

Black softshell turtle

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In news

A major temple in Assam has signed an MoU with two NGOs to conserve black softshell turtles.

Key updates

- The temple has signed MoU with the Assam State Zoo cum Botanical Garden and the Kamrup district administration for long-term conservation of the freshwater turtle.
- The event also marked the launch of a vision document by setting in motion a **plan to have a ecologically viable population of 1000 adults of black softshell turtles in Assam by 2030.**
- It was launched after Turtle Survival Alliance India and Help Earth signed the pact involving the **Hayagriva Madhava Temple Committee.**
- The ponds in the temple, revered by both Hindus and Buddhists, is at Hajo near to Guwahati

About the black softshell turtle:

In the 1800s it was believed these turtles were brought from Iran to Chittagong shrine pond by Hazrat Bayezid Bostami.

Scientific name: Nilssonina nigricans.

Other Name: To the locals and worshipers, the black softshell turtle is known as **Mazari.**

Appearance

- The black softshell turtle has an observably different appearance compared to that of a common turtle.
- This turtle, similar to all other softshell turtles, has a semi-flexible shell that is leathery, and does not

obstruct movement as much as the average hardshell.

- The black softshell turtle also has a very distinct nose and face, with a tube-like structure protruding from its nose resembling and functioning similar to a snorkel.
- The ligaments of this turtle are also much more distinct than those of the normal sea turtle or land tortoise, being that they have hand-like structures that are webbed, as opposed to other turtles like sea turtles who have a wider arm.

Habitat:

- It is a freshwater turtle that is found in Bayazid Bastami shrine at Chittagong, Bangladesh and Assam and in temple ponds in these places.
- Originally, it was native to Brahmaputra river.

Reproduction:

- *Nilssonina nigricans* are oviparous organisms, in which they reproduce by laying their young as eggs to be hatched.
- Softshell turtles are known to mature slowly with the males prepared to breed in their fourth year. The female population could take up to seven to nine years to mature.

Other characteristics

- It is omnivorous, with a diet ranging from aquatic plants to aquatic insects and carrions.
- They hibernate during the late autumn season until the spring for softshell turtles. They bury themselves at the bottom of a river/lake in the mud.

Threats

- Traditionally being hunted ruthlessly for its meat and cartilage and challenged by illegal trade in regional and international markets.

- The encroachment of wetlands and change in flooding patterns has a disastrous impact on the turtle population.

Conservation status

- Until sightings along the Brahmaputra River's drainage in Assam, the species was thought to be 'extinct in the wild', only being confined to some religious sites in Northeastern India and Bangladesh.
- However, based on the preliminary information, its IUCN status has been downlisted to 'Critically Endangered' in 2021 but does not enjoy legal protection under the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.
- CITES: Appendix-I