

An Unedited Report

Soft-shell turtle deaths in sacred temple unexplained

Chittaranjan Baruah

Member of the Asian Turtle Conservation Network (ATCN)

Department of Zoology, Gauhati University, Guwahati – 781 014, Assam, India

E-mail: chittaranjan_2004@india.com

Turtles are worshipped in many parts of India especially in Assam of northeast India. The Hayagriva Madhava temple of Assam, India (located in 26°14'25.49" N and 91°33'57.62" E), constructed by the Koch King Raghu Deva Narayan in 1583, is a famous tourist spot. The temple has a pond known as "Madhab Pukhuri", which has an area of about 10 bighas (468-foot-long, 252-foot-wide and 40-foot- deep pond). The pond is being inhabited by a large number of turtles since time immemorial. A total of six species of turtles are found in the Madhab Pukhuri of which three species viz., *Geoclemys hamiltonii*, *Pangshura tectum* and *Pangshura tentoria* belonging to the family Geoemydidae and the rest three *Aspideretes gangeticus*, *Nilssonia nigricans* and *Aspideretes hurum* of Trionychidae family.



The Madhab Pukhuri [Photo: Chittaranjan Baruah]

Recently, about 13 turtles of the Madhab Pukhuri died within two weeks, but experts are not sure why. The Kamrup district administration sent a team of experts to examine the cause. All the turtles died are soft-shell turtles belonging to 2 species *Nilssonia nigricans* and *Aspideretes gangeticus*. The dead turtles have been sent to the College of Veterinary Sciences for pathological examination. The expert team collected water samples and inspected the pond for clues to the deaths. They found the physico-chemical parameters of Madhab Phukhuri within the normal range.

The exact number of turtles residing in the pond is not known, but they are estimated to be over a thousand. In Madhab Pukhuri *Nilssonia nigricans* and *Aspideretes gangeticus* were recorded in large numbers. Especially most of the *N. nigricans* species are much older and their shells were coated with layers of algae. The overpopulation of soft-shell turtles might be a serious cause. Presently, the turtle population in the Madhab Pukhuri, Hajo seems to be under great threat. Construction of concrete border in the side has totally destroyed the natural breeding ground of turtles. It has been observed that almost all the dead turtles are aged females. The turtles get injured while they want to bask or try to come up for hatching. The same may also leads to metabolic disorders and parasitic infections. All the specimens are observed in fungal infected condition. The devotees threw the polythene bags directly to

the water bodies which may also cause toxicity effect. The turtles get only biscuits and bread as supplementary food which is a deviation from the normal nutritional requirement of the turtle. A thorough scientific investigation in the Madhab Pukhuri with the outcome of effective conservation management strategies is a dire need to save the existing turtles from danger. Rehabilitation of turtles may be a successful way to overcome the death caused by overpopulation.



A parasite infested soft-shell turtle [Photo: Chittaranjan Baruah]



A soft-shell turtle under treatment [Photo: Chittaranjan Baruah]

Additional source of information:

1. **The Telegraph** (Calcutta, India), *Saturday*, August 2, 2008