

IN ASSAM, TEMPLES STAVE OFF EXTINCTION OF TURTLES

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A black softshell turtle being released in the water.

It received 'divine protection' for many years and now, the rarest of India's 28 turtle species is back where it belongs – in the wild - where it went extinct years ago.

The black softshell turtle (*Nilssonia nigricans*) figures in the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List as "extinct in the wild". But a few temple ponds in Assam and Bangladesh are bringing these turtles back from the brink.

One such pond is in Hayagriva Madhab Temple at Hajo, about 30 km west of Guwahati. Locals regard the turtles in the pond as Kurma avatar of Lord Vishnu to whom the Hajo temple is dedicated.

"On January 27, we released 35 hand-reared turtle hatchlings, including 16 black softshells, in the Haduk Beel (wetland) of Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. These turtles were bred in the Hayagriva Madhab temple pond," Jayaditya Purkayastha of Help Earth said. Pobitora, often referred to as 'Mini Kaziranga', is about 50 km east of Guwahati.

The other turtle species moved from the temple pond to the wild was Indian softshell (*Nilssonia gangetica*) and the peacock softshell (*Nilssonia hurum*). Hatchlings of the three turtle species were moved to the Assam State Zoo in Guwahati, where they were monitored for a quarantine period of 39 days, before being released into the wild.

"This is a milestone in Assam's turtle conservation history, and it would not have been possible without the interest shown by the temple authorities in the artificial breeding programme. The Forest Department and Turtle Survival Alliance provided logistical support," Mr. Purkayastha said.

Pradipta Baruah, Divisional Forest Officer, Guwahati Wildlife Division, said that a certain degree of faith attached to turtles has helped them survive in temple ponds. "Involvement of local communities for amphibians that do not get as much attention as the animals perceived to be more glamorous is a step in the right direction," Mr Baruah said.

Taking the turtle conservation story forward is seen as a major challenge for wildlife officials in Pobitora, vulnerable to poachers because of a sizeable one-horned rhino population.

India hosts 28 species of turtles, of which 20 are found in Assam. But consumption of turtle meat and eggs, silt mining, encroachment of wetlands and change in flooding pattern have had a disastrous impact on the State's turtle population. "Unfortunately, 70% of the species found in Assam are threatened with extinction. The temple ponds have more turtles than they can sustain and lack egg laying space because of so-called beautification of these ponds with concrete boundary. Besides, temple turtles are fed non-natural food such as bread and wheat balls, which alters their biology," Mr. Purkayastha pointed out.

Researcher Aviad Scheinin says the hundreds of sharks flocking exclusively to the Hadera power plant every winter qualifies as "a legitimate and rare phenomenon."

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