



ASHISH KOTHARI

Bird protection area of Mangaljodi village

## Where Blackbucks Roam, Turtles Breed and Birds Fear No More

Text: Neema Pathak and Ashish Kothari

The authors are members of Kalpavriksh. In the next few issues, they will present more case studies of CCAs and review India's own legal record in supporting such initiatives.

**I**n these times when sponge iron plants, steel plants, commercial ports, coal and bauxite mines are changing the face of Orissa's landscape, when elephant corridors are being ripped apart by what the state's leaders consider "development," and when communities with ancient cultures are being converted into exploited labour, one wonders whether there is any hope for biodiversity conservation. Thought obviously goes to the national parks and sanctuaries in the state, several of them still harbouring rich wildlife. However, these sites are also embroiled in all kinds of conflicts, raising questions on their long-term sustenance.

*Various communities in Orissa are triumphantly pushing conservation to new heights despite many hurdles*

But there is also hope for nature in some unexpected quarters: youth clubs, women's groups, traditional elders and village panchayats. Across Orissa there are a number of local community groups which are engaged in protection of wild habitat and/or species. Theirs are stories of struggle, of hurdles and constraint, but ultimately of conservation.

There are few places in India where Blackbuck can be seen grazing freely with the livestock of the village. Buguda village in Ganjam district is one such. Its inhabitants have been protecting Blackbucks from time immemorial. Fifty years ago the efforts were intensified by a few village elders, who realised that the incidents of hunting by outsiders were on the rise. Strict penalties were put in place for those found hunting or harming the animals. And though, a large percentage of agricultural fields are lying uncultivated today, due to scarcity of water and crop damage by Blackbuck, the resolve to protect the species is still very strong. The

## Communities also conserve - Orissa

village was recently awarded the Chief Minister's award for wildlife conservation.

Over 180 villages in Ranpur block of Nayagarh district are protecting forest patches, and combining them into a relatively contiguous stretch of possibly a few hundred sq. km. Some of these villages started protecting forests about 50 years back and are still struggling with strong internal politics and external pressure for timber smuggling. In villages like Dengajhari and Gundrubari, protection by all-women's groups is very successful. These women came forward to protect the forests because degradation was threatening the availability of non-timber forest produce (NTFP), on which their economy depends. Men were not able to handle the timber mafia on the face of physical violence including life threats. Today all of the 180 villages, some with multi-caste and class composition, while others homogenous, have come together to form a block level Federation. The Federation provides technical support, a forum for discussions, facilitation of dialogue with politicians and government agencies and conflict resolution.

Villages claim the return or re-appearance of various species in the Ranpur forests, the most fascinating of which is that of Elephants (*Elephas maximus*). Local groups feel that with disruption of traditional Elephant corridors elsewhere, the animals prefer the regenerating forests of Ranpur. This phenomenon urgently needs to be further examined and understood.

The Ranpur example is only one of possibly over 10,000 community forest protection initiatives in Orissa! Unfortunately, there is almost no documentation of wildlife found at these sites.



Blackbuck graze freely with the village cattle at Buguda

Rushikulya is among the lesser-known rookeries (mass turtle nesting sites) in Orissa. Traditionally, local fisher-folk would collect the eggs for consumption or sale. Some youth in the village first realised the threatened status of the Olive Ridley Turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) and the importance of the Rushikulya beach as a nesting site after interaction with Bivash Pandav of the Wildlife Institute of India. They then stopped eating and

selling turtle eggs, and educated fellow villagers. They registered themselves as a non profit organisation, the Rushikulya Sea Turtle Protection Committee, and constructed an interpretation centre with funds from the Vasant J. Sheth Memorial Foundation. Now this awareness has spread, with neighbouring villages such as Gokharuda following suit. Some villagers are also earning an income from tourists, though this needs to



Mating Olive Ridley Turtles, just before mass nesting at the Rushikulya rookery

## Communities also conserve - Orissa

be made more systematic and regulated. In 2006, over 100,000 turtles are reported to have nested at Rushikulya.

Chilika Lagoon is also famous for the Irrawady Dolphins, its fish productivity and lakhs of birds that visit it every year. Some restaurants in the area display a board mentioning that bird meat will not be served, an indication of the fact that people otherwise expect to get this 'delicacy!' Villagers in Mangaljodi, on the edge of Chilika, were among those who once earned a major part of their livelihood through hunting and selling bird meat. This was till a decade back, when the NGO Wild Orissa started spreading awareness about bird conservation. Today, the villagers are strictly protecting wintering and resident birds, and looking forward to an alternative source of income through tourists. One could see lakhs of wintering waterfowl at Mangaljodi this winter; many more than were visible at the official Nalabana Sanctuary inside Chilika.

These are just a few examples of numerous such initiatives in Orissa. It would be fascinating to find out how many such initiatives exist in the State and what kinds of ecosystems and species are being protected by them. These efforts, however, are facing a number of constraints that need to be urgently addressed. Firstly, the State government is yet to recognise these as an effective system of conservation, with the exception of occasional awards like what Buguda got or the provision of some facilities to Mangaljodi by the Chilika Development Authority. Indirectly, the role of community initiatives in forest regeneration has been acknowledged in the Forest Survey of India report for 2003, but even this has not led to

legal, administrative, or financial support from the Government. Secondly, very little input goes into providing livelihood support to the conserving groups, e.g. to youth at Rushikulya, or former bird poachers at Mangaljodi. The potential to develop eco-sensitive, pro-conservation tourism plans has not been realised. Community forestry initiatives could also do with support in watershed development and water harvesting

Goalgadia and Similisaahi) fall in the proposed Utkal Coal Project of Indian Metals & Alloys Ltd. No one considers the need to take the consent of communities before starting such projects.

If community wildlife conservation is to continue to flourish in Orissa, the above hurdles will need to be urgently tackled. There are some non-government agencies working towards identifying the hurdles faced by these



Volunteers of Wild Orissa with village representatives from Mangaljodi at the conservation site

(a crying need at Buguda), agricultural improvement, forest produce based enterprise, etc.

Unfortunately, official interventions have sometimes been counter-productive. For instance, the Forest Department has imposed Joint Forest Management (JFM) on community forestry initiatives, disrupting existing institutional mechanisms. Worse, the government has often introduced threats, e.g. by giving mining leases in areas conserved by communities. For example, forests protected by four villages (Rajiharan, Nandijhor,

initiatives and helping them resolve the same. Among some of the organisations are, Vasundhara, a Bhubaneswar based NGO, which is trying to do such research. The Orissa Marine Resources Conservation Consortium, initiated by groups like ATREE, consists of local fisher-groups and NGOs collaborating to conserve turtles and coastal habitats. The Wildlife Society of Orissa also extends some help to community groups. However, they can do with much more support from the Government.