

BIODIVERSITY

Environmental Payoff

Furor over a conservation group taking fees from developers **BY WENDEE HOLTCAMP**



TURBULENT WATERS AHEAD: After mating, some olive ridley sea turtles will nest on a beach in northeastern India. That site might be

damaged by a nearby port, the construction of which, some say, has the paid approval of the famous conservation group IUCN.

Every winter and spring, tens of thousands of endangered olive ridley sea turtles clamber onto the shores of Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary, along India's northeastern coast, to lay eggs in one of the world's most spectacular phenomena—the arribada, or mass nesting, which occurs only in India, Costa Rica and Mexico. This past season, however, the arribada did not happen at Gahirmatha.

Although turtles have occasionally failed to mass-nest in previous years, conservationists fear this time the cause is dredging for a new seaport. Indian scientists and conservation groups place some blame on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), among the world's most respected conservation organizations. The union has taken corporate money to consult on the port, effectively giving it a green stamp of approval even though it may spell the end for this nesting site.

Formed in 1948 under the aegis of the United Nations, the IUCN consists of 1,100 member nonprofits and governments plus nearly 11,000 volunteer scientists around the globe. Headquartered near Geneva, the union pushes for sustainable development and conservation solutions, especially in developing nations. Most famously, it manages the Red List of Threatened Species, which keeps track of the plant and animal species left on the planet. In 2004 the IUCN passed two resolutions to engage more closely with the private sector, which ultimately led to the controversy surrounding India's sea turtles and the IUCN's involvement with the port.

The idea of the seaport began in the 1990s, when the Indian state of Orissa began discussing its construction at the mouth of the Dhamra River, part of a broader desire to increase coastal develop-

ment. But scientists and conservation groups have consistently opposed it, arguing that even at 15 kilometers from Gahirmatha, one of the world's largest rookeries for olive ridleys, the port and its traffic might prove disastrous. In 2004 a committee on the Indian supreme court concluded that the proposed port site “will seriously impact Gahirmatha's nesting turtles and could lead to the beach being abandoned by the marine creatures. It is therefore necessary that an alternative site is located for this port.” Renowned Indian scientist and IUCN member B. C. Choudhury, who started radio-telemetry studies on the turtles, says that the Gahirmatha nesting beaches “are eroding at a much faster rate than before and will probably be not even fit for turtles to nest in the future.”

Despite the threat, the port project gained momentum in 2006, when the Indian conglomerate Tata helped to create

the Dhamra Port Company Limited. The firm hired Nicholas Pilcher, a co-chair of the IUCN's marine turtle specialist group who is based in Malaysia, as a consultant. After a visit to the site, Pilcher wrote to the IUCN presiding species survival commission chair, Holly Dublin, that "this port WILL impact marine turtles, of that there can be no doubt." But by helping the company develop the best environmental management plan possible, he believed the IUCN could mitigate any effects.

Today he is of a different mind-set. "Realistically, the impacts on turtles will be so minimal as to not be noticed," he says. "I just can't see the hoo-ha people are making over this, particularly as there is not one single scientific piece of literature that suggests the port will be a catastrophe." Such data could emerge from a new comprehensive environmental impact study, but Tata has steadfastly refused to update its 10-year-old analysis, which critics consider woefully inadequate. (The company said it would relocate the port if it affected the turtles, according to Pilcher's letter to Dublin.) Tata did agree to turtle-safe dredging techniques and a lighting plan that would avoid serious disturbance of nighttime nesting.

Pilcher claims all opposition has "come

out of ignorance and being misled by Greenpeace and others rather than being against the IUCN's involvement." But Indian scientists and conservationists remain united in opposition both to the port and to the IUCN's role. In 2008 several of Pilcher's India-based colleagues and other IUCN member groups wrote to IUCN director general Julia Marton-Lefèvre, arguing that the union's involvement casts "aspersions on the credibility and neutrality" of the IUCN. The letter stated that the port company "is using this purported support of the IUCN to claim that environmental impacts have been adequately addressed and mitigated." The regional chair of the marine turtle specialty group, Kartik Shanker, has resigned over the situation. "Almost unanimously," he says, all the specialty group members in India "have opposed the involvement of the IUCN in this project."

The Dhamra port is just one of the IUCN's corporate controversies. Another arose in 2007, when Marton-Lefèvre signed a partnership agreement with Royal Dutch Shell "to enhance the biodiversity conservation performance by Shell" and "to strengthen IUCN's capacity for leadership in business and biodiversity," as the agreement puts it. That deal has led to in-

ternal dissension, with one of the IUCN's commission chairs, M. Taghi Farvar, insisting that it should not partner with industries causing wide-scale environmental damage, particularly in light of the IUCN's mandate for reversing global warming. The controversy led to a motion at the World Conservation Congress last October to cancel the contract. That motion narrowly failed, after Marton-Lefèvre argued that legal action by Shell was possible.

The IUCN's dealings with the business world is not likely to slow down, but if the union wants to soothe internal strife, conflicts of interest must be eliminated, and transparency is key, Farvar insists. Tata and Shell can exert undue pressure on the IUCN, because what are financial peanuts to megacorporations are substantial funds to nonprofits. Other groups have managed the balancing act to some degree, such as scientists conducting clinical trials on behalf of pharmaceutical companies. While members continue to debate how the IUCN should navigate these rocky waters, all hope that endangered species and biodiversity will not pay the price.

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CANCER

Virus in the Brain

Does a herpesvirus cause the deadly brain cancer glioblastoma? **BY MELINDA WENNER**

More and more in recent years, cancer biologists are pointing their fingers at viruses. Human papillomavirus, they found, causes cervical cancer; hepatitis B induces liver cancer; and Epstein-Barr virus has been implicated in lymphoma. Most recently, scientists discovered that malignant brain tumors called glioblastoma multiforme, the late-stage version of the cancer that has afflicted Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, are almost always teeming with cytomegalovirus (CMV), a common, typically

harmless herpesvirus. Although the nature of the association is still a mystery, researchers are already taking advantage of the link to find new cancer treatments.

The saga began in the late 1990s, when Charles Cobbs, a neurosurgeon then at the University of California, San Francisco, started pondering the link between inflammation and brain cancer. Malignant tumors are often associated with abnormal immune activity, and he wanted to know why. "Is it just something that happens out of the blue, or is it possible that there's

something maybe driving that inflammatory cascade?" he recalls wondering.

Because they elicit immune responses, infections immediately sprang to mind as possible candidates. Cobbs and his colleagues analyzed glioblastoma samples from 22 patients and found that all harbored CMV. Four out of five people have this virus, which remains in the body for life. Usually a person's immune system keeps CMV in a latent state in which it does not replicate, but Cobbs found the virus actively reproducing in these tumor cells—and not in healthy