

Comment

An uncommon tragedy

Recent reports about suicides by fishermen in Kendrapara, Orissa, India can only be described as shocking, particularly as there have rarely, if ever, been reports of fishermen committing suicide. Notably, these suicides have taken place in a State considered one of the poorest in India, with about 47 per cent of the population estimated to be below the poverty line.

Investigations have indicated that the suicides were linked to the restrictions on fishing activity and subsequent declines in income following the declaration of the Gahirmatha (Marine) Wildlife Sanctuary in 1997, to protect the olive ridley sea turtle in its nesting and breeding habitat (see page 37). Declining incomes from fishing in a context of high indebtedness, lack of social security nets, and few alternative livelihood options have proved to be a shock fishermen have found difficult to bear. Many fishermen are reported to have migrated out of Kendrapara district, some are burdened with extreme mental distress, while, over the past four years, at least seven fishermen have taken the extreme step of the final exit.

That this should have happened is unacceptable, even more so as various measures suggested over the past few years, if implemented, would perhaps have made it possible to improve turtle conservation, while enabling the continuation of sustainable fishing operations and livelihoods based on them. Several of these suggestions have emanated from organizations like the Orissa Traditional Fish Workers Union (OTFWU).

It is important that the message from this tragedy does not go unheard. Traditional fishworkers must be made equal and effective partners in identifying socially-just conservation and management measures, and specific steps to cushion the socioeconomic impacts of conservation should be implemented. For example, where research conclusively establishes that certain types of fishing gear, whether traditional or trawl, have detrimental impacts, regulation on their use should be accompanied by adequate financial assistance for shifting to other permissible gear. Training and other financial assistance for alternative livelihood programmes for fishworkers displaced from the fishery as a result of conservation measures should also be considered.

The importance of comprehensive socioeconomic data on communities living adjacent to turtle conservation areas, to gauge the potential impact of conservation programmes on them, cannot be overemphasized. There needs to be a specific focus on the issue of indebtedness, especially in view of the rising costs of inputs, such as fuel. High rates of indebtedness have also been a major factor in the suicides of an estimated over 10,000 farmers in India in the past few years.

The approach to conservation adopted in Orissa is by no means an isolated example. Fishing communities living adjacent to marine protected areas (MPAs) in several countries in Asia and Africa have similar experiences to recount, and their concerns must be addressed, as articulated in the Joint NGO Statement on Protected Areas presented to the 8th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 8) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Curitiba, Brazil on 23 March 2006 (see page 24).

Coastal fishing communities can be powerful allies in the efforts to conserve, restore and protect coastal and marine biodiversity. And needless to say, coastal fishing communities dependent on the resource base for their livelihoods, can also be the prime beneficiaries of well-designed conservation and management programmes. To ensure that happens, is the challenge ahead. It is completely unacceptable and totally unnecessary that the cost of conservation should be paid in human lives.