



tortoises and turtles

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TURTLE STATUS SCENARIO IN BANGLADESH

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Thousands of kilometers of rivers that snake southwards to meet the sea. Haors, the large yet shallow bodies of standing water, hundreds of square kilometers in area, but only a few meters in depth. A 750 km coastline, with estuaries, bays, and coral reefs. Much of Bangladesh is water. The land area is less than 144,000 sq. km., and the human density approaches 900 per sq km., making it one of the most densely populated countries on earth. Floods

wreak havoc at least once a year, and many people see sense in investing in a boat rather than property on firm land.

Approximately a tenth of the world's described turtle species, 25 in all, live in Bangladesh, an incredible diversity. In addition, populations of several freshwater turtles, now uncommon in the adjacent Indian states because of unrestrained exploitation, are still abundant. The prime reason for this high population and rich diversity seems to be the extensive wetlands present throughout Bangladesh, and a biologically rich forested area in the north-east and south-east, contiguous with forest patches in north-eastern India and northern Burma, coupled with the attitude of the followers of Islam, the religion followed by 90% of the people of Bangladesh.

Between December 1988 and February 1989, I conducted a survey of the freshwater turtles and land tortoises of Bangladesh, supported by the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society, to collect status and biological data needed for management and conservation (Das, 1989), walking, driving, sailing, or flying thousands of kilometers, from the northernmost district (Sylhet) to the southernmost (Cox's Bazaar). Close contacts with Forest Department personnel, turtlers, middlemen, exporters, academicians, and amateur naturalists made my work easier.

Fugler (1984) provided recent data on the export of freshwater turtles from Bangladesh. An official government publication, that of the Export Promotion Bureau (Anon, 1987) reveals that turtle exports have continued to increase. Between July and December 1985, turtle meat, eggs, and "fins" worth 148,000 Taka (approximately \$3,900 US) were exported, while the figure for live turtles during the same period was 25,369,000 Taka. In the entire preceding fiscal year (1984-85), no export of the first category of products was officially recorded, while 23,247,000 Taka worth of live turtles were exported (Anon, 1987).

Two species of softshell turtles were found to be exported, the Indian softshell turtle (Trionyx gangeticus) and the peacock softshell turtle (T. hurum), both included in Schedule III of the Bangladesh Wildlife (Preservation) Act of 1974, which gives them legal (paper) protection from being captured, killed, or traded. Permits for export are given for three species of Trionyx, including T. leithi, the Leith's softshell turtle of peninsular India, T. cartilagineus, widely distributed in southeast Asia but not found in Bangladesh, and "T. certilsfionus," a species which, if indeed described, is not recognized in any scholarly monograph on the group. Both T. gangeticus and T. hurum are listed on Appendix I of CITES, to which Bangladesh is a party. Lack of staff in the enforcement departments and identification problems, due to paucity of literature, training, and interest seem to be the reasons behind this violation.

All turtles and turtle products seem headed for Far Eastern