

First-ever nesting report of incredibly rare giant softshell turtle

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Cantor's Giant Softshell Turtle hatchling taken along the Chandragiri river in Kerala, India. Credit: Ayushi Jain

Knowledge from local communities has resulted in the first-ever nesting evidence and discovery of a breeding population of an incredibly rare

turtle in India. The Cantor's giant softshell turtle (*Pelochelys cantorii*) is native to the rivers of South and Southeast Asia. Known for its rarity and secretive nature, this species has long been a subject of fascination and concern among conservationists.

Habitat destruction has made it disappear from much of its environment. They are also heavily harvested by locals for meat and are often killed by fishermen when caught in fishing gear. Currently, the [freshwater turtle](#) is classified as Critically Endangered (CR) on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, and its numbers today are decreasing.

To uncover the whereabouts of the species, a team of conservationists turned to those who live in and share their habitat, and this journey took them to the verdant banks of the Chandragiri River in Kerala. By talking to local villagers, the group were able to systematically document sightings of the turtle and engaged communities in [conservation efforts](#).

This work led to the first documentation of a female nesting, and the rescue of eggs from flooded nests. The hatchlings were later released into the river.

The study, [published](#) in the journal *Oryx*, was led by conservationists from the University of Portsmouth and Zoological Society of London in England, University of Miami, Museum of Zoology at the Senckenberg Society for Nature Research in Germany, Florida Museum of Natural History in the U.S., and Wildlife Institute of India.



Cantor's Giant Softshell Turtle (*Pelochelys cantorii*) taken along the Chandragiri river in Kerala, India. Credit: Ayushi Jain

Corresponding author, Dr. Françoise Cabada-Blanco from the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Portsmouth, said, "For years, the Cantor turtle's existence has barely been a murmur against the backdrop of India's bustling biodiversity, with sightings so scarce that the turtle's very presence seemed like a ghost from the past.

"Following several unsuccessful attempts at tracking one down using conventional ecological survey methods, we took a different approach by tapping into local knowledge.

"The team, led by Ayushi Jain were able to engage the community really effectively, so much so that they shared tales of historical sightings, provided leads on current occurrences, and even aided in the live release of individuals accidentally caught as by-catch."

Ayushi's team is now working on setting up a community hatchery and nursery.

Ayushi Jain, from the Zoological Society of London's Edge of Existence Program, added, "Through household interviews and the establishment of a local alert network, we did not just listen; we learned."

"The community's willingness to engage formed the backbone of our project, allowing us to record not just fleeting glimpses of the turtles but evidence of a reproductive population—a discovery that rewrites the narrative of a species thought to be vanishing from India's waters."

The paper says the implications of the findings underscore the invaluable role of local knowledge in conservation science—a tool as critical as any satellite tag or camera trap in the quest to understand and protect our planet's biodiversity.

The establishment of the alert network represents a pioneering approach in the area, where community involvement leads to real-time insights and immediate action, paving the way for a more responsive and inclusive model of wildlife conservation in Kerala.

"Uniting traditional wisdom with scientific inquiry can certainly illuminate the path forward for the conservation of the Cantor's giant softshell turtle," added Dr. Cabada-Blanco.

"Our study is a narrative of rediscovery, of finding hope in the stories told by the river and its people, and of laying the groundwork for a

future where this magnificent species can thrive, not just survive."

More information: Ayushi Jain et al, Using local ecological knowledge to determine the status of Cantor's giant softshell turtle *Pelochelys cantorii* in Kerala, India, *Oryx* (2024). [DOI: 10.1017/S0030605323001370](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605323001370)

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