



Indian star tortoise (*Geochelone elegans*) (Photo : R. Whitaker)

TURTLE CONSERVATION PROGRAMME AT MADRAS CROCODILE BANK

by Indraneil Das

Turtles are among the most popular exhibits at the Madras Crocodile Bank, turtles being the most "acceptable" of all the reptiles, having no poison or large teeth. Our tortoise and turtle conservation programme has been underway here since 1983.

Besides the immediate goal of public education, we envisage a long-term research and conservation programme, run along the lines of the Bank's highly successful crocodile breeding project (MCBT has 10 of the world's 25 species of crocodylians) to maintain and breed all the 33 species and subspecies of freshwater turtles and tortoises found in India. Towards this end, success has been achieved in part – there are now 22 species and

subspecies of Indian chelonians (and several exotics) here, and several have bred, some for the very first time.

Breeding pairs currently at the Crocodile Bank include those of the peninsular black turtle (*Melanochelys trijuga trijuga*), Indian flapshell turtle (*Lissemys punctata punctata*), Sri Lankan black turtle (*Melanochelys trijuga thermalis*) and Travancore tortoise (*Indotestudo forstenii*). Permits are now being acquired to obtain pairs of the other species. However, one (or possibly both) of the Indian softshell turtles (*Trionyx gangeticus*) females have been laying fertile eggs continuously since 1986, even though we have had no males of the species since that year. This indicates that females of the species can retain sperm for

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