

## Turtles in Trouble: New Report Profiles World's Most Endangered Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles

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Yangtze Giant Softshell Turtle Credit: Gerald Kuchling

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With half of all turtle species facing some risk of extinction, turtles are one of the world's two most threatened major vertebrate groups. A new report from the Turtle Conservation Coalition—a collaborative partnership of leading turtle conservation organizations—highlights the world's 25+ most imperiled tortoise and freshwater turtle species, and the conservation opportunities to prevent their extinction.

The report, "Turtles in Trouble: The World's 25+ Most Endangered Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles—2018," profiles numerous unusual and charismatic species, including:

**The Yangtze giant Asian softshell (*Rafetus swinhoei*)—China and Vietnam:** This is one of the largest freshwater turtles in the world, reaching up to 260 pounds. Only three known individuals of this species exist, including a pair in captivity in China at the Suzhou Zoo. Breeding has been unsuccessful to date: The female has laid eggs each year, but all have been infertile, and the male has a severely damaged penis, likely as the result of a battle with another male decades ago. Artificial insemination may be the last best hope for the species, though previous attempts have not been successful.

**The ploughshare tortoise (*Astrochelys yniphora*)—Madagascar:** This species may be the most critically endangered tortoise in the world. Though it has been in gradual decline for decades, a spike in poaching since 2011 has left only a handful of individuals in the wild. The demand for the species, with its beautiful shell, is so high in the illegal pet trade that even conservationists' intentional efforts to deface the shells have not deterred poaching.



Central American River Turtle Credit: Melvin Merida

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The Central American river turtle (*Dermatemys mawii*)—Belize, Guatemala and Mexico: This species is the last remaining species of a turtle family that dates back 84 million years. The animals are entirely aquatic and strictly herbivorous. Local consumption of the species has resulted in intensive collection, particularly for Easter festivals.

"The purpose of the Top 25+ is to call attention to those species most at risk of imminent extinction, to inform the public of the potential loss of these amazing animals, and to encourage governments to do more to prevent these looming extinctions," said Craig Stanford, chair of the IUCN SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group and professor of biological sciences at the University of Southern California. "Only a concerted global effort is going to save them."

The new 2018 list includes species found in five continents, though 63 percent of the top 27 species are from Asian countries, where the value of an individual turtle for food, traditional medicine or the pet trade can command an astronomical price. The list also features species from Africa, Latin America and Australia. In addition to poaching, tortoises and freshwater turtles face rapid habitat loss as the result of development, agriculture, and pollution.

"Turtles are remarkable animals, and it is unthinkable that they lived through the extinction of the dinosaurs but are today struggling to hold on as one of the two most endangered larger groups of vertebrates," said Russ Mittermeier, Chief Conservation Officer for Global Wildlife Conservation. "It's going to take a combination of habitat protection, anti-poaching laws and enforcement, and captive breeding and head-start programs to ensure that we aren't merely documenting extinctions rather than preventing them. If we don't act now, we run the risk of losing some of these species, as already happened since the 2011 publication of the last list with the extinction of the Pinta giant tortoise (*Chelonoidis abingdonii*) from the Galápagos in 2012."

Two species are new to the most endangered list this year: Dahl's toad-headed turtle (*Mesoclemmys dahli*) from Colombia, and the Nubian flapshell turtle (*Cyclanorbis elegans*) from the Sahel region of Africa and the White Nile Basin. Only 15 percent of the Dahl's toad-headed turtle's habitat remains and its population may number only in the hundreds. Biologists have not seen the Nubian flapshell turtle in the wild in more than 15 years and the species is among Global Wildlife Conservation's 10 "most wanted" lost turtle species in the Search for Lost Species.

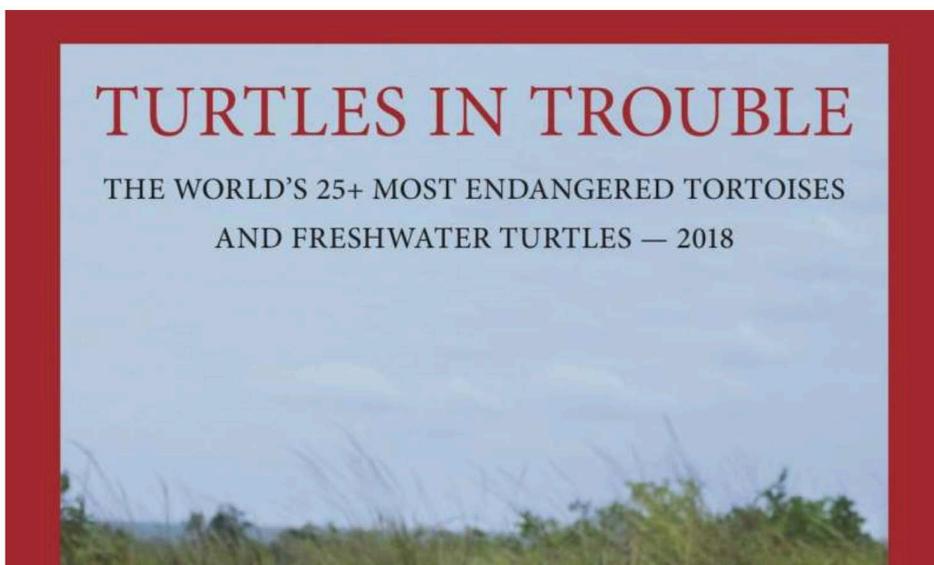
"This report is a wake-up call—a call to action if you will—for everyone who cares about the future of this iconic group of animals," said Rick Hudson, president of the Turtle Survival Alliance. "We must double down on our commitment to protect them, and though we've made impressive strides in the recovery of several species, others are still at risk of slipping through the cracks. Turtles and tortoises face many serious threats today but none more insidious than the illegal wildlife trade."

Tortoises and freshwater turtles often play an important role in the ecosystems where they live. Tortoises in the Galápagos Islands, Neotropical rain forests and African arid lands are important seed dispersers for many plants, trees and fungi. Snapping and softshell turtles are important scavengers that contribute to maintaining clean aquatic ecosystems. Turtles also play an important cultural role in human history, depicted in art as icons of longevity and virility in many societies.

"Turtles and tortoises have the dubious distinction of leading the race to extinction," said Eric Goode, founder of the Turtle Conservancy. "I grew up in the halcyon days of California in the 1960s when it appeared that everything was common. Little did we know we would soon enter the era of human-caused mass extinction. Universally, there is awareness for whales, elephants, and pandas, but this publication is a tool to elevate turtles and tortoises into the public consciousness as one of the most endangered groups of animals on Earth."

The Turtle Conservation Coalition is a group of tortoise and freshwater turtle experts primarily from seven organizations: the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, Turtle Conservancy, Turtle Survival Alliance, Wildlife Conservation Society, Global Wildlife Conservation, Chelonian Research Foundation and Turtle Conservation Fund.

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Report cover

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### **More information:**

"Turtles in Trouble: The World's 25+ Most Endangered Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles--2018"