

World's second most endangered turtle on road to recovery

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Myanmar roofed turtles—a species once thought extinct—are released into their native habitat. Credit: Steve and Kalyar Platt/WCS – TSA

Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) announced today that 60 captive-raised Myanmar roofed turtles—a species once thought extinct—have been released into their native habitat in Myanmar. More than 350 villagers, government representatives, and religious leaders attended ceremonies for the release.

"This is the first chapter of a longer story yet to be written," said WCS Regional Herpetologist Dr. Steven Platt during a release ceremony. "It's one that will hopefully see the Myanmar roofed turtle restored as a functional member of this remote riverine landscape."

The Myanmar roofed turtle (*Batagur trivittata*) was believed extinct until 2001, when Dr. Steven Platt and U Win Ko Ko found a single shell from a recently killed turtle at a village along the Dokhtawady River.

Subsequently, live individuals were discovered at a wildlife market in China and in the ponds of a pagoda in Mandalay. These turtles formed the nucleus of the captive assurance colony which was established under the supervision of Dr. Gerald Kuchling and WCS Veterinarian Dr. Tint Lwin.

This species is considered to be the second-most critically endangered turtle in the world due to the persistent threats of habitat loss, egg collection, and incidental catch by fishermen. Prior to the release, fewer than 10 adult females were surviving in the wild and were found only in a remote stretch of the Upper Chindwin River in Myanmar.

In 2007, WCS and TSA began an ambitious program to "headstart" the species by collecting eggs from the wild to hatch, raise, and breed the turtles in captivity. This was done to eventually repopulate the turtles in their original habitat within and around the Htamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary.

With the collaboration of the Myanmar Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry, the program has been very successful, and the captive turtle population has grown notably in size. In 2011, a new facility was opened in Linpha Village in order to increase the program's resilience to catastrophic events, and to bring the animals back closer to their natural habitat. The facility is now home to more than 300 turtles.

Younger turtles in the wild have very low survival rates due to natural predation by large fish, wading birds and monitor lizards. Only individuals large and strong enough to withstand such attacks, sizes that are attained around seven years of age, are deemed eligible for release. This year, WCS and TSA scientists selected 60 individuals suitable for reintroduction into the wild with an average carapace (upper shell) length of 25.3 cm.

After undergoing health evaluations, including the use of molecular diagnostic techniques by WCS veterinarians, some of the animals to be released were equipped with a radio transmitter on their carapace. This will allow scientists to monitor the animals as they adapt to their wild habitat during the coming months. In addition, with the help of local residents, regular monitoring of turtle nesting areas will continue in the hopes of safeguarding eggs. The turtles were released on February 22 and February 27 in ceremonies in Linpha and Nam Thalet directly from the hands of local villagers, government officials, and Buddhist monks, who blessed the animals.

An additional 100 turtles were selected as suitable for relocation and were transported from Mandalay on a perilous 700 kilometer overland route to the facility in Htamanthi Village where they will be used to establish another captive-breeding colony.

Kalyar Platt, Director of TSA-Myanmar said, "Conserving this species is not only beneficial for nature, but also crucially importantly for

preserving the culture and traditions of the Khamti Shan ethnic group in Myanmar."

Traditionally, the Khamti Shan people who dwell along the Chindwin River have regarded turtles as an important food source, harvesting eggs each year in what they thought was a sustainable manner (a few eggs were left in every nest to avoid depleting this food source). In recent decades these practices proved unsustainable as new threats added to the naturally low survival rates of these turtles in the wild. Unregulated gold mining, dynamite/electro fishing, widespread use of illegal fishing nets, and eating of adult [turtles](#) were all factors that contributed to pushing this species to the brink of extinction.

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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