

The Turtle Collection of the Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata, India

¹B. H. C. K. Murthy and ²Indraneil Das

¹Zoological Survey of India, 16 J.L. Nehru Road, Kolkata 700 016, India

²Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation,
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia
E-mail: idas@ibec.unimas.my

The foundation (in 1784) of the Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta, then capital of British India by Sir William Jones (1746–1796) was a significant step towards the establishment of systematic research in zoology and the exploration of natural diversity of India and adjacent countries. It is thus to early European naturalists that we are indebted for commencing scientific research on the biodiversity of a subcontinent, which is both diverse and abundant. Often at great personal risk, these pioneers traveled extensively to what must have been inaccessible regions, returning often with spectacular specimens for the Society's Museum. The early exploration phase in the Indian region started in the early 1800s and lasted till the end of that century, when many species of Indian turtles were described. The large (and eclectic) membership of the Society was responsible for the arrival of both palaeontological and zoological material to the museum of the aforementioned Society, from all over British India, and occasionally, beyond, including the Middle East, Africa, North America, Central Asia, the Malayan Peninsula and Archipelago and eastern China, especially after 1824.

In 1866, with the passing of the Indian Museum Act, this collection was handed over to the Indian Museum (Fermor, 1836), and with the establishment of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) in 1916, the zoological collections were passed on to this organization, which included a large number of turtle specimens, both wet and dry. The ZSI, with its headquarters at Kolkata, is the single largest repository of zoological material in the country. The collection of turtles was made by often prominent naturalists of the time, being either gifts from the members of the Asiatic Society or collected by the staff of the Society, or the ZSI (Plate 2A–2D) during scientific expeditions, such as to Yarkand, Yunnan, Chilka Lake, Little Andaman, Great Nicobar, Chotanagpur, *etc.* Specimens were also received from museums such as Berlin, London, Karachi and Port Louis, via exchanges or as donations. Notable collectors of herpetological (including turtle) material include: John Anderson (1833–1900), Thomas Nelson Annandale (1876–1924), William Thomas Blanford (1832–1905), Banawari Lal Choudhuri (?–1913), John Cockburn (?–?), George Edward Dobson (1848–1895), Ashley Eden (1831–1887), Henry Haversham Godwin-Austen (1834–1923), John Robert Henderson (1863–1925), Baini Prashad (1894–1969), Edward Bosc Sladen (1831–1890), Ferdinand Stoliczka (1838–1874) and William Theobald (1829–1908).

This essay presents a listing of the contents of the turtle collection in the Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata (i.e., the National Zoological Collection). Plate 2E and 2F show representatives of turtle types in the ZSI, which are preserved in a custom-built fire-proof building, behind the Indian Museum building, at 16-Jawaharlal Nehru Road. Other important turtle collections in the 16 regional stations of the Survey have not been included, and neither are the palaeontological material of turtles from mostly the North Indian Shiwaliks and also some Jurassic and Eocene turtle material of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Geological Survey of India, that are currently stored in the adjacent Indian Museum or Geological Survey of India buildings. The term 'turtle' includes members of the Order Testudines (Chelonia or Chelonii, of some authors). Nomenclature follows Fritz and Havas (2007). The geographical spread of the samples include, besides general localities (such as 'Atlantic Ocean' or 'Arabia', or those received without data from zoos and museums), Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Myanmar, Palestine, Pakistan, Seychelles, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the U.S.A.