



The Wildlife Watch Binocular

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Saving the Turtles of Northeast India

By Bindu Gopal Rao

It's my pleasure to let you know about **Professor H.T. Lalremsanga** who heads the Department of Zoology at Mizoram University. Prof. Lalremsanga has been working tirelessly to conserve softshell turtles.

Freshwater turtles are facing a rapid decline in numbers due to habitat loss, climate change, the pet trade, their meat, and use in traditional medicines. Conservation then is not just the need of the hour but a long-term, community-based approach, that requires the help of local youth, researchers, and forest staff.

Professor H.T. Lalremsanga



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SHAZAM, THE LAST LIVING MEMBER OF THE CATSKILL GAME FARM BIG CATS

Periodically, **Wildlife Watch** checks in with **The Wildcat Sanctuary** to see how our remaining big cats are. The rescue that Wildlife Watch initiated in 2006 can be seen at the links at the end of this article, along with their lives and their gentle passing at the wonderful Wildcat Sanctuary that gave them a second chance at life. **Shazam is now the last remaining cat of the Big Seven.**

For a brief history: The black leopard was one of the seven large cats that Wildlife Watch arranged to be transported over the Christmas holiday from the Catskill Game Farm in Catskill, NY to The Wildcat Sanctuary in Sandstone, MN. His zookeeper alerted Wildlife Watch to the plight of the big cats who were still left at the Catskill Game Farm after the auction of hundreds of animals had ended. Her concern was that they could end up in a canned hunting operation. She told us the sad story of the black leopard and expressed her deep concern about his future. She explained that he had a longtime mate while there, and they were inseparable.

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TURTLE TALK

Lalremsanga's team started their research on the turtles and tortoises of Mizoram, a state in northeast India, in 2010. The Asian Brown Tortoise (*Manouria emys*) was their first initiation into the world of turtles. Prof. Lalremsanga explains, "Our first scientific papers specifically on Softshell turtles was published on May 21, 2020. It was about the geographic distribution of *Amyda* species – (softshell turtles) and their need for conservation. **Our work included the ecology, distribution, DNA barcoding, conservation, and legal awareness within the state, and the need for conservation of the species, not only for the softshell turtles but for all turtles.**" In the remote areas of Mizoram where tradition rules, people are still bound by old practices and hunting wild animals is still part of the daily life of the people in these areas. Hunting softshell turtles for both food and money is quite common as most people are unaware of the legal impact or the need for conservation of the species. Each adult softshell turtle weighs around 3 to 4 kilograms which is worth anywhere between Rs. 1250 and Rs. 1700 (between about \$15 and \$20).

HABITAT LOSS

Softshell turtles are mostly found in major drainages and rivers of the state, and in some fishponds in the plains areas. **One of the other reasons for the dwindling numbers is also loss of habitat due to deforestation, construction**

of dams for hydro-electric power, use of dynamo for catching fish, poisoning of streams, rivers, or drainages, dumping of waste near water bodies and the shortage of legal awareness programs. Deforestation in the state is mainly due to agricultural practices like Jhum cultivation (slash and burn), collection of timber, main and link road construction which is also causing climate change and water scarcity. "Uses of dynamos, bombs, and poisoning of water bodies hugely affects softshell turtles and the aquatic environment. The softshell turtles are mostly found in major drainages and rivers of the state, and in some fishponds in the plains areas. **Prof. Lalremsanga urges spreading awareness among the local people who play a vital role in the conservation of these valuable species.**"

MAPPING TO HELP

There is little information about softshell turtles in and around northeastern India. Recently, a new subspecies, *Amyda ornata jongli* was discovered from specimens based on Assam, Mizoram, Tripura, and Bangladesh in 2022. Later it was reported from the state of Manipur. Other species like the Black softshell turtle (*Nilssonina nigricans*) is listed as Endangered, while the Indian peacock softshell turtle (*Nilssonina hurum*) and the Indian flapshell turtle (*Lissemys punctata*) are listed as Vulnerable under the IUCN criteria. [Founded in 1948, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has become the global authority on the status of the natural world.] The surveying of different habitats including water bodies, wetlands, drainages, paddy fields and the like to know the distribution and population of the species is being done by his

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Black softshell turtle listed as endangered

team. Questionnaires have been circulated among local people and will be utilized by QGIS (an open-source Geographic Information System) to map the population and distribution of softshell species. “Since local people and laymen from remote areas are our priority and our main source of information for studying the softshell turtles, an awareness program and need for conservation of these turtles among the local people and school students, forest department staff, and turtle hunters are carried out as far as possible. Our aim is to involve them as much as possible,” says Prof. Lalremsanga. The long-term community-based approach relies on local monitoring and rescue teams who will monitor and execute the necessary conservation related work.

GRANT IMPETUS

Prof. Lalremsanga’s work to map their population, distribution, and learn more about their habitats in Mizoram has recently won a Habitats Trust Grant as well. Rushikesh Chavan, who heads the Habitats Trust explains, “**The freshwater turtles of northeast India are under threat from several anthropogenic activities. H.T Lalremsanga’s proposal to save these lesser-known species is central to The Habitats Trust.** He and his team

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have the local knowledge of the language, culture, and terrain, along with a track record of working on research and conservation in Mizoram and Manipur. **One of the major ecological outcomes of the project will be an understanding of the distribution and habitat used** by softshell turtles, and the identification of potential sites for further work. This will set the groundwork for saving some of these threatened turtle species. This makes H.T Lalremsanga’s work on the neglected species and regions of NE India extremely important.”

IMPACT MATTERS

As per The Wild Life (Protection) Amendment

Act 2022 [Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act, 2022 came into force on 01/04/2023. Now if any person is found to be in possession of any CITES



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listed exotic species, the burden to prove that they were legally obtained would be on him], the Southeast Asian box turtle (*Cuora amboinensis*) has now been listed as a Schedule 1 animal which means it is prohibited from hunting it. “This was as per our suggestion in our scientific research paper in *Herpetology Notes* (Germany) in 2021 called ‘New records of the endangered Southeast Asian Box Turtle, *Cuora amboinensis* (Testudines, Geoemydidae), from Mizoram, Northeast India’ (Volume 14: 1177-1180)’. We are glad for this legal status for this species and we are hoping the same in future for other species which are in need of conservation and legal protection. A huge number of turtles and tortoises were reported to us for relocation by hunters and pet owners from different locations. **There has been a positive impact among government officials and among the local people, and we are happy to see the result and hope for a positive future regarding conservation of the species and their legal implementation among the people via social media and Whatsapp groups,**” concludes Lalremsanga.

If our readers would like to learn more about this conservation project, please contact thehabitustrust.org/H-T-Lalremsanga.php or this article’s author below.

Bindu Gopal Rao is a freelance writer and photographer from Bengaluru. She enjoys birdwatching and environment, as well as taking the offbeat path when traveling. You can follow her on Instagram @bindugoplr Rao and find her work on bindugopalrao.com