



SURVEY OF THE BATAGUR TURTLE OF THE SUNDERBANS WITH NOTES ON OTHER REPTILES

The decline of the batagur turtle or river terrapin (Batagur baska) populations almost throughout its range is evident from a review of literature. Blyth (in Gunther, 1864) mentioned that the species abounded at the mouth of the Hooghly (in West Bengal) and great numbers were brought to Calcutta for food. Maxwell (1911) reported two large populations from the Irrawaddy river of Burma, and mentioned that both eggs and flesh were in demand. In Malaysia, the predominant religion being Islam, turtles are considered unfit to be eaten, but eggs are relished, and prior to the Second World War, the country's turtle population was several times larger (Loch, 1950). The present status of the batagur is unclear in many parts of its range. In the Indian subcontinent, the species was considered extinct till recently, when some members were found being kept in village ponds in the Sunderbans of Bangladesh (Whitaker, 1982) and of India (Moll, 1985). In Burma, there appears to have been a near total population collapse; a UNDP team found only a small nesting site along the Irrawaddy, where 3 or 4 batagur still nested (Moll, op cit.). Therefore, calling batagur 'endangered' is justified as it reflects the existing knowledge of the status of the species. Once common and an important protein-rich food in the diet of the local people of south and southeast Asia, it has, through unrestrained exploitation, seriously declined.

In India, the batagur is restricted to the Sunderbans mangrove forest situated at the mouth of the Ganga, in West Bengal. In this inhospitable land, freshwater inflow is almost absent. High salinity has discouraged settlers and only in the west, near Hooghly or further north, are human settlements to be found. In contrast, the Sunderbans on the Bangladesh side receives a much greater inflow of freshwater and as a result, organisms that are less saline resistant, such as the sundari tree (Heritiera fomes), which probably gives the region its name, are more common. Under Project Tiger a 2,585 sq. km. area has been gazetted in the Indian Sunderbans as a Tiger Reserve in 1973 and within it's 1,330 sq. km. core area or wilderness zone, all human activities are prohibited. Dense human population characterizes the outer limits of the Reserve, many of the inhabitants depending on the forest for their livelihood. Every year, approximately 5,000 people are given permits by the Project Tiger authorities to enter the core area for fishing, tree felling and honey collecting.