
Poachers on The Indus(News Item)

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By Salman Khan

LAHORE, Feb 18: Freshwater and marine turtle species in the country are currently facing more threat to their lives than ever before owing to apathy of nomadic hunting communities along the rivers and the government departments concerned.

Today death laughs at the helplessness of this aquatic creature which is reckoned to be the oldest of the organisms on the earth and which is facing the constant threat of illegal hunting for meat and shells.

The select few parts of the turtles are being illegally exported to the countries like China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore and Korea where these serve many purposes and form part of human consumption either in the form of medicines or as meat.

It is learnt that the soft shells and chest pellicles of the turtles are being used by the manufacturers of the Traditional Chinese Medicines (TCM). The TCM practitioners believe that the turtle shells are highly effective for purifying blood and curing many diseases.

Information gleaned by Dawn reveals that there is no dependable count to assess the exact loss of the endangered species, though the official estimates as documented by some institutions from time to time amply show that the day is not far when the turtles will face extinction much to the detriment of the ecological system.

According to conservationists, turtles and tortoises play a vital role at the ecological stage and the former's loss will create a void that will be hard to fill by other species. Thus, the unscrupulous turtle-hunt becomes a concession which the future will deplore.

A study conducted by the WWF-Pakistan at the Taunsa Wildlife Sanctuary as a part of the ecological baseline draws a horrific picture of brutality the turtles are subjected to. Led by Dr Khalid Baig, who had been one of the consultants for the WWF-Pakistan, it explores the motive behind the gruesome act and how the hunting communities commit the harshest brutality for petty consideration.

The report says: "A number of people living in the riverine belts camp for months together at the bank of a canal at the Taunsa Barrage where they hunt the turtles from the wild and supply them to some traders in Lahore."

Quoting one of the hunters, it says, tens of similar groups are operating all over the country in the same business. The most gruesome aspect of this story is that they kill turtles only to obtain a small hinder part of the carapace of soft shell turtles known in scientific terminology as "Aspederatus gangaticus" and "Chitra indica".

"These cruel people nail the live turtle with an arrow, chop the required part of its body and throw it there to die. After obtaining the required part, they boil them in the container, clean them and finally dry them. The finished form changes into a shape that even an experienced herpetologist can hardly identify it as a turtle part," explains the report.

It further points out that the buyers pay Rs200 for a piece of turtle having over two-foot carapace and Rs100 for small turtles.

Estimates given by the collectors reveal in the research that one group of people can manage to collect over 200 turtles every week from one site. One can imagine the possibility of the survival of any turtle when the group uses to camp at one site for months, it adds.

Ms Uzma Khan, species focal person (WWF-Pakistan), told Dawn that there was no data available to confirm the exact number of turtles the country was losing to illegal trade since it was hardly considered a priority species.

However, she said, Pakistan was a signatory to the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) which envisaged protection of the freshwater and marine turtle species in the country. The situation had assumed alarming proportions, and concerted efforts were the only way to stem the tide.

She said the WWF, in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, had launched the Pakistan Wetlands Programme the chief purpose of which was to take stock of the magnitude of the illegal trade and consequential loss to nature. Among other objectives, she said, the PWP focused on the training of the customs officials to enable them to identify the parts of the turtles at checkpoints. The programme is funded by the UNDP and the Royal Netherlands Embassy.

According to the draft of the conservation plan being drawn up under the programme, all eight species of freshwater turtles in Pakistan are under threat of illegal hunting for meat and shells. It says the freshwater turtles are protected by legislation in Punjab and Sindh.

The study observes that in Sindh fishermen are involved in turtle hunting while in Punjab vagrant groups have been found engaged in the activity.

It says: "If a turtle meat/shell consignment is found, it is confiscated. The offender is given the option, either to go to court or solve the matter internally with the department by paying some fine. The wildlife department fines (the wrongdoer) depending on the gravity of the crime and the protection status of the area where the crime was committed.

"In court, the compensation varies and usually the offenders get away with a minor penalty. The penalties for offender are meager and the trade itself is so lucrative that it is worth taking the associated risks."

The Punjab Wildlife Department deputy director could not be contacted despite repeated attempts by this reporter.

However, an official told Dawn that the department was alive to the situation, and it had deployed force at the airport and sea routes to check the illegal trade.

He said the activity was prohibited under the law and efforts were being made to ensure its implementation.

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By Fareedullah Chaudhry

LAYYAH, Feb 18: Hundreds of hunters are camping at various spots near the river Indus to catch the turtles to mint money by selling them in the local and international market.

According to a survey conducted by Dawn, five hunting teams each of which comprises 30 to 50 members from Sindh, the NWFP and Punjab have set up camps at various spots of the riverine union councils, including Samitia, Warah Sehran, Basera, Sahuwala, Shahpur, Kotla Haji Shah, Lohaunch Nashaib, Jhakhar, Jaman Shah, Kot Sultan and Bait Wasawa Shumali.

These teams have devised special mechanism for catching a turtle species (*Cinosternum pennsylvanicum*). They have prepared fodder which they leave in water as bait.

Hunters turn the turtle upside down with bamboo stick and capture it by pricking lance-like weapon into its lower belly. They collect the daily catch at a makeshift collection centre from where buyers from Lahore purchase the turtles and transport these to Lahore.

According to the locals, each team manages to catch around 500 turtles daily. These teams have hired local guides against daily wages. Hunters Amanullah and Muneer Khan, who had come from Dera Ismail Khan for the purpose, said they got Rs200 to Rs300 according to the size of a turtle from a Lahore-based buyer who had links with international buyers in China, Japan and Korea.

Mr Taqi Shah, an ecologist, expressed concern over the large-scale stalking of this "unique marine species". He said it might face extinction if the practice was not stopped. When contacted, District Wildlife Officer Khuda Bakhsh said the department had moved a summary to amend the act that prohibited the turtle hunting. He said strict measures would be taken against the hunters to protect the endangered species.

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