

OPEN LETTER

07.11.2010

To,
Mr. Jairam Ramesh,
Minister of State, Ministry of Environment and Forests
Paryavaran Bhavan,
C.G.O.Complex,
Lodhi Raod,
New Delhi 110001

Subject: Statement of views on impact of proposed POSCO port on the marine environment of Orissa from scientists, ecologists, researchers and turtle biologists

We, the undersigned are a group of scientists, ecologists, researchers and turtle biologists who have been conducting various research and conservation programmes for several years on the olive ridley sea turtles that seasonally visit the Orissa coast. We have been concerned that the South Korean company POSCO, proposes to construct a dedicated port at Jatadhar in Orissa, in addition to a green field integrated steel plant near Paradip.

The POSCO marine terminal site location is at the Jatadhar river mouth, 12 kilometres south of the Paradip port and a few miles north of the Devi river mouth, which is an important olive ridley mass nesting ground. The port will be designed to accommodate ships of sizes varying from 30,000 DWT and 100,000 DWT to bring raw materials and for carrying finished products. There is expected to be constant port traffic to the tune of 25-30 million tonnes.

There are several port projects proposed on the Orissa coast. The location of the POSCO port is as problematic as any other new port project on this coastline. The port project is likely to have a serious impact on the rich marine environment of the region, but is of particular concern to the endangered populations of the olive ridley sea turtles that congregate and nest in this area.

We wish to present the following statement on the impacts of the proposed POSCO port project and wish to state our reasons for considering this site unsuitable:

1. Close proximity to the sea turtle congregation zone

The Jatadhar river mouth marks the northern boundary of the restricted fishing zone, set up by the Orissa Government and recommended by the Supreme Court's Central Empowered Committee, for the protection of the offshore congregations of olive ridley sea turtles [a protected species under Schedule – I of the Indian Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1991]. Therefore the nearshore waters region between Jatadhar river mouth and the Devi river mouth are protected waters under the Orissa Marine Fisheries Regulation Act, 1983. The turtles use these waters as breeding areas, prior to their arrival onshore for nesting. Offshore congregations have been recorded here by scientists as well as fisherfolk. In fact the recording of a large number of dead turtles on the adjacent beaches (from incidental capture in mechanised fishing boats) is said to be indicative of a thriving offshore congregation in these waters.

2. Close proximity to the mass nesting beaches of the Devi River Mouth

The proposed POSCO port project site is at an approximate distance of 25 kilometers from one of Orissa's three known mass nesting beaches. Mass nesting of the olive ridley sea turtles has been recorded at the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary, the Devi River mouth and at Rushikulya River mouth. Each of these sites has been accorded legal protection. At these beaches, olive ridley turtles arrive in large numbers laying more than 100,000 nests per year. In recent decades, drowning of thousands of turtles in fishing nets and coastal development has already impacted this population. Arribadas have been known to decline and disappear in the face of direct and indirect effects on populations. The close proximity of the port site to the Devi River mouth would mean that the nesting and breeding habitats of this unique population are likely to be further impacted.

Mass nesting is a very special phenomenon that only occurs in ridleys (kemps ridleys and olive ridleys) amongst all species of sea turtles. The **only** known mass nesting sites globally for olive ridleys are in Pacific Costa Rica, Mexico and Orissa, with recent studies indicating sites in Nicaragua and Panama. Genetic studies have also shown that these olive ridley turtles are distinct from and may be ancestral to global populations of the species and thus of particular conservation importance.

The numbers nesting in any particular year at any of these three mass nesting sites can vary greatly. There is growing concern that the primary site at Gahirmatha is now in severe decline: there has been large scale erosion and degradation of nesting beaches; light pollution from base at Wheeler Island has been a source of disorientation to hatchling turtles; and most recently the construction of Dhamra Port has resulted in multiple sources of environmental perturbation. Hence, it is critical to protect the remaining nesting areas, because the turtles are known to move from one site to another, and if they end up abandoning the Gahirmatha site they will need an alternate place to nest.

3. Impacts of illumination on adult nesting turtles

As mentioned earlier, the port site is located in close proximity to the offshore congregation waters near the Devi River mouth mass nesting site. The absence or presence of illumination at a particular site is an important criteria for the selection of a particular beach as a nesting site by adult turtles. Over the years, the intensity of illumination from the Paradip port has intensified although located at distance of approximately 50 kilometres from the Gahirmatha nesting site. We understand that a port site will have to be sufficiently well lit for operational and security purposes. We are of the opinion that the illumination and the glow of light from the POSCO port area will inhibit nesting from taking place at the Devi River mouth area.

4. Disorientation of turtle hatchlings due to illumination

Turtle hatchlings make their way to the sea immediately upon hatching and find the sea using by locating the brighter horizon, which is usually the seaward side due to reflection of moon and starlight on the water. Hatchlings are attracted to light and they get severely disoriented by the presence of artificial illumination along the coast. The recruitment of turtle populations is impacted when hatchlings are disoriented and unable to find their way to the sea from their nesting beaches.

5. Poor quality of the EIA prepared by Ms. Dastur Consultants for POSCO

We have studied the Environment Impact Assessment report prepared by Ms. M.N. Dastur & Company Consultants for this port project. The report has virtually no mention of any of the above significant points and is not a suitable document for assessing impacts on the marine environment, particularly on the globally significant population of sea turtles. The EIA only makes passing mention about there being no impacts to sea turtles near Gahirmatha, but completely disregards years of data on the presence of mating and nesting

populations in the offshore waters of the Devi and Jatadhar river mouths. We disagree with the conclusions of that EIA about this location having little impact on turtles. We believe that a port at this site of this magnitude mandates a fresh environment impact assessment of the highest standards to be conducted by suitable and qualified agencies, particularly from the marine perspective.

6. Multiplied impacts on turtles from multiple infrastructure projects on the Orissa coast

There are several proposals awaiting clearance from several infrastructure projects on the Orissa coast. Some of these are the Dhamra port proposed just north of the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary, Reliance's exploration efforts off the Rushikulya coast (near the Rushikulya mass nesting site), the Chennai based, Creative Infrastructure Company Ltd's proposal for a port at Kiritania near the Subarnarekha river mouth (north of Gahirmatha), Orissa Stevedores Ltd's proposal to develop the Gopapur port (south of Rushikulya) Grasim's port proposed north of Dhamra, and the recent proposal by Nabajuga Engineering Company Ltd for a port at Astarang in Puri district (near the Devi river mouth) at the cost of Rs 6,000 crores and finally Essel Mining and Industries Limited's proposed captive port at Chudamani in Ganjam district. There has been no assessment of the cumulative impacts that all these activities will have on the existing population of olive ridley sea turtles.

The river mouths of Orissa's coast appear to be sensitive and suitable for nesting of this species of sea turtles. The congregations of sea turtles is not a stationary one. Similarly, the nesting beaches are also highly dynamic and it has been recorded that the turtles select varying beaches on the Orissa coast. With all the development that is being planned, it appears imperative that the known mass nesting beaches and surrounding pristine beaches are well protected. The turtles are already under threat from a high level of mechanised fishing related mortality. Any further degradation of existing and potential habitats will be the death knell of this endangered population.

7. India's commitment to the conservation of sea turtles

India is signatory to the Indian Ocean Memorandum of Understanding for the conservation of sea turtles and a Party to the Convention on Migratory Species; both international instruments carry clear obligations to protect both marine turtles and their nesting, feeding, and migratory habitats.

India also has a commitment through her own laws to ensure the protection of sea turtles and their habitats under the Wild Life Protection Act, 1972. The Supreme Court constituted Central Empowered Committee has also reiterated the need for protecting this species.

8. International endorsement by scientists on the impacts of large scale port development

As you maybe aware, at the 30th Annual International Sea Turtle Symposium, supported by your ministry, held in Goa in April 2010, several scientists from across the globe had reiterated their concern regarding a large number of ports being situated all along the coastline of India. POSCO and Dhamra on the Orissa coast are just some of the major concerns. This letter is annexed to this submission. Specifically, highlighting the concern about the impacts of port development, they stated that no port related activity be permitted within 25 kilometres of Orissa's mass-nesting beaches.

9. Mass nesting sites in India be declared Ecologically Sensitive Areas

The 300-odd signatories of the above mentioned petition, who attended the 30th Annual Sea Turtle Symposium, requested that as a priority action for safeguarding these fragile turtle populations, the mass nesting beaches of India be declared as Ecologically Sensitive Areas under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. They also state that a a buffer zone of 10 km be declared around these beaches where no industrial activity be allowed.

We hope you will consider our concerns regarding port development across the Orissa coast, and in this particular context, our objections to the proposed POSCO port and its implications for the future of our wild heritage.

Sincerely,

Signed /-

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CC: Dr. Shri. P.J Dilip Kumar, Director General of Forests, Ministry of Environment and Forests and Chairperson, Forest Advisory Committee.