

The trade in freshwater turtles from Bangladesh

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There are at least 25 species of turtles and tortoises in Bangladesh, with freshwater turtles being particularly abundant. Although these turtles form part of the diet for only a minority of people in the country, they are being exported in increasingly large numbers and this trade could now be threatening this valuable resource.

A cruise in a dinghy down one of Bangladesh's many rivers can rarely be a disappointment for a turtle biologist. Freshwater bodies occupy 8000 sq km of the country's 144,000 sq km and there are at least 25 species of turtles and tortoises, 10 per cent of the world's total. The fact that these animals are still abundant is probably due to the fact that 90 per cent of people in Bangladesh are followers of Islam, which forbids the eating of turtle meat, considering it to be unclean.

Export of this natural resource, unlike direct consumption, is not prevented by religious belief, and large numbers of Bangladesh's freshwater turtles are involved in foreign trade. Between December 1988 and February 1989 I conducted a survey of many of the districts of Bangladesh, from Sylhet in the extreme north to Cox's Bazar in the south (Figure 1), to study the distribution patterns and exploitation levels of the turtle and tortoise fauna. This report is based on impressions and observations on the trends of export of freshwater turtles from the country.

The increasing trade levels of freshwater turtles have been recorded by Oliver (1979), Khan (1982) and Fugler (1984), among others, all of whom expressed concern for this resource. The Export Promotion Bureau, the government authority that promotes and monitors the country's foreign trade, records two categories of items of turtles that are legally exported: turtle meat, eggs and 'fins'; and live turtles and 'tortoises' (Anon., 1987). An extract of the most recent data is presented in Tables 1 and 2. Oliver (1979) states that this legal trade represents the 'tip of the iceberg',

with much larger numbers being smuggled across the border to Indian states where turtle consumption is heavy and the resource dwindling.

Table 1. Export trends for turtle meat, eggs and 'fins', between fiscal years 1977-78 and 1985-86, expressed as Taka (Bangladesh currency)

1977-78	46,000
1978-79*	—
1979-80	69,000
1980-81*	—
1981-82	26,000
1982-83	70,000
1983-84*	—
1984-85*	—
1985-86†	148,000

* No figures available.

† Up to December 1985.

Source: Anon. (1987)

Table 2. Export trends for live turtles, between fiscal years 1974-75 and 1985-86, expressed as Taka

1974-75	1000
1975-76	17,000
1976-77	1,187,000
1977-78	5,520,000
1978-79	6,914,000
1979-80	12,948,000
1980-81	16,326,000
1981-82	22,506,000
1982-83	22,884,000
1983-84	24,251,000
1984-85	23,247,000
1985-86	25,369,000

Source: Anon. (1987)