

U.S. SLIDER TURTLES POSE A THREAT IN NORTHEAST

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Growing concerns: The red-eared sliders grow fast and leave nothing for the native species to eat. special arrangement

A 'cute' American turtle popular as a pet is threatening to invade the natural water bodies across the Northeast, home to 21 of the 29 vulnerable native Indian species of freshwater turtles and tortoises.

Between August 2018 and June 2019, a team of herpetologists from NGO Help Earth found red-eared sliders in the Deepor Beel Wildlife Sanctuary and the Ugratara temple pond – both in Guwahati. They published the "grim" finding in 'Reptiles & Amphibians', journal of the U.S.-based International Reptile Conservation Foundation in August 2020.

But the alarm was raised after H.T. Lalremsanga and eight others from Mizoram University's Department of Zoology published another report in the same journal in April this year. Their report said a red-eared slider was collected from an unnamed stream, connected to the Tlawng River, on a farm near Mizoram capital Aizawl.

The red-eared slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) derives its name from red stripes around the part where its ears would be and from its ability to slide quickly off any surface into the water.

"Native to the U.S. and northern Mexico, this turtle is an extremely popular pet due to its small size, easy maintenance, and relatively low cost. But on the flip side, they grow fast and virtually leave nothing for the native species to eat," Mr. Lalremsanga told *The Hindu*. on Friday.

"Much like the Burmese python that went to the U.S. as a pet to damage the South Florida Everglades ecosystem, the red-eared slider has already affected States such as Karnataka and Gujarat, where it has been found in 33 natural water bodies," said Jayaditya Purkayastha of the Guwahati-based Help Earth.

"But more than elsewhere in India, preventing this invasive species from overtaking the Brahmaputra and other river ecosystems in the Northeast is crucial because the Northeast is home to more than 72% of the turtle and tortoise species in the country, all of them very rare," he said.

Mr. Purkayastha said the red-eared slider presents a Catch-22 situation. People who keep it as pets become sensitive about turtle conservation but endanger the local ecosystem, probably unknowingly, by releasing them in natural water bodies after they outgrow an aquarium, tank or pool at home.

"Although the red-eared slider is traded legally, the time has come for the government to come up with regulations against keeping invasive as pets," he said.

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