

- Reptiles

Northern river terrapin

This month, shines a spotlight on India's most endangered turtle species.

BBC Wildlife Magazine · 9 Apr 2020 · 27 · Dr Shai Singh FIND OUT MORE PTES northern river terrapins project: bit.ly/2vvei5U

What do we know about the northern river terrapin?



It is one of Asia's largest freshwater and brackish water turtles, growing up to 60cm in length and weighing 18kg. The species is found in the estuarine water of vast mangrove forests in eastern India, Bangladesh and part of Myanmar. Adults have an upward-pointed snout and dome-shaped carapace, and the heads of the males become black and crimson pink during the courtship season in early winter. It is believed that females, which are larger, travel hundreds of kilometres to nest along sea-facing sandy beaches.

Why is the species in danger?

A long history of over-exploitation, habitat degradation and non-specific fishing have led to many terrapins being either hunted or accidentally drowned throughout their range. With fewer than 50 adults in captivity and no evidence of ecologically viable populations in the wild, there's a possibility that this species will become extinct in the wild.

What action has been taken?

A conservation breeding programme is aiming to reach 1,000 individuals in captivity before setting up a phase-wide sustained released programme. In the meantime, habitat evaluation work is being undertaken in India's Sunderbans and pilot releases are taking place. Adults tagged with acoustic telemetry were released in India but they could not be easily tracked in the vast mangroves: conservationists are now using satellite telemetry. Following a successful pilot release in Bangladesh, 10 sub-adult terrapins have now been released in the same area in the hope they may lead us to the previously released adults.

What happens next?

The team will be monitoring the released terrapins to track their survival and dispersal. Future releases will be adjusted depending on what the findings show. Breeding of captive terrapins will continue, ensuring good genetic diversity. There are also plans to launch a buyback initiative to retrieve any individuals caught by fishermen. Megan Shersby

DR SHAI SINGH is the India programme director for Turtle Survival Alliance and leads a recovery programme for turtles.

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