

## Conservation of Freshwater Turtles

### Why in news?


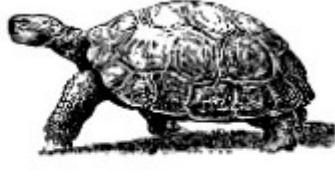
Recently, many incidents of smuggling freshwater turtles are reported across various States by international trafficking networks.

### What are freshwater turtles?

*23rd May marks the World Turtle Day.*

- Freshwater turtles are reptiles that are **ectothermic, or “cold-blooded”** (their internal temperature matches that of their surroundings).
- They also have a scaly skin enabling them to live outside of water.
- Turtles are **oviparous** (lay eggs).
- Turtles have a shell, composed of a carapace in the back and a plastron on the belly, is made of bony plates.
- Turtles have an impressively long life for such small animals.
- Freshwater turtles are smaller than their marine counterparts and their looks are more varied.
- India has 29 species of freshwater turtles (24) and tortoises (5).

*Not all turtles are tortoises, but all tortoises are technically turtles.*

 <p><b>TURTLE</b></p> <p>A turtle is a reptile from the Chelonian family. Turtles spend most of their life in the water.</p>	<h1>VS</h1>	 <p><b>TORTOISE</b></p> <p>A tortoise is a reptile from the Chelonian family. Tortoises spend most of their life on land areas.</p>
<p>May be herbivorous, carnivorous, or omnivorous. Most are omnivorous or carnivorous.</p> <p>Carapace is typically more laterally compressed and streamlined.</p> <p>Most live in the water or are always found near it.</p> <p>Most have webbed feet.</p>		<p>Most are primarily herbivorous, but there are a few that are omnivorous.</p> <p>Carapace is usually more dome-shaped.</p> <p>Most are primarily terrestrial.</p> <p>Feet are short and sturdy with bent legs.</p>

**What are the major threats for turtle?**

*India ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> in the list of countries with the largest number of threatened turtle and tortoise species in the world after China and Vietnam.*

- Smuggling, Poaching, Habitat destruction, etc. are the major threats to turtles.
- Turtles are smuggled primarily
  - For their meat (mainly within the country)
  - As pets (within and outside India)
  - To extract their calipee (a gelatinous layer found in the lower shells of turtles, believed to be used in traditional Chinese medicine)
- Pollution of waterbodies, incidental entanglement in fishing gear, etc. adds to the issue.
- **West Bengal** remains the hotspot for the illegal trade of turtles for meat.
- During the annual Kali Puja festival, over 1 lakh turtles such as the northern river terrapin and black-spotted turtles are slaughtered as part of sacrificial rituals in West Bengal, Assam and Bangladesh.

# TURTLES ENDANGERED

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**3<sup>RD</sup>**

India ranks third in the list of countries with the largest number of threatened turtle and tortoise species in the world after China and Vietnam.

**10%**

population of world's 50 most threatened freshwater turtle species is in India.

## WHY IS IT HAPPENING?



Meat Market



Traditional Medicine



Marine Pollution



Exotic Pets



Poaching



Habitat Loss

## What efforts were taken by India for conservation of turtles?

- The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) launched '**Operation Save Kurma**' to prevent poaching, transportation and illegal trade of live turtles and tortoises.
- '**Operation Turtshield-I**' and '**Operation Turtshield-II**' were taken up to tackle the illegal trade of live turtles.
- The Conference of Parties (COP) adopted India's proposal to transfer **Red-crowned roofed turtle** (*Batagur kachuga*) and **Leith's Softshell Turtle** (*Nilssonina leithii*) to Appendix I of Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild fauna and flora (CITES).
- 11 of the turtle species are protected under **Schedule I of The Wildlife Protection Act**, enjoying the same protection as tigers.
- Smuggling of turtles, one of the Class 1 species of the water animal, is a non-bailable offence under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.
- **The Wildlife Conservation Society - Turtle Survival Alliance - India** team have been employing ex-situ conservation measures and capacity building of enforcement agencies to minimize illegal turtle trade.
- Indian biologist Shailendra Singh has been awarded the **Behler Turtle Conservation Award** for bringing three critically endangered turtle conservation species back from the brink of extinction.
- **Other projects**
  - Red-crowned Roofed Turtle Recovery Program in Chambal
  - Northern River Terrapin Recovery Project in Sunderbans
- The Assam Biodiversity Board has declared the **Hajong tortoise lake** which is home to several threatened freshwater turtle species as a biodiversity heritage site.

**Related links** - [Northern River Terrapin](#), [Indian Flapshell Turtles](#)

## Quick Facts

### Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

- CITES is an international agreement between governments and is **legally binding** on the Parties.
- Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of the species.
- It has 3 appendices to protect threatened and vulnerable species.
  - **Appendix I** - For species currently threatened with extinction.
  - **Appendix II** - For species not necessarily threatened with extinction but demands intervention to keep a check on trade and avoid its utilisation that may threaten their survival.
  - **Appendix III** - For a given species, when a specific country wants to regulate trade.

### Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB)

- It is a statutory multi-disciplinary body established under the Ministry of Environment and Forests, to combat organized wildlife crime in the country.
- Under **Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972**, it is mandated
  - To collect and collate intelligence related to organized wildlife crime activities
  - To establish a centralized wildlife crime data bank
  - To assist foreign authorities and international organization concerned to facilitate co-ordination and universal action for wildlife crime control
  - To advise the Government on issues relating to wildlife crimes having national and international ramifications, relevant policy and laws
  - Capacity building of the wildlife crime enforcement agencies for scientific and professional investigation

## References

1. [The Hindu | The battle to bring freshwater turtles back from the brink](#)
2. [WCCB | About Wildlife Crime Control Bureau](#)
3. [Wildlifesos | All Eyes On Indian Turtles This World Turtle Day](#)
4. [PIB | India's conservation efforts towards tortoise and turtles](#)
5. [HWW | Freshwater turtles](#)