

Smuggling leaves Star turtles shell-shocked

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> The call of the wild demands an answer. Because, the Star tortoise - an
> animal which lives life in the slow lane -finds itself on the fast track
> to being on the 'endangered' list. With India fast becoming a transit
> point for the illegal business of smuggling of animals, this harmless
> creature finds itself being shipped to South East Asian countries,
> including Malaysia and Thailand, where it is either kept as a pet, eaten
> or used for medicinal purposes.

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> "Unfortunate as it sounds, India has emerged as a major site for the
> 'pet' trade and the thriving medical industry in China. One of the
> worst-hit animals in this regard are tortoises and turtles, of which
> India has 32 species," says BC Chowdhury of the Wildlife Institute of
> India.

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> Figures reveal precisely how smuggling is snatching away the lifeline
> of Star turtles: since August 2003, nearly 3,000 of these creatures have
> been seized by customs officials from smugglers. And the reasons why
> smugglers target the Star tortoise aren't far to seek. Weighing between
> 15 gram and 250 gram, these tortoises are easy to carry and fetch a sum
> of \$ 40 in Singapore 'pet' markets and up to \$ 150 apiece in the US
> and Europe. While small, star-striped tortoises are kept as pets, the
> larger ones, and turtles, are used as essential ingredients in
> traditional Chinese medicine and also find their way to the dinner
> table. Illegally.

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> "Star tortoises, protected under Schedule III of the Wildlife
> Protection Act, are found in large numbers in the jungles of Tamil Nadu
> and Andhra. They are collected by local residents and sold to middlemen
> for anything between Rs 50 and Rs 100," says an officer of the
> enforcement wing of the forest department. But with the forest
> department not having a separate wing to crack down on smugglers, the
> masterminds are at large. Not surprisingly, wildlife officials have gone
> hi-tech by implanting electronic chips in Star tortoises before
> releasing them into their natural habitat. "The tagging of e-chips to
> tortoises helps ascertain the places from where these animals are being
> smuggled," says chief wildlife warden and chief conservator of forest
> wildlife Hitesh Malhotra.

> However, more than e-technology, what Star tortoises need most is the
> shelter of human concern. Unfortunately, it takes years for the word
> 'human' to evolve to 'humane'.>

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