

## OPINION

### Sea turtles and Submarines – Sinking the wrong ship ?

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Olive ridley turtles nest all along the east coast of India, though the major mass nesting grounds are to the north, in Orissa. The beaches in and around Vishakapatnam in Andhra Pradesh are good solitary nesting grounds for olive ridleys, though the population has been affected by the usual problems attendant with urbanization, namely lighting, sand-mining, predation of eggs and hatchlings by dogs, crows and so on. Nevertheless, the efforts of a few non governmental organisations including the Vishaka Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, VSPCA, the Marine Turtle Preservation Group, and others, have worked towards the protection of these nesting beaches and the sea turtles nesting there.

Recently, the beaches of Vishakapatnam became a bone of contention between VSPCA and the Indian Navy. The Indian Navy wanted to create a museum on the beach using a decommissioned submarine and ship. Vishakapatnam is incidentally the headquarters of the Eastern Naval Command. VSPCA filed a petition in the High Court against the Navy claiming that the submarine museum would be a violation of the CRZ (Coastal Regulation Zone) notifications and that it would severely affect sea turtles and their nesting habitat. VSPCA received letters of support from MEDASSET (Mediterranean Association to Save the Sea turtles) and Animal People, an international magazine, amongst others. The defenders of sea turtles in this case claimed that the submarine museum violated international conservation agreements that India has endorsed.

The main issue that the court debated was the violation of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) which includes sea coasts, backwaters, estuaries and creeks up to a distance of 500 m from the the

high tide line and the area between the low and high tide lines. While the Navy and Government claim that the area is CRZ-II, the VSPCA claimed that it was CRZ-I (which includes ecologically sensitive areas) where no construction is allowed. In November, 2000, the Andhra Pradesh High Court ruled that the proper permits had to be obtained by the Navy from the Andhra Pradesh coastal zone management authority after a proper examination of the area.

In June 2000, we received a letter from the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests regarding this particular issue. In this letter, the PCCF first points out that the VSPCA did not have the necessary permits to work on sea turtles for the year 1999-2000 unlike previous years. He then refers to the VSPCA's petition against the Indian Navy and points out that the beach where the proposed museum is to be set up "has been the recreational area for the urbanites of Vishakapatnam and there is so much traffic and disturbance throughout the year that it not at all a suitable site for conservation activities". He goes on to say that the Navy "red-handedly" caught members of the VSPCA trying to transplant eggs to the museum site, to make it appear that it is a nesting beach. A team of officials including the Curator, Indira Gandhi Zoological Park, Vishakapatnam, Divisional Forest Officer, Vishakapatnam, P.S. Rajasekhar, a marine turtle biologist with Andhra University, Vishakapatnam, K.V. Ramana Murthy, Green Mercy (an NGO that also works on sea turtles) inspected the areas on the same day and conducted an enquiry and arrived at the conclusion that the eggs had indeed been transplanted. The Forest Department of Andhra Pradesh was understandably annoyed. This Department has been genuinely concerned with the conservation of sea turtles, conducting

workshops for fisheries and forest officers, NGOs, the Navy, Coast Guard and trawler operators. They have been hugely supportive in the sea turtle survey of the coastline for the UNDP project by the Wildlife Institute of India.

I would like to start by saying that it is actually quite irrelevant (to me) as to whether the VSPCA transplanted those eggs or not. One accepts that even if it did occur, it was done for the 'noble cause' of protecting turtles. However, in environmental protection as in other arenas of life, the end does not justify the means. The protection of a beach or a species by false representation of data, or the election of a good president by ballot fixing is still wrong. Furthermore, the environmental movement, unlike politics, still rests on a base of good faith. More than anyone else, we talk about the ethical treatment of animals, the ethics of damaging the environment that our children will inherit, and so on. More than anyone else, environmentalists and conservationists have a responsibility to behave ethically.

However, there are other issues here that I think are more important that I would like to address:

1. While it is true that uncontrolled habitat encroachment along the coast has affected sea turtle nesting, it is also true that development cannot be completely arrested. Vishakapatnam and its nesting beaches represent a fairly minor nesting population of olive ridleys along the east coast (with apologies to turtle conservationists in Vishakapatnam) and the major nesting aggregates are further north in Orissa.

2. The naval museum is likely to take up a 200 metres along the beach (lets say an impact of a

few km). Perhaps the sacrifice of this nesting space could have been compensated by using the museum for furthering education and awareness about sea turtles. Perhaps it could be compensated by involving the Navy to a greater extent in turtle conservation.(Point: the Navy has been in communication with our researcher in the same region and is very open to helping out in offshore patrols).

3. An undue amount of effort and attention to minor issues distracts from issues such as the construction of a port at Dhamra (where several 100,000 turtles nest as opposed to a 100) and an oil pipeline at Rushikulya (where several 1000 turtles nest). The problem is that high court judges and other officials may not always be able to differentiate between one petition and another. If they are swamped by petitions to save turtles in every single beach in India, they are likely to ignore them all. This is also true of international support for these programs.

The conservation movement would be dead in its tracks without the motivation of its activists. However, the activist is often not in the best position to evaluate conservation needs or to prioritise conservation action. This, to me, is the domain of science. It is important to be able to objectively evaluate the evidence in the decision making process. In the case of species conservation, it is necessary to decide which populations should be prioritized for regional and global conservation attention and action. The lesson here is that local activists would benefit from consultation with conservationists and scientists who might be able to offer them a larger perspective and technical advice. The latter, for their part, need to interact with local activists to achieve conservation at the grassroots.

## NEWS

### **Mass nesting at Gahirmatha**

The Orissa Forest Department reported that mass nesting occurred at Gahirmatha from February 2, 2001. No further information is currently available on the total nesting or mortality.