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With nowhere to go

Nobody knows where they come from and where they disappear to after their arribada (mass nesting) on Orissa's coasts between January and April every year. But today, as we observe Earth Day, the Olive Ridley turtles are stuck in the mudflats of the development versus environment debate.

The Olive Ridleys are protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, on a par with the tiger. The latest threat to these turtles comes from a deep-sea port at Dhamra, Orissa, being built by the Dhamra Port Company Limited (DPCL), a joint venture by Tata Steel and Larsen & Toubro. While the DPCL thinks that "the port is a central component of the economic development of the state", the green lobby, led by Greenpeace, feels that the Olive Ridleys might be lost forever thanks to dredging and shipping traffic.

In 2000, despite opposition from environmentalists, the Ministry of Surface Transport cleared the port. The National Environment Appellate Authority seconded the decision. The green signal was given even though the guidelines of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) state that "no ports, harbours and jetties should be planned within a range of 25 km from any important nesting and congregating site."

The Dhamra port site is located less than 15 km from the mass nesting beaches of the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary and less than 5 km from the Bhitarkanika National Park. In July 2004, a Supreme Court-appointed panel also recommended that the Dhamra site would "seriously impact" nesting turtles and, therefore, it was "necessary that an alternative site is located for this port".

Tata Steel, however, was not a part of the project when the initial clearance was given; it joined in 2004. Greenpeace India also entered the fray late, in 2006. Between 2004 and 2007, the two lobbies went back and forth on studies to assess turtle presence in the area. In 2007, Greenpeace International commissioned a rapid biodiversity assessment of the port site and its surrounding areas. The survey, done by Professor S.K. Dutta of the North Orissa University, indicated the presence of horseshoe crabs, rare species of snakes and amphibians. But just two weeks after the report was released, the university took back its own report, alleging that Greenpeace had tampered with it, which the latter denies vehemently. Meanwhile, in December 2006, DPCL signed a deal with The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to undertake preparation of a mitigation plan and design environmental standards for the project.

Even as discussions between the two parties were on, dredging started in December 2007, followed by a nesting failure. The IUCN's take on the project is fuzzy. A newsletter of its Marine Turtle Specialist Group says, "It is IUCN's viewpoint that no port would be a great option, but if the port is to be developed, IUCN would much rather it be developed while taking on board the very best mitigation measures..."

As of now, there is a deadlock in discussions. While the greens want a ban on port activities until further studies are done, DPCL finds the request for a complete cessation of work "to be unreasonable and inconsistent with our preparedness to adjust their schedule of works to facilitate the study itself." With no solution in sight — the MoEF is watching the fight from the sidelines — the fracas has reached a crescendo. While Greenpeace issued ads against Tata Steel the day the Nano was launched, anti-Greenpeace emails and SMSes (some question their credibility) have been doing the rounds.

Most of us who are watching this fight — and many without any scientific expertise — are in the dark. Several MPs and international scientists have written to the MoEF against the port and have asked for an independent assessment. Can the port be built somewhere else? How much would it affect the ecology in the long-run? These are questions that need to be answered by an independent panel. Just clearing a project under the garb of economic development is not, and cannot be, the answer to this tangle.