

## STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION OF ESTUARINE TURTLES IN INDIA\*

### Introduction

While knowledge of the status, distribution and reproductive biology of marine turtles of the Indian seas has increased considerably in recent years, the estuarine turtles have been very much neglected. Two species of turtles occur in the estuarine regions of the country, the River terrapin *Batagur baska* (Emydidae: Batagurinae) and the Asian giant softshell turtle *Pelochelys bibroni* (Trionychidae: Trionychinae), both species extending their distribution further east into south-east Asia. The present article reviews the status and distribution of these two estuarine turtles.

### *Batagur baska* (Gray) (River terrapin)

A large emydid turtle, with shell length exceeding 60 cm; snout-tip tilted, saw-jawed; carapace smooth and heavily buttressed; four claws on each forelimb. The species exhibits seasonal and sexual dichromatism. Breeding males from Burma have been described as having pale blue nostrils, intense black head and crimson neck and forelimbs. In Malaysia, the skin and shell of breeding males turn jet black, while at other times it is brown or grey. Females and juveniles paler in colour.

The species generally inhabits estuaries of large rivers and freshwater lakes, and canals in their vicinity and coasts near river mouths. In India, the River terrapin is confined to the Sunderabans of West Bengal, and has a small population which is endangered. Extralimital distribution and estimated population sizes are as follows: Bangladesh-indeterminate; Burma-minor; Thailand-minor; Malaysia-major; Indonesia-minor and Indochina-indeterminate.

Listed as 'endangered' by the IUCN Red Data Book, primarily because of overexploitation of eggs and adults for food and habitat destruction (Groombridge, *The IUCN Amphibia - Reptilia, Red Data Book, Part I, Testudines, Crocodylia and Rhynchocephalia*. IUCN, Gland, 1982), and under Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), indicating that international trade in the species is prohibited.

\*Prepared by Indraneil Das, Department of Limnology, Bhopal University, Bhopal.

### Distribution in India

In the tidal rivers, channels, creeks and sea coasts of the Sunderbans of West Bengal. Nesting takes place on deserted sandy beaches and sandspits at Mechua, Kedo and Nagbarachar. Reported also from Kanak, the 1.5 sq km sandspit (washed away by floods in 1984) situated at the mouth of the Matla River.

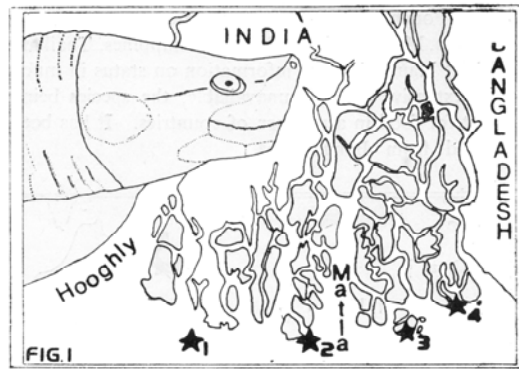


Fig. 1. Distribution of nesting beaches of the river Terrapin (*Batagur baska*) in the Sunderbans, West Bengal. References: 1. In Nagbarachar, 2. Kanak, 3. Kedo, 4. Mechua. Some sites determined from interviews with fishermen need to be confirmed. The small dot shows the locality of Kumirmari villages, where the species is kept as pets by villagers.

Several specimens, some trapped in nets, others hatched from eggs are being kept as pets in village ponds at Kumirmari and elsewhere north of the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve. The species is caught in offshore nets for sale along with Olive ridley *Lepidochelys olivacea*, during the winter months, from the vicinity of Sagar Island, in the western Indian Sunderabans.

### Conservation measures proposed

Inclusion of species in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, as it is endangered; enforcing existing legislation and thereby preventing capture of adult terrapins and collection of egg from the Tiger Reserve area; identifying nesting grounds which may exist outside the Reserve and extending protection to these; public education; setting up a breeding programme, perhaps using only the captive stock available as it causes no further capture from the wild population and continued research on the status and ecology of the species.