

# TURTLES PLAY FAST AND LOOSE WITH BORDERS

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

The northern river terrapin is left only in tiny numbers in India and Bangladesh. AFP | Photo Credit: DR. SMA RASHID

Animals know no international boundaries and this has come as some sort of a surprise and challenge to experts and forest officials who installed GPS transmitters on the northern river terrapin in the Indian Sundarbans.

In just six weeks after the release, at least three of the 10 turtles of the critically endangered *Batagur baska* species have travelled hundreds of kilometres and are now in Bangladesh.

Shailendra Singh, director of Turtle Survival Alliance India (TSA), who played an important role in the conservation and release of the turtles, said that the animals with transmitters had traversed hundreds of kilometres and in the case of one turtle that was in Bangladesh at present, the dispersal has been about 400 km.

## 'Three cross over'

"There are three turtles that have entered Bangladesh. In the case of maximum dispersal, the animal descended from the release site in Indian Sundarbans, crossed the sea and Bangladesh Sundarbans, and is now in its fringe area," Dr. Singh said.

Of the three turtles in Bangladesh, one was caught by fishermen in Bangladesh who removed the transmitter from the animal.

"Fortunately, there was a telephone number on the transmitter and somehow the fishermen contacted the TSA office and we approached officials of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve. We are trying to bring the turtle back to India," Dr. Singh said. Of the 10 animals released with the transmitter, signals are coming from six: four from India, and two from Bangladesh.

Experts have pointed out that five of the animals have descended down from the site of release in the Sundarbans and moved south. Justin Jones, Deputy Director of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, said that the turtle had been rescued by the Bangladesh Forest Department.

"We are trying to bring back the animal, but at present, the animal is at a facility under Khulna Forest Department. Bangladesh also has a facility for *Batagur Baska*, and the animal which is injured is at the facility," Mr. Jones said.

Highlighting the need for the release of the critically endangered turtles, the official of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve said the objective of the initiative was to ascertain the habitat, breeding pattern and the movement of the species.

The population of the northern river terrapin, a freshwater turtle, had reached critical limits about 15 years ago when experts and forest officials were not sure about any surviving population of the freshwater turtles in the Sundarbans.

In 2008, a joint exploration of swamps mangroves and tidal creeks by the TSA and Sundarban Tiger Reserve located a cohort of eight males, three females, and one juvenile in a pond at the Sajnekhali Interpretation Center.

In 14 years, the conservation breeding of the species, categorised as critically endangered by International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List, has been a success with almost 12 adults and close to 370 juveniles of the species.

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Shailendra Singh

Director of Turtle Survival Alliance India

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