

Turtles Target in India's Northeast as Meat Craze Spirals (Surajit Talukdar)

Oneworld South Asia 8/6/04 (New Delhi, India)

Of the 26 species of non-marine turtles and tortoises found in India, 19 are found in the northeast region, thus making it an important repository for them.

But now, warn environmentalists, human rapacity coupled with official apathy is proving to be a deathblow for these rare creatures. Especially, the Ganges soft-shell turtle (*Trionyx gangeticus*), which is found mainly in the Barak Valley region, is on the verge of extinction.

The reader of the department of ecology in Assam Central University, A. Gupta, says, "Due to lack of awareness, these turtles are being constantly preyed upon by the people for their meat which is considered a delicacy in Assam. If this trend continues, these creatures will soon be a thing of the past."

Admittedly, a large section of Assam's tribal inhabitants is carnivorous in its food habits and consumes turtle meat and eggs. Many tribes have expert hunters, trappers and fishermen.

Nevertheless, there were several checks and balances in their predatory way of life. The Ningthouja clan of the Meitei tribe, for instance, considered it a taboo to consume turtle or tortoise meat.

Unfortunately, a booming market for turtle meat has made the trapping of these reptiles by the Ningthoujas a favorite alternative to earn money.

Ramu Das, a trapper in southern Assam's Cachar district, sells turtles to traders in Silchar's Fatak Bazar, one of the largest markets in the state, "The demand for turtle meat is huge," says Das. "Young turtles that weigh less than 200 gram fetch a high price in the market. The price of a kilogram of turtle meat is around US \$7.5."

Das admits he sells up to ten turtles a day, which translates into sales of a cool US \$75 daily. In a state that's way down - even by Indian standards - on the totem pole of development, that's considerably more than he can hope to earn elsewhere.

The turtle trade has created some strange bedfellows. To fulfill the insatiable demand for the reptile's meat in Assam, several traders in the state have now teamed up with wildlife smugglers in Kanpur, an industrial city in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

Till the mid-80s, live animals and carapaces - the hard upper shell of a turtle - used to be smuggled out of Barak Valley to other parts of India and even China, the leading market for turtle meat in Asia.

That's history. "Smuggling is almost non-existent now as the numbers have dwindled drastically. Traders now offer very attractive prices for flesh and carapace to tribal hunters and fishermen," points out an activist of the nongovernmental organization, People for Animals.

In many tribal-dominated areas of Assam, superstitious beliefs also lead to attrition in the

turtle population.

"We hang a carapace on the door of a house to protect it from burglars. Similarly, to have good luck and to keep snakes away, we use to hang turtle carapace in the cattle-shed," says S. Barman, a villager in the hill district of North Cachar.

Turtle flesh, eggs and blood are also much in demand for their supposedly medicinal value. The blood, believed to be a cure for piles and fistula, is in great demand in this region. The animal's flesh is supposed to be a remedy for gout and arthritis.

But what's more terrible is the manner in which these hapless creatures are killed. Many hunters use spears to gore the turtles in shallow water, refusing to spare even the juveniles.

Another common practice is to lay rows of hooked lines in shallow water near sandbanks. As the turtles move into the trap zone, their paddles get caught in the hooks. Other traps made of bamboo and cane are also used.

"A male and a female *Kachuga sylhetensis* - a rare species found in the northeast - recently rescued had their front paddles badly mauled by hooks," says Gupta, who is also the coordinator of the Turtle Save Program launched by the Environmental Society of South Assam (EnSSA), a leading NGO.

This is despite the fact that hunting of these rare species is a punishable offense under India's wildlife protection laws. Cachar College Science Society convener T.P. Singha protests, "Unfortunately, very few people have raised their voice against this unlawful practice," adding that these reptiles are crucial in maintaining the ecological balance.

A senior forest department official points out that the real numbers of turtles hunted may never be known as many turtle trapping areas in the state have not yet been identified.

To make up for the apathy of the law enforcing agencies, the EnSSA in concert with the Bombay Natural History Society, one of India's leading NGOs in the field of wildlife, has conducted a study to assess the nature and extent of the threat to the Ganges softshell, the most vulnerable of all turtles in Assam.

As per the study, this species uses the Rukni River bank as its breeding ground and can be sighted in clusters in many oxbow lakes of the Barak and Sonai rivers and these spots are the prime targets for the poachers.

In a state wracked by poverty, serial floods, ethnic strife and a sea of other problems, few people are likely to have the time to speak up for the mute turtle.