

Marine Turtle Newsletter

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Number 36 March 1986

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ACTION ALERT: ROCKETS TO DISLodge RIDLEYS AT GAHIRMATHA

Efforts are underway to shift the proposed national rocket testing range from Balliapal in the Belasore district of Orissa, to Satbhaya in the Cuttack district, because of protests by the inhabitants of Balliapal. This move, if implemented, will seriously affect the unique ecosystem of the 170 sq. km Bhitir Kanika Wildlife Sanctuary, and more particularly, the Gahirmatha beach, where an estimated 800,000 olive ridleys nested in the 1984 season (Bhaskar, 1984). Besides turtles, the area also harbours the country's most important population of the saltwater crocodile and a rich avifauna.

It is interesting to note that the Sea Turtle Specialist Group, formed by the Government of India's Department of Environment, has recommended the creation of a marine national park at Gahirmatha, and a ban on fishing from Palmyras Point to False Point. About 300 dead ridleys washed ashore at the Gahirmatha beach in 1983 after having earlier drowned in trawl nets or died in poachers' vessels. Only a tenth as many were found in the succeeding year, thanks to the patrolling by the coast guard.

Bhaskar, S. 1984. Sea turtles in eastern India. *WWF Monthly Report*, August 1984:185-189.

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[Those readers desiring more information or wishing to write letters protesting the proposed rocket testing range being built near the Gahirmatha nesting beach should correspond with Indraneil Das at the address given above. NBF]

SEA TURTLE WORK IN CHINA

Marine turtle conservation is being carried out in China, where marine turtles have been classified as protected animals. The First Session of the Marine Turtle Conservation Meeting was held at Huidong County, Guangdong Province in September 1985, attended by representatives of the China

Ministry of Farming, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries, the China Ministry of Construction and Environmental Protection for City and County, the China Scientific and Technical Committee, the Institute of Zoology Academia Sinica of China, the China Wild Animal Conservation Association and the concerned departments of Guangdong Province. During the meeting, the Guangdong television station made a TV film about the turtles' egg-laying, hatching and breeding in the Port of Huidong County.

The major area in China for marine turtle nesting is the Hsisha Islands, but the turtles also nest every year in the Port of Huidong County. In order to protect the marine turtle resource, a marine turtle hatching area has been set up at Huidong County and two marine turtle conservation areas are being planned to be built in the suburbs of Sanya City and along the coast of Ling Shui County of Hainan Island. After artificial breeding there, the turtles will be tagged and returned to the sea. A South China marine turtle observation team will be organized by the Ministry of Farming, Animal Husbandry and Fishery. This team will complete its observation mission from 1986 to 1987. Dr. Huang Chu-chien has been contacted to act as an advisor to the team and will participate in the marine turtle observation with the team.

The Beijing Science and Education Film Studio will shoot a film about the South China Sea marine turtles. Dr. Huang Chu-chien will also act as technical advisor for the film, which will be made during 1987.

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MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION: THE TRIBAL CONNECTION

Conservation efforts are unlikely to become successful in the long run if public opinion is not actively sought and obtained. Realizing this, the marine turtle conservation program of the World Wildlife Fund — India (Eastern Region) has started its campaign to reach out to the masses. An illustrated pamphlet published by the WWF-I in Bengali is being distributed among the prospective consumers of turtles in the many markets of West Bengal, requesting them to abstain from buying turtle meat or eggs. Another publication is the book, *Indian Turtles: A Field Guide*, which describes all the 36 species and subspecies of turtles so far recorded from India. Besides creating an interest and awareness in this group of reptiles and providing information on their biology and status, the field guide can be used in the enforcement of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972.

Another effective strategy is the recruitment of the rural scroll-painter, Ranjit Chitrakar, who paints and sings of marine turtles and the need for their conservation. Hailing from a remote little village in Midnapore, Ranjit is a third generation scroll-painter and has been involved in the environmental education activities of the WWF-I since 1982, when Ms. Bonani Kakkar, Project/Education Officer of the WWF-I (Eastern Region) "discovered" him at a fair and immediately realized his potential.

A "patua," as a scroll-painter is called, is very much a part of rural Bengal. He paints his own scrolls, each as long as 7 meters, using colors from natural sources, and wanders from village to village singing tales from epics and legends to the vast, enthusiastic audience. Work on a scroll commences only after Ranjit has had a personal insight and grasped the conservation problems involved. This means that he may have to be taken to the "field" — in the turtle program, to the turtle markets. While the scene is fresh in his mind, the scroll-painter starts his painting and song composing simultaneously. Ranjit, like all members of his trade and tribe, uses only natural colors to illustrate his songs, like clay (brown), soot (black), vermillion (red), indigo (blue) and tumeric (yellow). Green is less readily procured: it has to be made from the juice of a plant leaf. Color is applied to the paper using a brush made from the tail hairs of a goat.