



*By Express News Service*

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## Here women guard casuarina, mangrove forests

BHUBANESWAR: Necessity is the mother of invention. What had started a few years ago completely out of need has transformed into a fine act of self-initiated coastal conservation.

In a small village of Puri's Astarang block comes an inspiring story of the women who have taken the concept of coastal conservation to a new level, all on their own.

Gundalba does not boast of a huge population but the 60- odd households were devastated by the 1999 super cyclone.

It is a 6 sq km patch that the women of the village stand guard, basing on a duty chart prepared by the committee they had floated nine years back.

Pir Jehania Jungle Suraksha Mahila Samiti, the allwomen's committee has its task cut out - conserve the casuarina and mangrove forest patch abutting the village.

In fact, the immediate impact of cyclone and its aftermath were felt on farm produce of the villagers. With the coastal bio-shield gone, crop yield fell.

The villagers realised that they need to conserve the casuarina forest patch as a first step. "It all started as a needdriven initiative by village folks. The women of the 60- odd households took lead and formed the outfit in 2000," says Sweta Mishra, a researcher on community conservation.

The women members devised a methodology to conserve the forest. Duty charts were chalked out and a common day of the week was identified on which they collected firewood, only dry and fallen branches and twigs. On the rest of the days, they were doing patrolling. Local youths of Gundalba took a cue and pitched in with support. The village, being close to the Devi river mouth, was also a nesting ground for the Olive Ridley turtles which attracted tourists.

With tourism getting a boost, the villagers who were dependent on fishing reaped benefits.

Though the village had casuarina forest for support, the following years of cyclone saw a surprise regeneration of mangroves which extended till the Devi river mouth.

In fact, regenerated mangroves also mean better spawning ground for fish as well as other aquatic species helping the villagers with livelihood since a ban on fishing remains in force from November to May every year due to Olive Ridley nesting.

Bichitrananda, a local who has been part of the initiative for last several years, says the self-initiated conservation measure has seemingly caught up with another six adjoining coastal villages.

"It is a stretch of about 30 km - from Kadua to Devi river mouth - along the coast which is slowly coming under the protection measures. It works both ways," he says.

Interestingly, the regeneration of mangroves has drawn the winter migratory birds to the area which were hitherto an uncommon sight for villagers.

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