

Japan's Trade in Live Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises as Pets

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Almost 42%(128) of the world's 305 species of turtles and tortoises are threatened with extinction (Baillie, Hilton-Taylor, Stuart, 2004). This endangerment comes both from loss of habitat and from direct use by humans. Across the world, people use turtles and tortoises in several ways, such as for food or for traditional medicine. In Japan, people buy turtles and tortoises as pets. Japan was the world's largest importer of live tortoises *Testudinidea* spp., importing over 50% of the world's total imports in 1996, for example (Anon., 1999). The desire for the rarest and most exotic forms means that Japan's market for live freshwater turtles and tortoises are a significant factor in the endangerment of these species.

This report investigates the trade of live turtles and tortoises as pets in Japan, describes the domestic control system for this trade, and recommends actions to ensure this trade is legal and sustainable. This report is based on surveys of pet shops, carried out in March 2002, as well as review of trade data from Japan's government agencies.

The global trade in turtles and tortoises often has a large volume, relative to the size of the populations of these turtles and tortoises. Most turtles and tortoises in trade are regulated internationally by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). CITES has taken a special interest in freshwater turtles and tortoises, adopting a Resolution on conservation of and trade in tortoises and freshwater turtles (*Resolution Conf. 11.9*), which asks countries involved in this trade to faithfully enforce policies for conservation of these species.

Japan's imports of CITES-listed live turtles and tortoises have increased dramatically over the past 20 years (Anon.,1981-2001) . In the early 1980s, annual imports stood at about 2 000 individuals per year. By 1998, this had grown to over 30 000 annually. From 1981 to 2001, over 250 000 live turtles and tortoises were imported. Over 50% of this trade came from just three species: the Central Asian Tortoise *Testudo horsfeldii*, the African Spurred Tortoise *Geochelone sulcata*, and the Leopard Tortoise *Geochelone pardalis*.

TRAFFIC's investigations of the Japan's market for live turtles and tortoises took place in 2002, with analysis of Internet web sites, specialized magazines for collectors of these species, and visits to 32

shops in Tokyo metropolitan, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Osaka, Kyoto and Aichi Prefectures. Over 190 different species of tortoises and freshwater turtles are sold in Japan. Sixty-eight of these species are listed on CITES Appendices. The most expensive individual seen was an albino Indian Star Tortoise for JPY 2 500 000 (USD20 900). Seventeen shops sold the Yellow-Margined Box Turtle *Cuora flavomarginata* and Common Yellow-Margined Box Turtle *Cuora flavomarginata flavomarginata*, listed as a Japanese National Monument. Although this species is legal when imported under CITES regulations, native specimens cannot be legally caught or sold. It is unclear if the specimens for sale in Japan are legally imported or illegally caught. Thirty shops sold the Indian Star Tortoise. It is widely in demand, . In addition, Indian Star Tortoise is among the species most commonly seized from illegal trade in Japan. There are also many large seizures of the species in other countries being smuggled from South Asia. The legal imports of the species totaled circa 3000 animals during the period 1999-2002 according to the CITES Annual Report Database (UNEP-WCMC, 2004). This relatively low number would not appear to account for the turnover and availability of the species at the retail level. It is therefore reasonable to presume that some of the Indian Star Tortoises found for sale may have been imported illegally.

The current study has several findings. Japan is a major end market for the world's turtles and tortoises. There are many seizures internationally that indicate Japan is the end market for the smuggled tortoises and turtles. Customs data must be more specific, however, to fully understand Japan's impact on wild populations of these species. Border controls must be strengthened to prevent on-going illegal trade, yet Japan's Customs Service is poorly equipped to identify the species in trade. Finally, improved legislation is needed to more fully regulate Japan's domestic trade in turtles and tortoises.

Although Japan's Ministry of Environment has taken some steps to comply with the CITES Resolution Conf. 11.9, there is still much to be done. In particular, Japan must plan and implement a system to monitor and assess the impact of Japan's trade in freshwater turtles and tortoises, and must actively involve traders and consumers in promoting the sustainable trade for freshwater turtles and tortoises.

The recommendations below are aimed to address specific problems identified by this report.

- **Strengthen and broaden the trade monitoring system for live turtles and tortoises**

The Ministry of Environment should provide the Customs Service with an identification manual for turtles and tortoises, allowing for improved enforcement of existing regulations (and more consistent Customs declarations by traders).

- **Improve the legislative and regulatory framework that protects live turtles and tortoises**

The Ministry of Environment, in cooperation with the Agency for Cultural Affairs, should work to improve the conservation of animal species that are also listed as National Monuments. Species that are listed both as National Monuments and in CITES Appendix II should be regulated under Japan's *Law for the Conservation of Endangered Species*, for example. This includes concrete measures to register all commercial captive breeding facilities, backed up by a robust marking scheme, that is monitored and an retail premises are inspected.

The Ministry of Economy, Technology, and Industry should require the registration of all importers of freshwater turtles and tortoises This would make investigations of illegal imports more effective

The Ministry of Environment should establish, for particularly valuable species, an identification system by individual. All freshwater turtles and tortoises listed on CITES Appendix II might be required to have implanted microchips, for example, prior to sale and through a permitting system. This should be backed up by a monitoring and inspection system for retail premises.

- **Help consumers become partners in conservation**

The Ministry of Environment, in keeping with CITES Resolution Conf 11.9, should devise ways to encourage all consumers – collectors, breeders, traders, importers – to participate in the conservation and sustainable trade of freshwater turtles and tortoises, for example, reporting information on suspicions of illegal trading to the relevant authority.

METHODS

Two data sets are used in this report. One comes from a survey of shops selling freshwater turtles and tortoises. The second comes from a review of CITES import and export data.

Survey. A preliminary review of Internet web sites and specialty magazines allowed determination of (1) districts in or near Tokyo with a high concentration of pet shops trading in turtles and tortoises and (2) the shops with a high volume of this trade. TRAFFIC staff visited thirty-two shops, with support from a specialist in turtle identification in March 2002. Twenty-four of these shops were in Tokyo, two were in Chubu, and six were in Kansai.

At each shop, the species name, the number of specimens, carapace size, and price was recorded for all CITES-listed species. When this information was not written on the tags accompanying the specimens for sale, it was asked of the shopkeepers. The same information was also collected, as possible, for turtles and tortoises not listed on CITES Appendices. Native speakers of Japanese collected all information.

Similar data from previous TRAFFIC surveys were used for comparison with the current survey. Information on species, prices, and sizes were collected in two previous surveys of shops in Tokyo, Chubu, and Kansai, one in 1995 (97 shops) and another in 1996 (101 shops).

CITES data.

Import and export data for those species of freshwater turtles and tortoises on the CITES Appendices were collected from annual reports kept by Japan's CITES Management Authority. Import data were collected for the years 1981 to 2001 by Japan CITES Annual report, Export data were collected for the years 1994 to 2001. Discrepancies between scientific names in annual reports for different years were resolved by reference to *A Revised Checklist with Distribution Map of Turtles of the World* (Iverson, 1992).

Prices.

All prices are converted to US dollars at the exchange rate of March 2002, 119.6 JPY to 1 USD.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2002 market survey found 199 species of freshwater turtles and tortoises, 65% the world's species of freshwater turtles and tortoises. Of these, 68 species (including subspecies) were listed on the CITES Appendices. Three species are listed on CITES Appendix I, 62 species are listed on App.II, and three species are listed on App.III. Well over half of the turtle species being sold (131 species; 65.7%) were not subject to CITES. Eleven of the 20 species most heavily traded in Japan are Tortoises on CITES Appendix II (Table 1). This includes the Indian Star Tortoise, sold in more shops than any other species. Sixty-five of the species (including subspecies) are from Asia, 44 from Central

Table 1
Twenty species of turtles and tortoises most frequently found in pet shops

| Common name | Scientific name | CITES * | number of shop | proportion in total surveyed shops (%) |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------|----------------|--|
| Indian star tortoise | <i>Geochelone elegans</i> | II | 30 | 93.8 |
| Red footed tortoise | <i>Geochelone carbonaria</i> | II | 24 | 75.0 |
| Leopard tortoise | <i>Geochelone pardalis</i> | II | 23 | 71.9 |
| Middle Eastern spur-thighed tortoise | <i>Testudo graeca terrestris</i> | II | 23 | 71.9 |
| Pancake tortoise | <i>Malacochersus tornieri</i> | II | 22 | 68.8 |
| Common spider tortoise | <i>Pyxis arachnoides</i> | II | 22 | 68.8 |
| Mexican giant musk turtle | <i>Staurotypus triporcatus</i> | N | 22 | 68.8 |
| Central Asian tortoise | <i>Testudo horsfieldii</i> | II | 22 | 68.8 |
| Pig-nose turtle | <i>Carettochelys insculpta</i> | N | 19 | 59.4 |
| African spurred tortoise | <i>Geochelone sulcata</i> | II | 19 | 59.4 |
| Alligator Snapping turtle | <i>Macrolemys temmincki</i> | N | 18 | 56.3 |
| Yellow-margined box turtle | <i>Cuora flavomarginata</i> | II | 17 | 53.1 |
| Burmese star turtle | <i>Geochelone platynota</i> | II | 17 | 53.1 |
| Big-headed turtle | <i>Platysternon megacephalus</i> | N | 17 | 53.1 |
| Central Asian tortoise | <i>Testudo hermanni boettgeri</i> | II | 17 | 53.1 |
| Pacific coast giant musk turtle | <i>Staurotypus salvinii</i> | N | 16 | 50.0 |
| Seibenrock's snaked-necked turtle | <i>Chelodina siebenrocki</i> | N | 13 | 40.6 |
| Southeast Asian box turtle | <i>Cuora amboinensis kamaroma</i> | II | 12 | 37.5 |
| Loggerhead musk turtle | <i>Sternotherus minor minor</i> | N | 12 | 37.5 |
| Asia Minor spur-thighed tortoise | <i>Testudo graeca iberica</i> | II | 12 | 37.5 |

Note CITES* : CITES Appendix, N: CITES non-listed species as of CoP11.

and South America, and 40 from North America. The import of CITES-listed species has risen steadily since 1981, while exports have remained low.

Clearly, Japan is a consumer of many species of turtles and tortoises, especially from Asia. This is of conservation concern, given the grave endangerment of some Asian freshwater turtles and tortoises. Japan's impact on these species needs to be carefully monitored to ensure that this trade is sustainable.

Import

Japan is the largest importer of live tortoises in the world, having imported some 29 000 specimens in 1996 (TRAFFIC East Asia-Japan, 1999). The number of turtles and tortoises imported is generally

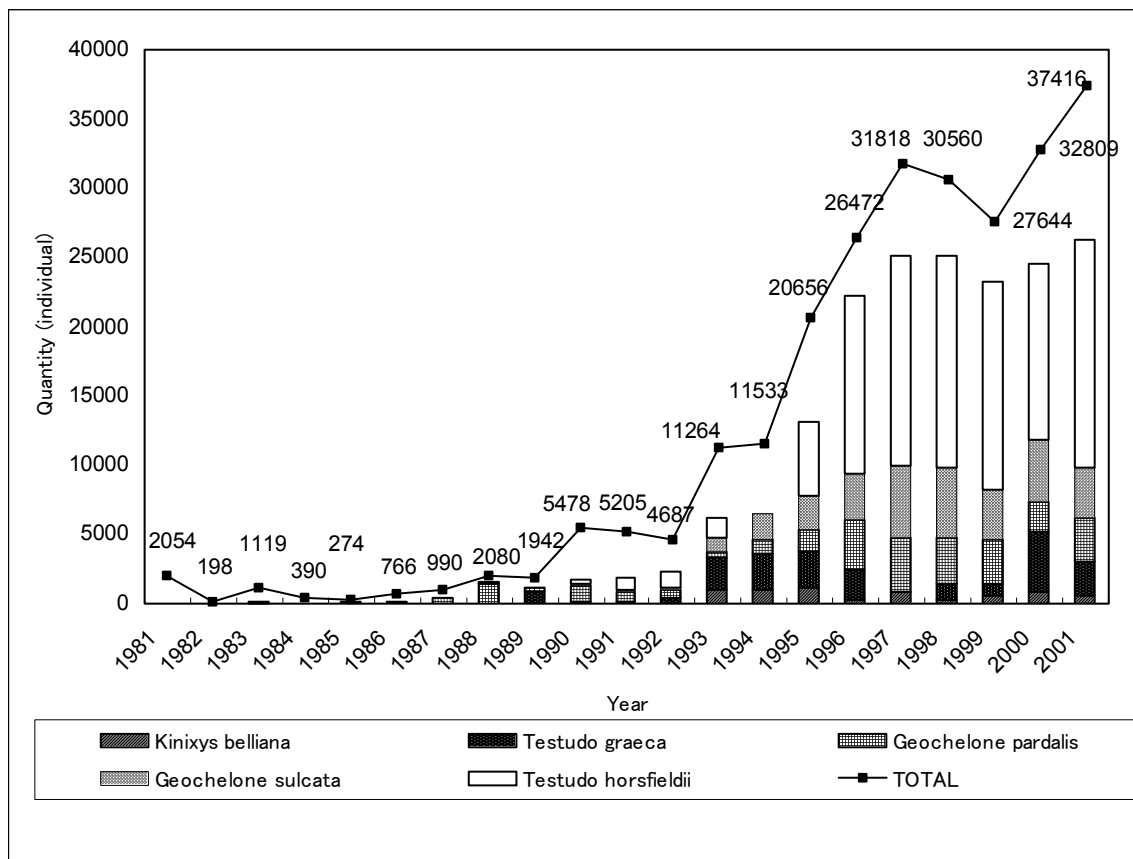
increasing (Figure 1). During the 21-year period from 1981 to 2001, Japan imported 255 000 live freshwater turtles and tortoises.

In the 1980s the amount imported was no more than about 2 000 individuals per year. In 1993 the number increased even further to 11 000, and since then it has continued to increase, reaching 37 000 in 2001. The import volume was lowest in 1982 when only 198 individuals were imported. Compared with the import volume in 2001, the number of imported turtles increased more than 180 times during this period.

In April 2002 a new category “Live Testudinata (turtles and tortoises)” was added to the Customs statistics compiled by the Ministry of Finance, so it is now possible to follow the number of turtles and tortoises imported that belong to non-CITES listed species. However, “Live Testudinata” records the total overall import volume, so the trading volume by species remains unclear.

At present, import data shows general trends in Japan’s trade in live turtles and tortoises. To focus conservation interventions, however, Japan’s import data needs to be revised. Information on total import volume is not sufficient, for example.

Figure 1
Imports of freshwater turtles and tortoises on CITES Appendix (1981–2001)



Further, identification of species is weak, with the Customs Service using out-dated identification manuals and lacking expertise in reptile identification. Freshwater turtles, in particular, are difficult to identify. It is essential that customs officers be trained by turtle specialists to improve their ability to correctly identify the species in trade.

Domestic trade

Domestic trade is controlled by the *Law for the Conservation of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora* (LCES). LCES mentions only species on CITES Appendix I, making no mention of species on CITES Appendix II and III. This means that there are no provisions for legal action against those who illegally bring CITES Appendix II turtles and tortoises into Japan and subsequently market them. This means that illegally imported specimens may be sold in Japan's markets.

Both the Okinawa Black-Breasted Leaf Turtle and the Yellow-Margined Box Turtle are protected as National Monuments in Japan. Yet, the 2002 market survey found 25 specimens of Yellow-Margined Box Turtle (including its subspecies, the Common Yellow-Margined Box Turtle) being offered for sale. These 25 specimens were found in 17 shops, showing wide availability. It remains unknown if these turtles were imported or were specimens collected in the Japan. If collected in Japan, these turtles cannot be legally traded; there is no way to tell if the documentation regarding country of origin of these specimens had been falsified.

The Indian Star Tortoise are sold in 30 of the 32 shops (93.8%) in the survey. The Indian Star Tortoise is difficult to breed in captivity, for example, and there are known cases of smuggling in this species (Yasukawa, 2001). It is therefore essential to develop a system to prevent the trade of turtles and tortoises that have been smuggled into Japan, and to strengthen the legal measures taken at ports of entry. This includes concrete measures to register all commercial captive breeding facilities, backed up by a robust marking and inspection scheme.

CITES Resolution Conf. 11.9

Japan is both a range state and a consumer state for turtles and tortoises. The CITES Resolution Conf. 11.9 urges both range and consumer states to maintain and enforce laws for the conservation of freshwater turtles and tortoises in Asia and elsewhere. To comply with Resolution Conf. 11.9, Japan needs to enhance existing legislation, increase management action for native freshwater turtles and tortoises, improve ability for government regulators to identify the species in trade, and find ways to increase the involvement of collectors, traders, exporters and importers in the conservation of and

sustainable trade in freshwater turtles and tortoises. (Refer to Annex 2 for complete text of Res Conf 11.9.)

Japan has made some progress on Res Conf 11.9, but there is still much to do. Domestic species, such as the Yellow-Margined Box Turtle, should be included in the LCES as a national endangered species. Japan's Customs Service needs to update the guide it uses for species identification to reflect the additions and changes in status since the guide was first published in 1980 (Anon., 2002c).

Adequate examination of how to involve of all participants in the trade in the conservation of freshwater turtles and tortoises has not been carried out by the Ministry of Environment and its agencies. The import volumes of CITES-listed species of turtles and tortoises have been steadily increasing in Japan. The current survey confirms that many species of turtles and tortoises are widely available. Current domestic regulations are not enough to address the conservation of freshwater turtles and tortoises and proper trade management. Although the Ministry of Environment has compiled a Red Data Book for reptiles, and included information about freshwater turtles in its Internet Nature Institute (Internet Shizen Kenkyosyo), this is not enough.

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