



BATAGUR BASKA IN ORISSA

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Annandale (1912), in his account of the turtles of the Mahanadi drainage, suspected the occurrence of *Batagur baska* in the river. Subsequently, however, no examples of the species, which is largely restricted to mangrove dominated deltaic regions of rivers, were found, and with the development of Paradip Port near the mouth of the Mahanadi, now a large industrial township, the last of the mangrove tracts in the river disappeared.

J. Vijaya, the late Research Assistant of the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, heard descriptions of the species from fishermen at Udaipur village, near Digha on the Orissa - West Bengal border (Vijaya 1982 and unpublished notes). Udaipur is on the banks of the Subarnarekha river, where Moll and Vijaya (1986) also found the little-known softshell turtle *Pelochelys bibroni*. In her letter from the field, Vijaya wrote of nesting by *Batagur baska* in the islands off the Subarnarekha river mouth, based on information she received from the locals, who called the species 'Ram kachim'.

In February, 1984, while on a field trip to Gahirmatha, Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary, Orissa, I had an unconfirmed sighting of what I believe to be *Batagur baska* - a small, dark-coloured, smooth-shelled emydid, near the river mouth close to Ekkakula. No observations on this were published, since the species could not be collected or photographed, and equally important, the species was not reported by the half a dozen capable biologists who worked on the ridleys of Gahirmatha, though fishermen in the West Bengal Sunderbans, during my survey of *Batagur* claimed to have collected its very distinctive eggs, along with those of the ridleys, from the Gahirmatha coast before the area was gazetted a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1975.

My own interest on the occurrence of *Batagur baska* in Orissa was rekindled recently, on discovering a letter dated 9th April, 1982, from Chandra Sekhar Kar, (then doctoral student of Utkal University) to Vijaya. Kar spent some 8 years at Gahirmatha, studying the ridleys. In the letter, he wrote of *Batagur* nesting in the area, but 'in lesser numbers than ridleys'!!

These records indicate that *Batagur baska* may well be extant in the mangrove-backed coast of north-eastern Orissa, and nesting, at least up to the recent past, did take place. Records from Orissa also mean an extension of range of *Batagur baska* by a few hundred kilometres to the west of the Sunderbans, where the species is known to nest at a number of islands, shown elsewhere (Das 1987).

Literature accounts from the last century make it clear that the species was once abundant, and almost certainly ranged further north. The Zoological Survey of India, Calcutta, has an example from (Saltwater Lake, Calcutta) the northern-most record which is supported by a museum specimen. Mangroves were known to dominate the Salt Lake Area of Calcutta up to the end of the last century, before the tidal channels were closed. The report of the species from Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, mentioned by Nath (1959) is untenable, the locality being hundreds of kilometres upriver from the sea-mouth and the mangrove habitat of *Batagur baska*.

References

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