

Marine Turtle Newsletter

Marine Turtle Conservation: The Tribal Connection

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Conservation efforts are unlikely to become successful in the long run if public opinion is not actively sought and obtained. Realizing this, the marine turtle conservation program of the World Wildlife Fund-India (Eastern Region) has started its campaign to reach out to the masses. An illustrated pamphlet published by the WWF-I in Bengali is being distributed among the prospective consumers of turtles in the many markets of West Bengal, requesting them to abstain from buying turtle meat or eggs. Another publication is the book, *Indian Turtles: A Field Guide*, which describes all the 36 species and subspecies of turtles so far recorded from India. Besides creating an interest and awareness in this group of reptiles and providing information on their biology and status, the field guide can be used in the enforcement of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972.

Another effective strategy is the recruitment of the rural scroll-painter, Ranjit Chitrakar, who paints and sings of marine turtles and the need for their conservation. Hailing from a remote little village in Midnapore, Ranjit is a third generation scroll-painter and has been involved in the environmental education activities of the WWF-I since 1982, when Ms. Bonani Kakkar, Project/Education Officer of the WWF-I (Eastern Region) "discovered" him at a fair and immediately realized his potential.

A "patua," as a scroll-painter is called, is very much a part of rural Bengal. He paints his own scrolls, each as long as 7 meters, using colors from natural sources, and wanders from village to village singing tales from epics and legends to the vast, enthusiastic audience. Work on a scroll commences only after Ranjit has had a personal insight and grasped the conservation problems involved. This means that he may have to be taken to the "field"-in the turtle program, to the turtle markets. While the scene is fresh in his mind, the scroll-painter starts his painting and song composing simultaneously. Ranjit, like all members of his trade and tribe, uses only natural colors to illustrate his songs, like clay (brown), soot (black), vermillion (red), indigo (blue) and tumeric (yellow). Green is less readily procured: it has to be made from the juice of a plant leaf. Color is applied to the paper using a brush made from the tail hairs of a goat.

Ranjit the scroll-painter has been involved with WWF-I's environmental education program for over 3 years and is doing very effective work. The success of the conventional methods of education such as slides, films and posters may be limited especially when rural audiences are concerned, being interpreted as a city-dweller's attempt to talk about rural problems. On the other hand, the utilization of local skills and crafts in environmental education efforts holds promise, especially in developing countries. However, it has been little experimented with until now.