



Kachhapa

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A newsletter for the Indian subcontinent on sea turtle conservation and management

Its turtle time in Orissa again

The Olive Ridley nests at three major rookeries in Orissa, of which Gahirmatha is the largest rookery in the world today with over 100,000 nesting turtles. However, there has been no nesting at this rookery for the past two years. Much of the decline of the nesting population can be attributed to illegal trawl fishing operations, particularly shrimp trawling, in the near-shore waters of Gahirmatha and other coastal areas of Orissa. The Wildlife Institute of India has recorded over 30,000 dead turtles off the Orissa coast over the past four years and 14,000 dead turtles last year alone. This number exceeds the entire nesting population at the other two Orissa rookeries. What is particularly galling is that the turtles are not even the target of these mechanised trawlers. Sea turtles are **incidental catch** in the trawl fishing nets and drown during the long periods that the nets are operated.

Shrimp trawling has been identified as the biggest cause of sea turtle mortality throughout the world. The immediate solution to reduce this mortality is the strict enforcement of Orissa Marine Fishing Regulation (OMFR) Act 1982 and Rules 1983, which prohibits any kind of mechanised fishing within five km from the shore line along the Orissa coast. A blanket ban on near shore mechanised fishing will bring down the turtle mortality to a large extent. A second step towards minimising this mortality would be the mandatory use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) in the trawl nets. At the moment, none of the 3,000 odd trawlers operating in Orissa use TEDs in their nets.

It is also important to carry out research projects on these turtles including continued monitoring of the nesting beaches, quantification of mortality and

conservation genetics to determine population structure and the origin of this population.

Mechanised trawling has not only endangered turtles, but also the lifestyles of the local artisanal fishing community. In the case of other highly endangered species, conservationists have advocated a highly protectionist approach. However, the best solution for the Olive Ridelies along the coast of Orissa (and elsewhere along the coast) would be to encourage artisanal fishing and to return the coastal waters to the local traditional fisherfolk.

Solutions are also available to many other problems of Olive Ridelies. Indigenously designed TEDs and turtle friendly lights are available, but the difficulty lies in getting people to use the technology.

A conservation effort, Operation Kachhapa, has been launched in 1998, with the cooperation of local conservation groups and the Orissa Forest Department. This initiative hopes to implement management practices by strictly enforcing the ban on near-shore mechanised trawling by providing the necessary support to the Forest Department and seeking the cooperation of the Coast Guard.

Since sea turtles do not respect national boundaries, it is important to have active regional cooperation in the conservation of these species. We would therefore like to initiate a regional network where we can exchange information and support each other's programs. In this issue, we profile various organisations, primarily NGOs, working on sea turtles in this region. We also outline the plan for Operation Kachhapa and for this network.

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