

Indian Star Tortoise may get protection

KUALA LUMPUR, July 21:

The Indian Star Tortoise may soon be afforded legal protection in Peninsular Malaysia and be banned from sale in the country if a proposal by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks is accepted.

"The department will propose that the Wild Life Protection Act 1972 be amended to include all endangered species listed under the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES)," said Mislihah Mohd Bashir, its director of enforcement.

This means that exotic, endangered tortoises, currently excluded from the Act, will be protected. She said this might take time as the proposal needed to be first submitted to the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment.

Mislihah said the department was aware that the species was being smuggled in.

"But once they are in the country there is nothing we can do. We can't charge anyone with possession as the species is not listed under the Act." She also said the species was sometimes smuggled across the border from Thailand.

"This is a bit difficult for us because we don't have enough trained staff to station at the borders. It is also hard to detect as it may be hidden somewhere in the vehicle when they cross the border," she said.

Mislihah said the department would be recruiting new staff to beef up enforcement. "Currently, we also need help in identifying animals and animal parts. For instance, if there is an endangered animal part in powdered form, it is very hard for us to tell if it belongs to a tiger or any other animal. We do need tools that can help us. It will give confidence to our officers when carrying out enforcement." She was responding to the report Demand Driven: The Trade of Indian Star Tortoise (*Geochelone Elegans*) in Peninsular Malaysia to be launched by Traffic South East Asia tomorrow.

The report showed that the Indian Star Tortoise is able to enter the country undetected every two to three months to meet local demands for them as pets.