

CONSERVATIONISTS CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC AFTER RELEASE OF RARE TERRAPINS INTO SUNDARBANS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Rare species: *Batagur baska* fitted with GPS transmitter being released into the Sundarbans.

Less than two decades ago, experts and forest officials were not sure if the once plentiful Northern River Terrapin (*Batagur baska*) had survived in the wetlands of Sundarbans.

Widespread in the coastal mangrove swamps, rivers, and estuaries of Odisha and West Bengal in the early 1900s, unsustainable harvesting had resulted in sharp decline in the population.

In 2008, a joint exploration of the mangroves and tidal creeks by the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) and Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) located a cohort of eight males, three females and one juvenile at a pond at the Sajnekhali Interpretation Center. Since then, the conservation breeding of the species, categorised as critically endangered by IUCN Red List, has been a success with around 12 adults and close to 370 juveniles of the species having been bred in captivity so far.

Marking a milestone in the conservation efforts, on January 19, ten sub-adult *Batagur baska*, reared for over nine years, were reintroduced in the wild by the experts of TSA and STR officials.

"These animals were tagged with GPS transmitters the battery of which can last 18 months. These transmitters will help to understand survival and dispersal patterns of the turtles and adjust future large scale release programs. This will help to generate the basic ecological data on the conservation requirements of released animals," Director of TSA India Shailendra Singh said.

Dr. Singh said this will be the first ever GPS tagging and tracking of any freshwater turtle in India, providing hope to replicate it in rewilding of other threatened turtles in India. The GPS based tracking will allow field researchers to track the *Batagur baska* across the vast expanse of mangrove swamps and generate extensive data to better inform future releases. Conservation breeding of the terrapins is jointly being carried out at seven places in the Sundarban Tiger Reserve.

Sundarbans is the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world and the release of the turtles is an attempt to understand the habitat and behaviour of these freshwater turtles whose population in the wild are difficult to track.

"We have no data on the habitat of *Batagur baska*, their breeding grounds, their travel paths or the best age to release them. The rewilding will give us crucial data on the species. We have 300 odd individuals and in future the number will rise and with this information we can release more animals in the wild," Deputy Field Director, STR, Justin Jones said.

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