

Project Update July 2009

Under the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) Range Country Programme - India and with support from the Rufford Small Grants Foundation, the turtle conservation programme in Assam has been initiated with conservation education, local awareness programmes and community participation in wetland and river areas including in-situ egg protection. The entire field activities are beginning in Assam, as outlined in the *Conservation Action Plan for Endangered Turtles and Tortoises of India* drafted in 2006 during a meeting in Lucknow supported by TSA and Conservation International, and are being attempted for most of the endangered turtle species.

Fieldwork

The field survey is being carried out in different parts of Assam. A study has been conducted on the present status and distribution of *Pangshura sylhetensis* in the wetlands and rivers of Darrang, Sonitpur and Udalguri districts of Assam.

Awareness Programme

World Environment Day Celebration 5th June 2009

A series of events were organized to mark the World Environment Day under the auspices of Centre for Wildlife Research and Conservation Action (CWRCA), Zoology Department, Gauhati University, Assam with the support of Rufford Small Grants Foundation in collaboration with Turtle Survival Alliance India Programme, BIOiLLUMINA and Assam Forest Department. The activities included a popular talk series on conservation biology among the predominate tribal populations of the Chandubi Beel area, and an environmental awareness programme targeting students and fishing communities (300+) in the Rajapara M.V. School of Assam (Kamrup District). Also, a popular talk on turtles and their importance in the environment and a painting competition with the school children (34) were organized. The main objective of the programme was to create awareness regarding the role of turtles and other aquatic diversity of Assam with special reference to the Chandubi Beel ecosystem. An attempt has also been made to sensitize the participants to various threats to the health of those ecosystems. Prof. D.K. Sharma, Head of Department, Zoology Department, Gauhati University was the chief guest who delivered a valuable speech on water resources and their role in biodiversity. The news appeared in the regional esteemed daily, the *Telegraph* on 9th June 2009.

Database and Study Materials

We have developed software for exploring the turtle and tortoise diversity of north-east India. A scientific communication was published in the recent issue of *Turtle and Tortoise Newsletter* (Baruah and Sharma, 2009. *Turtle and Tortoise Newsletter* **13**: 9-10.). This new software is designed to further the understanding of status, distribution patterns, molecular information etc., and will be of great value in determining taxonomic relationships among these turtle species and to fulfill the need for a better identification system to enforce the protection regimes for turtle biodiversity.

A poster and brochure are being designed to educate communities. A handbook on *Turtle and Tortoises of Northeast India* is under preparation to fulfill the demands of local people's awareness needs. We are in the process of motivating the local community against this practice of sacrificing turtles due to superstitious beliefs (http://www.asianturtlenetwork.org/library/news_articles/Softshell_turtle_sacrificed_on_superstitious_belief.html).

Rescue and Release of Endangered Freshwater Turtles

We have also rescued *Chitra indiac* and *Pangshura sylhetensis* from the local markets and released all of them into the Brahmaputra River.

