

Protecting the pig-nosed turtle

There's a premium attached to the pig-nosed turtle. And that spells bad news for the creature, writes Loretta Shepherd

ASIAN tortoises and freshwater turtles suffer greatly from illegal, unregulated trade, harvested to meet the demand for meat, use in traditional medicines, and for the pet trade. Somewhat worryingly, an increasing number of people worldwide are becoming more fascinated with keeping "exotic" pets.

Demand for these animals as pets comes from within a country where these species live, and abroad. One creature in trade internationally is the pig-nosed turtle, *Carettochelys insculpta*. Named for its porcine snout, this turtle looks more like its sea-faring cousins with flippers similar to those of marine turtles.

It is found in only three countries, namely Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Australia. And unfortunately, the rarer a creature is, the higher the premium attached to it commercially, attracting reptile enthusiasts and traffickers.

In a period of seven and a half years, researchers training their eyes on the trade in pig-nosed turtles identified 26 seizures totalling 52,374 smuggled turtles, occurring in or originating from Indonesia.

Monitor Conservation Research Society and the Oxford Wildlife Trade Research Group examined 2013-2020 seizures, looking at contemporary trade networks and hubs, mapped routes, assessed successful prosecutions, and in the process, flagged failures to utilise existing tools to better protect the species and anomalies in how legal trade in the species is permitted.

Indonesia emerged as the greatest source of the species entering illegal trade. Of the 52,374 turtles confiscated, 10,956 were seized in six separate trafficking incidents originating from Indonesia.

Amongst those countries was Malaysia, with two shipments intercepted by the authorities, one off Johor waters, with 3,300 individuals being smuggled by boat from Riau's Bengkalis Island, Indonesia, while another, involving 4,000 turtles occurred off Sabah's coast near Tawau.

This species used to be sold openly in pet stores but are now increasingly sold through social media apps. Until Malaysian laws catch up to include wildlife cybercrime, online traders will continue to exploit this loophole. Malaysia is also a transit point for the trade of pig-nosed turtles coming from Indonesia.

PUTTING TOOLS TO USE

Globally, a treaty called the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites) provides a means of regulating international trade in species threatened by trade, using a system of appendices.

The pig-nosed turtle is listed in Appendix II, which means trade is permitted only with required permits — but the individuals that were confiscated during the study period didn't have any. Furthermore, it's totally protected in Indonesia.



Pig-nosed turtle. PIX COURTESY OF KADDOORIE FARM & BOTANIC GARDEN

FURTHER READING

ILLEGAL wildlife trade, seizures and prosecutions: a 7-and-a-half-year analysis of trade in Pig-nosed Turtles *Carettochelys insculpta* in and from Indonesia by Chris R. Shepherd, Lalita Gomez and Vincent Nijman was published in *Global Ecology and Conservation*.

Read the full paper at www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2351989420307903?via%3Dihub

Go to www.mcrsociety.org

Despite these legal protections, only nine of the 26 cases were successfully prosecuted, with the "success" arguable as none were to the full extent of the law: a maximum five-year prison sentence and a fine of US\$7,132.

Offenders rarely received penalties close to the maximum — the highest prison sentence given was approximately half the potential maximum. As far as can be assessed, no one was charged for violations under the Customs Law (maximum penalty 10 years imprisonment and US\$356,583 fine) or the Fisheries Act 31 (maximum penalty five years imprisonment and US\$106,975 fine).

"Indonesia has multiple tools in the form of legislation and regulations to serve as a strong deterrent, and ultimately to protect this species from over-exploitation," says Dr Chris R. Shepherd, the study's lead author, adding: "But tools are ineffectual if they're not put to use."

Protected species may be commercially traded in Indonesia if the specimens have been bred to a second generation

in captivity, and only by traders with a license to breed these species. However, traders in Indonesia are known to abuse these regulations and launder wild-caught animals into the international market under the guise of being bred in captivity.

The possibility of bogus captive breeding operations, given the time and resources required in breeding pig-nosed turtles in captivity to the second generation, was also flagged in this recent study.

"In all likelihood, the turtles declared as captive-bred are all wild-caught or ranches, and falsely declared as being captive-bred to circumvent restrictions and enable export to countries where the checking of the source of the imported animals is lax," says Dr Vincent Nijman, co-author of the study.

NEED FOR ROBUST STRATEGY

The authors also question how more than 5,000 pig-nosed turtles were exported as wild-caught, in direct violation of Indonesia's own legislation, including 80 into the United States, in violation of the US Lacey Act.

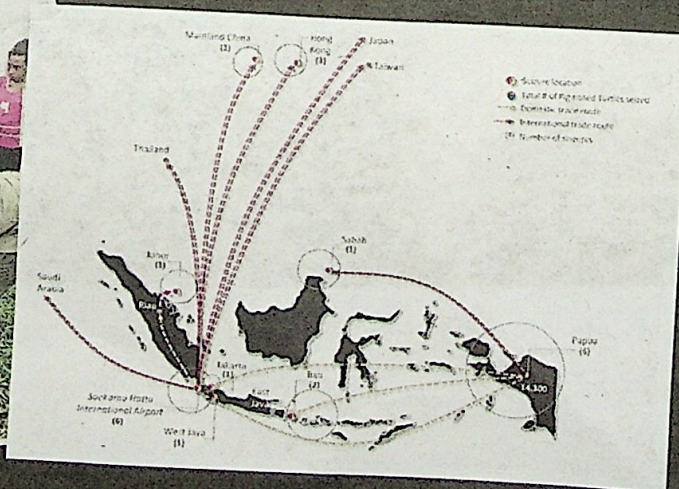
The vast majority were destined for mainland China and Hong Kong. Elevating this species to Appendix I of Cites would assist the range states in obtaining stronger cooperation from other Cites Parties, as species listed in Cites I are generally prohibited from international commercial trade, and in some countries, penalties for trading in Appendix I listed species are often higher.

Clearly, Indonesia is in urgent need of a robust strategy to effectively tackle this trade along the trafficking chain. The country has legislation and infrastructure that should be utilised to punish the wildlife criminals, and ultimately, better protect the pig-nosed turtle.

Malaysians too have a role to play in ending the illegal trade in pig-nosed turtles. We need to come together to help raise awareness of this issue, and not be a part of the problem by buying pig-nosed turtles.

If we see pig-nosed turtles for sale, or know of someone keeping one as a pet, we have to report it to the Department of Wildlife and National Parks Hotline at 1-800-88-5151 (Mon-Fri office hours) or the 24-hour MYCAT Wildlife Crime Hotline at 019-356 4194.

It's time to play our part!



FROM LEFT: Repatriation and wild release. PIX COURTESY OF KADDOORIE FARM & BOTANIC GARDEN. The locations of pig-nosed turtle seizures that occurred in Indonesia, and several that occurred outside the country but reported Indonesia as the source and quantities of individuals seized.