

India has 10% of world's 50 most threatened freshwater turtle species: Report

China and Vietnam have the most number of endangered species of turtles, reveals study by Turtle Conservation Coalition

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Northern River Terrapin (PHOTOS: TURTLES IN TROUBLE REPORT)

India ranks third in the list of countries with the largest number of threatened turtle and tortoise species in the world after China and Vietnam, an international report released on Thursday has revealed.

The country has two of the world's 25 most threatened freshwater turtle species – Northern River Terrapin (*Batagur baska*) found in the Sudarbans, West Bengal, and the Red-Crowned Roof Turtle (*Batagur kachuga*), found only within the riverine National Chambal Gharial Wildlife Sanctuary (NCGWS) in Madhya Pradesh.

Another three species – South Asian Narrow-headed Softshell Turtle (*Chitra indica*) from NCGWS, Black Softshell Turtle (*Nilssononia nigricans*) from Assam, and the Arakan Forest Turtle (*Heosemys depressa*) from Mizoram – were identified under the list of top 50 most threatened species globally. This takes the tally in India to 7.4% under the world's 25 most threatened turtle species, and 10% of the top 50.



Red-Crowned Roof Turtle (PHOTO: TURTLES IN TROUBLE REPORT)

Additionally, the study identified the Keeled Box Turtle (*Cuora mouhotii*), Asian Giant Tortoise (*Manouria emys*) in northeast India, and the Leith's Softshell Turtle (*Nilssonia leithii*) from western India, as three other threatened species outside the top 50, assessed as critically endangered.

The details were revealed in the report - *Turtles in Trouble: The World's 25+ Most Endangered Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles* - in Ojai, California, USA compiled by the Turtle Conservation Coalition, an international body comprising of eight conservation groups including the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Turtle Surveillance Alliance (TSA), a group protection these species in India as well.

“Our study found that Asia was facing a crisis with 63% of the top threatened tortoise and turtle species identified from the continent, followed by Africa and Latin America at 14.8% each,” Rick Hudson, president and chief executive officer, TSA, that released the study, told HT in a telephonic interview.



South Asian Narrow-headed Softshell Turtle (PHOTO: TURTLES IN TROUBLE REPORT)

“In India, the major threats include illegal trade of these species, drowning in fishing nets (which is a major threat to Red-Crowned Roof Turtle), habitat loss, and degradation due to sand mining, dam construction, and pollution. Illegal trade impacts primarily four species of softshell turtles (traded for food), as well as the Indian star tortoises and Spotted Pond turtles (for pet markets in Southeast Asia),” Hudson said.

TSA officials from India, however, said poaching was the main concern for the endangered status.

“We have rescued 16,000 freshwater turtles and tortoises from different parts of the country in 2017 from organised poaching rackets,” said Shailendra Singh, country director, TSA.

“Along with the Madras Crocodile Bank and the Wildlife Conservation Society-India, TSA has developed turtle breeding and conservation sites to safeguard the population of these species in captivity,” Singh said.

He added that current global figures are indicative of immediate steps required to safeguard these species from extinction.



Black Softshell Turtle (PHOTO: TURTLES IN TROUBLE REPORT)

“The nesting sites for many of these turtles are located outside reserved or protected forest areas. While the state forest departments and the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) are helping control this trade, there is a need for a countrywide policy for developing sanctuaries wherever these species are nesting,” said Singh.

WCCB officials said the focus towards conservation of smaller species needs more focus in India.

“The conservation status to tigers, elephants and rhinos is much stronger as compared to smaller species, mostly involved in illegal trade. There is a lot of room for awareness among masses to protect these species. On a departmental level, we are sensitising all security personnel to work in tandem with different departments and develop a much stronger intelligence unit to track the trade within the country and across international borders,” said M Maranko, additional director, WCCB.



Arakan Forest Turtle (PHOTO: TURTLES IN TROUBLE REPORT)

Globally, China had the maximum number of threatened turtle species with six of the top 25 most threatened, and 11 of the top 50 (accounting for 22% in both categories). The Yangtze Giant Softshell Turtle from China was identified as the top threatened species, facing extinction, according to the study. Vietnam was second with four of the top 25, and eight of the top 50 most threatened species.

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

The study identified 356 tortoise and freshwater turtle species globally, of which, 148 or 60.4% of those species have been included in the IUCN 2017 Red List, and 41.6% of all turtle and tortoise species are officially listed as ‘Threatened’ by IUCN criteria (categorized as vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered). Of this, all species identified in India are listed either under ‘endangered’ or ‘critically endangered’ categories. Yangtze Giant Softshell Turtle from China is the most threatened species worldwide.

Species list for top threatened in India

Two species listed under top 25 threatened worldwide

- Northern River Terrapin (*Batagur baska*)
- Red-Crowned Roof Turtle (*Batagur kachuga*)

Five species listed under top 50 (including the two above) threatened worldwide

- South Asian Narrow-headed Softshell Turtle (*Chitra indica*)
- Black Softshell Turtle (*Nilssonia nigricans*)
- Arakan Forest Turtle (*Heosemys depressa*)

Three other threatened species outside the top 50 assessed as critically endangered

- Keeled Box Turtle (*Cuora mouhotii*)
- Asian Giant Tortoise (*Manouria emys*)
- Leith's Softshell Turtle (*Nilssonia leithii*)

(Source: Turtles in Trouble: The World's 25+ Most Endangered Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles)