

Editorial: Operation Kachhapa: new problems, new solutions ?

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It has become our annual pastime to bemoan the state of the sea turtles in Orissa each December. Operation Kachhapa was initiated last season with some successes and some failures. The mortality was not very encouraging since another 10,000 dead turtles were counted on the Orissa coast. However, this was offset by the mass nesting of 250,000 turtles at Nasi off the Gahirmatha coast. Also, 64 trawlers and gill netters were seized for illegal fishing and their trial cases are being contested by lawyers engaged by Operation Kachhapa on behalf of the Forest Department.

Operation Kachhapa and the Forest Department had planned even more extensive patrolling this year. Unfortunately, much of the careful planning that went into this year's campaign has been swept away in the aftermath of the cyclone. The state's resources are simply inadequate to deal with a catastrophe of this magnitude and the administrative machinery is faltering. Operation Kachhapa's efforts have been diverted to relief operations till such time as turtle conservation work becomes possible. Meanwhile, turtles have arrived in the offshore waters. A few have already fallen victim to trawlers from Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, which have been operating in these waters.

One of the principal nesting beaches at Gahirmatha (Nasi 1, where about 50,000 turtles nested in 1999) has been fragmented again, while the other one (Nasi 2, where 200,000 turtles nested in 1999), appears to have become even narrower. In 1999, more than 90% of the eggs laid on Nasi 2 were exposed and lost due to inundation.

Other problems are appearing on the horizon. A major cargo port at Dhamra, 10 km from Gahirmatha, which has long been in the

pipeline, is reported to have obtained government clearance. The construction of this port is likely to have long term consequences for the Olive Ridelys and also for the mangrove forests of Bhitarkanika which adjoin this area. Already, there is a growing belief that the widespread destruction of mangroves may have contributed substantially to the impact of the cyclone.

Recent research has also indicated that Olive Ridelys in Orissa may use more than one nesting beach during a season and may in fact nest at entirely new sites. In March and April, 1999, mass nesting (8000 and 20000 turtles) occurred at Barunei, 30 km south of Gahirmatha. This implies that current conservation strategies may not be adequate; declaring a particular stretch of coastline as protected will not help if the turtles nest at different areas along the coast. It would be necessary to assess turtle congregations at the beginning of each season, and monitor critical areas of the coast throughout the season. It is clear that the challenges ahead are numerous and the solutions are complex.

As we move into a new season and a new millennium, we find ourselves looking for fresh ideas to help deal with the unending wave of environmental problems. Undoubtedly, the long term solutions lie in education and awareness and in involving the local people in the conservation effort. However, the short term success of conservation initiatives will also depend on the ability of different organisations playing very different roles to cooperate and coordinate efforts. Given the scale of current and potential destruction in the immediate future, this may be critical for the survival of sea turtles in India. It is clear that the challenges ahead are numerous and the solutions complex.