

PACT SIGNED TO CONSERVE RARE TURTLE IN ASSAM

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The freshwater black softshell turtle.Special ArrangementSpecial Arrangement

A major temple in Assam has signed a memorandum of understanding with two green NGOs, the Assam State Zoo-cum-Botanical Garden and the Kamrup district administration for the long-term conservation of the rare freshwater black softshell turtle or the *Nilssonina nigricans* .

A vision document 2030 was also launched after Turtle Survival Alliance India and Help Earth signed the pact involving the Hayagriva Madhava Temple Committee. The temple, revered by both Hindus and Buddhists, is at Hajo, about 30 km northwest of Guwahati.

Until sightings along the Brahmaputra's drainage in Assam, the black softshell turtle was thought to be "extinct in the wild" and confined only to ponds of temples in northeastern India and Bangladesh. The International Union for Conservation of Nature had in 2021 listed the turtle as "critically endangered". But it does not enjoy legal protection under the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, although it has traditionally been hunted for its meat and cartilage, traded in regional and international markets.

"Various temple ponds in Assam such as that of the Hayagriva Madhava Temple harbour various threatened species of turtles. Since the turtles are conserved in these ponds only based on religious grounds, many biological requirements for building a sustainable wild population have since long been overlooked," Arpita Dutta of Turtle Survival said.

"This multi-stakeholder association [conservation pact] aims to restock the wild with viable, self-sufficient and genetically pure threatened turtle populations in the region. We will offer assistance for the required improvement of husbandry of turtles kept in such ponds, and further recovery efforts are recommended for the long-term survival and existence of the endangered freshwater turtles," she added.

Kamrup Deputy Commissioner Kailash Kartik N. emphasised the mass awareness on the conservation issues of all species of turtles in the region while working on threats and opportunities to strengthen the black softshell turtle population in Assam.

Zoo director Tejas Mariswamy and Help Earth's Jayaditya Purkayastha attended the programme on June 19, along with members of the Hayagriva Madhava Temple Committee.

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