

Background of the Dhamra Port issue

by Ashish Fernandes

The Dhamra port is being built in proximity to the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary, on the northern coast of Orissa, India. Gahirmatha is one of the world's largest remaining nesting ground for the Olive Ridley Sea Turtle, a species classified as Endangered by the IUCN. Between 200,000 and 500,000 female turtles nest here every year, in spectacular arribadas (mass nesting). The planned port facility will be located just north of the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary and less than five kilometres from the boundaries of the Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary, which itself contains an abundance of rare wildlife species and an amazingly lush and biodiverse mangrove forest ecosystem, all of which are threatened by this port development scheme .

The port is being built by Tata Steel via the Dhamra Port Company Limited, a 50:50 joint venture between Tata Steel and Larsen & Toubro. Dhamra is proposed to be a deep water port, one of the largest in South Asia, capable of handling 180,000 DWT ships and 83 million tonnes per annum in ten years. The channel depth at the port would be 18 metres which could accommodate Capesize vessels. The port and its attendant infrastructure, accompanying industrial and residential development, artificial lighting and the shipping traffic it will attract are only some of the problems it poses for the turtles and their hatchlings. A serious threat will also be posed by the amount of dredging required to create and maintain the shipping channels at the necessary depth (over 60 million cu. m. of capital dredging initially and a further 2.2 million cu.m. of maintenance dredging annually). The development of the port will also lead to an industrialisation spree in the area, with the attendant hazards posed by an increased population, lighting, pollution etc. While the Dhamra port site itself is not a nesting ground, the coastal waters are turtle habitat and there are many reports of turtle sightings in the area during the turtle season (November to May) each year. Obviously, such large turtle congregations depend on the natural food chain and ecology of the area to sustain themselves.

The project's main proponents are now Tata Steel, part of the Tata Group, one of India's largest industrial houses. Larsen and Toubro signed an agreement in October 2004 for the construction of the Dhamra port with Tata Steel. The Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) is the main funding agency supporting the Dhamra project.

People concerned about the port's impacts on the ecology, particularly the turtles, can write to:

Mr Ratan Tata, Chairman, TATA Sons

Cc to:

--R. Gopalakrishnan, Executive Director, TATA Sons:
email: gopal.gopalakrishnan@tata.com

--Alan Rosling, Executive Director, TATA Sons email: alan.rosling@northampton.ac.uk

--Jamshed J. Irani, TATA Sons, E-mail: jjirani@tata.com

--Mr. B. Muthuraman, Managing Director, TATA Steel, email:
muthuraman@tatasteel.com

Links to recent press releases and activities on the issue:

Press releases tracing recent developments in the campaign

TATA'S Dhamra port EIA seriously flawed, project must not go ahead: Greenpeace = <http://www.greenpeace.org/india/press/releases/tata-s-dhamra-port-eia-serious> (critique report download from <http://www.greenpeace.org/raw/content/india/press/reports/critique-of-the-environmental.pdf>)

Evidence of turtles, rare species at Dhamra: TATA must drop port says Greenpeace = <http://www.greenpeace.org/india/press/releases/evidence-of-turtles-rare-spec> (biodiversity report download from <http://www.greenpeace.org/raw/content/india/press/reports/greenpeace-biodiversity.pdf>)

Ratan Tata, Kya Hua Tera Vaada? = <http://www.greenpeace.org/india/news/ratan-tata-kya-hua-tera-vaada>

Greenpeace asks TATAs to "Take a turtle-friendly look at life"
=<http://www.greenpeace.org/india/press/releases/greenpeace-turtles-ask-tatas-t>

Turtles Invade Taj Land's End, seek new home
<http://www.greenpeace.org/india/press/releases/turtles-invade-taj-land-s-end>

Greenpeace activists blockade TATA office, demand the Company keeps promise to save turtles
<http://www.greenpeace.org/india/press/releases/greenpeace-activists-blockade>