

A CITES PRIORITY:

**CONSERVATION OF ASIAN TORTOISE AND FRESHWATER TURTLES****TRAFFIC BRIEFING DOCUMENT  
OCTOBER 2002**

**THE TWELFTH MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO CITES (COP12) WILL CONSIDER AN UNPRECEDENTED NUMBER OF ASIAN FRESHWATER TURTLE PROPOSALS. THE 12 PROPOSALS TO LIST ASIAN TURTLE SPECIES IN APPENDIX II COVER MORE THAN 20 SPECIES, AND HAVE GREAT POTENTIAL TO ENHANCE EFFORTS TO REDUCE THE SUBSTANTIAL THREAT POSED BY UNSUSTAINABLE TRADE.**

In less than five years, the crisis facing tortoise and freshwater turtle species, primarily in Asia, has moved from discussion among a small group of experts to global concern and conservation action. The large-scale trade in dozens of turtle and tortoise species, until recently virtually unregulated and only loosely monitored, has come under greater scrutiny. Only by looking back at what has unfolded over this time can we see how far the issue has come, and determine how much ground remains to be covered.

In 1995, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia published *Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles: the Trade in Southeast Asia*, a report highlighting the conservation impacts of the trade in turtles and tortoises in Asia. The report was prognostic of things to come, as the trade in these species continued to climb, and wild populations continued to decline.

In 1999, in response to the alarming observations of turtle and tortoise experts and wildlife trade analysts, TRAFFIC, WWF, the Wildlife Conservation Society and others brought together a group of experts from 15 countries to pool information on the status of and trade in Asian turtle and tortoise species, to discuss necessary actions to stem the dramatic overexploitation of virtually every species found in Asia, and to build momentum and awareness on what, at that time, was known to only a small number of people as a looming conservation crisis. The Asian Turtle Trade Workshop, held in Cambodia in December 1999, more fully documented current knowledge of the status of Asian turtle species, the levels of trade, trade routes and impacts on wild populations. But perhaps more importantly, it was a starting point for more comprehensive conservation action.

At the 11th meeting of the Conference of the Parties in April 2000, one of the most heavily traded turtle genera, the Asian box turtles of the genus *Cuora*, was listed in CITES Appendix II. Furthermore, range States for these species stressed the need for international co-operation to address the overexploitation not only of Asian turtles and tortoises, but of species from other regions as well. The Parties also adopted Resolution Conf. 11.9, which called for a number of conservation measures directed at the turtle trade, including enhancing enforcement efforts, assessing existing management efforts, improving legislation and increasing public awareness. With that resolution also came Decision 11.150, which called on the Secretariat to convene a technical workshop in order to establish conservation priorities and actions to achieve sustainable trade in freshwater turtles and tortoises.

Decision 11.150 led to the Technical Workshop on Conservation of and Trade in Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises, held in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, in March 2002. A significant measure of the increased attention on this issue was that this second workshop was hosted by China, the primary importer of turtles.

This second workshop established conservation priorities and actions for the sustainable trade in tortoises and freshwater turtles in Asia; identified specific actions to implement the recommendations from the Cambodia workshop; and formulated the findings and the recommendations for the 18th meeting of the CITES Animals Committee.



Peter Paul van Dijk

#### Action towards better trade controls

A number of countries have taken positive steps to control the trade in Asian tortoises and freshwater turtles. For example, in June 2000, the Chinese CITES Management Authority implemented the "Notice of Strengthening the Live Reptile Import and Export Management" which prohibits the export and re-export of all but two turtle species. A year later, China implemented another measure, which suspended the import of CITES-listed turtles from countries without export quotas and limited the number of ports through which turtles could be imported.

#### Positive results from efforts to interdict illegal trade

Concerted and co-ordinated efforts to interdict illegal trade have shown positive results. In December 2001, an illegal shipment of approximately 7500 Asian tortoises and freshwater turtles was seized in Hong Kong en route from Singapore to China. Several governments worked together with Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden and the newly formed IUCN Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) to treat over 4000 of these turtles and distribute them to Assurance Colonies established under the auspices of the TSA. These confiscated turtles and tortoises now form the basis for ensuring the survival of these species through captive populations that could contribute to future reintroduction efforts.

During the 18th meeting of the Animals Committee, the Working Group on Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises considered the Significant Trade reviews for four Asian turtle species, prioritized actions originating out of the Kunming workshop, and reviewed and recommended amendments to Resolution Conf. 11.9. This led to the development of CoP12 Doc. 39, which is an excellent basis for broader conservation action for these species.

The Parties have a unique opportunity to take action for Asian freshwater turtles at CoP12. The 12 proposals to list Asian turtle species in Appendix II cover more than 20 species and have great potential to enhance efforts to reduce the substantial threat that unsustainable trade poses for these and other species. Appendix II listings will provide an additional tool for trading Parties to monitor, evaluate and regulate international trade in these species. The proposals are consistent with the view of Kunming workshop participants that greater coverage by CITES of Asian turtle species is warranted.

However, CITES listings are only part of the answer to the conservation of these species. Among other actions that TRAFFIC believes to be critical are:

- More effective regulation of domestic collection of and trade in tortoises and freshwater turtles;
- Development of guidelines for the establishment of scientifically supported non-detriment findings, harvest and export quotas;
- Assessment of the implementation of CITES for tortoises and freshwater turtles used in traditional medicines, particularly as concerns labelling of medicines containing or purporting to contain parts/derivatives of turtles and tortoises;
- Adoption of domestic measures to advance *in situ* conservation efforts;
- Investigation of the conservation implications, both positive and negative, of ongoing and future commercial captive production efforts; and
- Pursuit of regional efforts to manage and control trade in these species.



**TRAFFIC,  
THE WILDLIFE TRADE  
MONITORING NETWORK,  
WORKS TO ENSURE THAT  
TRADE IN WILD  
PLANTS AND ANIMALS  
IS NOT A THREAT TO THE  
CONSERVATION OF NATURE.**

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