



OPERATION TURTSHIELD-II

From 1st December 2020 to 31st January 2021

<p>Indian soft shelled turtle (<i>Lissemys punctata punctata</i>)</p>	<p>Red crowned roof turtle (<i>Batagur kachuga</i>)</p>	<p>River terrapin (<i>Batagur baska</i>)</p>
	<p>Conservation status WLP Act 1972 : Schedule I</p>	
<p>Spotted black terrapin (<i>Geoclemys hamiltonii</i>)</p>		
<p>Spotted black terrapin (<i>Geoclemys hamiltonii</i>)</p>	<p>Star Tortoise (<i>Geochelone elegans</i>)</p>	
	<p>WLP Act 1972 : Schedule I</p>	

To

OPERATION TURTSIELD-II
WILDLIFE ENFORCEMENT OPERATION
1ST December, 2020 -31st January, 2021

Introduction

Turtles are now among the most threatened groups of vertebrate animals on earth, more so than birds, mammals, fish or amphibians. Main reasons for the decline of turtles worldwide include habitat destruction, over-exploitation and illegal trade for pets, food, shells/articles, black magic and medicine. The alarming rate of turtle disappearance could profoundly affect how ecosystems function as well as the structure of biological communities, thus could have serious ecological consequences.

Turtles are the major players in ecosystem food webs because they can be herbivores, omnivores or carnivores. Turtles contribute to the health of many environments, including desert, wetland, freshwater and marine ecosystems, and their decline may lead to negative effects on other species, including humans that may not be immediately apparent. They range from specialists that feed on one to a few food sources, to generalists, feeding on a wide range of items. Their diverse feeding habits allow them to influence the structure of other communities in their habitat. Turtles can be important for dispersing the seeds of dozens of plant species. Some turtle species may even be the primary seed dispersal agents for specific plants. There are specific seeds that exhibit higher rates of germination after being eaten and passed by turtles. Turtles are also great scavengers, the garbage patrol of an area.

Turtles and Tortoises are eaten with religious zeal, their eggs and body parts consumed under false promises of improved health and greater longevity. Turtle eggs are widely collected and eaten throughout South East Asia with serious consequences to turtle populations. Many species are collected for the pet trade. Their generally passive demeanour and amazing beauty have contributed to turtle declines, as these traits are highly valued in pets.

Turtles and Tortoises are being commercially exploited. Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh emerged as the major hotspots in terms of total number of turtles/tortoises seized. Calipee trade is a new and thriving business with chains connected from UP to West Bengal to Bangladesh. Turtle Calipee is found next to a turtle's lower shell and is sold at exorbitant rates in Southeast Asian countries. The soft shell calipee has been cut, dried and trafficked through Etawah, Etah, Mainpuri, Auraiya and Farrukhabad to Bangoan, the border area of West Bengal from where the calipee is carried to Bangladesh. Then it is smuggled to China, Malaysia and Hong Kong. The size of seizures of turtle/tortoise species within India is indicative of a well-organised network of collectors, transporters and traffickers operating this illegal trade.

Considering the threat due to large exploitation of Star tortoises, CITES has moved Star Tortoise from Appendix II to Appendix I.

Wildlife Crime Control Bureau had envisaged a specie specific enforcement operations, code named as “Operation Save Kurma” from December 15, 2016 to January 30, 2017 and “Operation TURTSHIELD” from 1st December 2019 to 31st January 2020 to tackle the illegal trade of turtles and tortoises. A total of 15, 739 live turtles were recovered from 45 offenders, having inter-state linkages during operation Save Kurma while operation TURTSHIELD resulted in registration of 18 wildlife cases and seizure of 4601 Turtles/Tortoises. The operation brought an awareness among the enforcement agencies to focus on the existing trade routes and major trade hubs in the country with regard to illegal turtles/tortoises trade.

What is “Operation TURTSHIELD-II”?

Multipronged approach is essential to curb illegal trade in turtles/tortoises in the country to disrupt the illegal web of poachers, suppliers, carriers, traders and facilitators so as to protect the species in their natural habitat. Therefore, to carry forward the legacy of “Operation TURTSHIELD”, an enforcement operation is envisaged by Wildlife Crime Control Bureau with code name “Operation TURTSHIELD-II” especially to focus on organised Inter-State and transborder networks engaged in illegal turtle trade. This Bureau will help in coordination and assist in investigation/interrogation of cases having linkages to other States and trans-border to unearth the whole network of wildlife offenders.

Time Period of Operation

The operation will start on 1st December, 2020 and terminate on 31st January, 2021.

Species involved in the Operation

Operation will cover Indian Soft Shelled turtle, Star Tortoise, Spotted Black Terrapin, Indian Black turtle, Indian Roofed turtle, Indian Tent turtle, Indian Flapselled turtle, Assam Roofed Turtle, River Terrapin turtle and all other turtle/tortoise species covered under the schedules of Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 which are being poached/ illegally traded.

Aim of the “Operation TURTSHIELD-II”

Aims of this operation are as under:

- To collect intelligence pertaining to the illegal trade in turtles/tortoises and conduct enforcement operations;
- To collect information about modus operandi in poaching, concealment, transporting and smuggling of turtles/tortoises;
- To collect information on criminals and networks involved in illegal turtles/tortoises trade and bust the networks;
- To check the present status of convicts, criminals on bail booked for illegal trading in turtle/tortoise.
- To carry out Joint Operations between Police and Forest authorities;
- Plan and carry out joint inter-state investigations;
- To facilitate information exchange and analysis amongst various agencies within the states as well as inter-state;
- To generate awareness in the public about illegality of keeping turtle/tortoise as pet and misconception of medicines made from turtle parts;
- Share good practices followed in various states with the Bureau so as to share with other state authorities to improve the investigation and intelligence gathering skills of field officials.

Action intended from the enforcement agencies

During the operation, the enforcement agencies in each state will focus on collection of intelligence related to the collection/transportation/trade of turtle/tortoise and conduct enforcement operation to apprehend offenders and carry out investigation. The agencies are requested to specially focus on the forward and backward linkages i.e. source and destination of the seizure.

The operation would be jurisdiction specific in which the States/agencies will cooperate among each other on matters having inter-state links so that the network involved in the crime is detected and apprehended. WCCB would coordinate among the agencies and in the event of information leading out of the State/country specific State/country based agencies and INTERPOL would be roped in to facilitate the detection of linkages therein during the operation. Also during the period of operation, the field agencies should identify the areas where local people are involved in collection, transportation and sale of these species and should organise the awareness programs for them with the help of NGOs and sister organization.

The information on the detection and registration of a case has to be shared over email every Monday in soft copy in the excel format enclosed herewith as **Annexure-A**. Photograph of the article seized and the persons arrested be also sent along with the format. Report with photographs of awareness/sensitization programs should also be submitted alongwith this. Information be mailed to ddic@wccb.gov.in

After the operation, the States will be requested to submit a status report. The good practices and lessons learnt will be shared amongst the States/Agencies. A detailed report will be published on the outcome of the operation for feedback and analysis by the respective agencies. The final report would be submitted to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

(The agencies are requested not to share the information of detection to media, which would make detection of further links difficult during the operation. The details will be shared after the end of the operation.)