

### Tawun Once A Haven For Freshwater Turtles

**Location:** Tawun village, Padas District, Ngawi regency, East Java

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A decade ago, Tawun village, Padas district, Ngawi regency, East Java, was still noted for its bulus or small freshwater turtles. These reptiles were found in nearly every part of the local river and also in almost every pond in this village. Locals, however, simply let them live freely as nature had intended." When I was young back in the 1930s, the stream in front of this house had a lot of turtles in it. There were thousands of them but the locals did not bother to catch any of them. Instead, they often fed them," said 80-year-old Diyun. He said that there were two species of turtles in Tawun. The first species was completely black while the other had yellow spots on their black shells. Locals call the latter bulus ceplok These turtles, about 40 or 50 centimeters in diameter, are shier than the black ones, said Diyun, who has six grandchildren. "Don't get close to them if you want to have a look at them. Feed them first and then watch them from a distance," he said. The locals in Tawun have no desire to cause trouble for the turtles as they believe the reptiles are sacred animals. The turtles, so the local legend goes, first came from an 80-square-meter pond called Sendang Tawun. They were kept by Ki Ageng Tawun, a descendant of the Majapahit royal family who the Tawun villagers claim as their ancestor. "This pond is the place of origin of the turtles. So while the turtles are increasingly rare in the village, you can still find a lot of them in the pond. The presence of these turtles in the pond is something that attracts tourists to visit this place," said Kaswadi, who lives close to the pond. Sendang Tawun, located about seven kilometers east of Ngawi town, has been a tourist area since 1952. Tourists are attracted here on account of the forests and hilly terrain. The pond, whose pristine water never runs dry even during the height of the dry season, is a good place for swimming, especially for children. Despite the arrival of many tourists, the turtles, the biggest attraction in Tawun village, continue to live undisturbed in the pond. The early 1980s, however, saw a decline in the population of the turtles in Sendang Tawun. The reptiles were caught in great numbers and sold in areas outside the village. As the locals began to realize that the turtles could produce money, they also started to catch and sell them to middlemen. At first, they openly caught these turtles but later they did it secretly because the village elders prohibited the practice. After the country was hit by the acute economic crisis in 1997, the illegal catching of turtles in Tawun reached its peak. The middlemen were ready to buy these turtles at much higher prices, therefore prompting locals to intensify their efforts to catch them. In those years, a turtle, generally weighing between eight and 10 kilograms, would fetch a price of Rp 8,000 a kilogram. Understandably, the locals were very keen on selling them. Later, however, the locals realized that the population of turtles in their village was declining. Following this realization, about three years ago they agreed to save the turtles from extinction. They also agreed that nobody, locals or otherwise, would be allowed to catch the turtles any more. As a result, illegal turtle catching has now be significantly reduced. "Of course, there are still cases of illegal catching. Four months ago, for example, the locals found two persons illegally catching turtles here. They were beaten up before they were taken to the local military command," Diyun said. Today, Sendang Tawun looks more beautiful than ever. It has been turned into a recreational park and placed on the list of tourist attractions in Ngawi regency.

A local investor, CV Naga Mas, which is owned by Tabib Muslim, now manages the park on a 25-year contract basis. The area has also been provided with tourist facilities and infrastructure. About Rp 1 billion has been spent on the tourist project. If you go there, you can find a swimming pool, and a cheap lodging place (only Rp 20,000 per night), an children's playground and a well caredfor park. To enter the tourist area, you have to pay Rp 2,000. Every Sunday, the site is crowded with visitors. Traditional and modern art performances are put on during holidays and the Muslim post-fasting festivities. To popularize this spot among tourists, the name has been changed from Taman Tawun to Bukit Tawun Ketawang Indah. "Since its renovation in 1992, the area has seen an increasing number of visitors. Unfortunately, despite a ban on this, many of the visitors throw garbage into the pond. That's why the turtles cannot live in peace there now," said one of the men in charge of looking after the pond. The locals' awareness of the need to conserve their turtles deserves appreciation. Despite the construction of tourist facilities and infrastructure, the Tawun locals continue to ensure that their turtles, which may now be considered rare, can live as peacefully as possible. In this context, it would be a good idea for the Ngawi regency administration to issue a regulation to protect these turtles so that they will be saved from extinction.