

News Release

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U.S. Leads Efforts to Protect Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises at International Wildlife Trade Meeting

(Bangkok, Thailand—8 March 2013) Several United States proposals to increase protections for freshwater turtles and tortoises under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) have been adopted today by member nations of the Treaty. CITES member nations, referred to as “Parties,” voted to increase protections for 44 species of Asian freshwater turtles and tortoises and three species of North American pond turtles.

“We are extremely heartened by today’s vote to give greater protection to these highly imperiled species,” said Bryan Arroyo, head of the U.S. delegation to the CITES 16th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP16). “More than half of the world’s freshwater turtles are threatened with extinction, yet they continue to be traded, unsustainably, for food, as pets, and in traditional medicines. We’ve taken a significant step forward today to begin managing that trade.”

The United States jointly submitted with China two proposals to increase CITES protection for a number of Asian softshell and hardshell turtle species. These proposals included new additions to the Appendices, “uplisting” species from Appendix II to Appendix I, and the setting of zero export quotas. These proposals were agreed by consensus with strong support voiced by range states, Thailand, Japan, India, Pakistan, Liberia, Indonesia, and non-range states, Guinea and Paraguay.

Proposals to transfer species from Appendix II to Appendix I were also agreed by consensus—a proposal for big-headed turtles, jointly submitted by the United States and Viet Nam, and a U.S. proposal for Burmese star tortoise. A proposal for the Roti Island snake-necked turtle was agreed by consensus after being amended to maintain the species on CITES Appendix II with a zero export

quota in wild specimens—effectively banning international commercial trade in turtles taken from the wild.

“Freshwater turtles worldwide are in desperate need of conservation, and the outlook for Asian turtles is especially grim. We are committed to working with China and Viet Nam and other CITES member nations to ensure the survival of these species,” said Arroyo.

As Asian species have become increasingly depleted, trade patterns are shifting to species native to the United States. To address this growing problem, the United States proposed to list three native turtle species—the diamondback terrapin, spotted turtle, and Blanding’s turtle—in CITES Appendix II to manage the trade in a legal and sustainable manner. Canada, Senegal, and Ireland, on behalf of the 27 member states of the European Union and Croatia, among others, voiced strong support for these proposals before they were agreed by consensus.

Turtles are in serious trouble around the world. Increasingly, freshwater turtles are in danger, with over half of the world’s species threatened with extinction. Tortoises and freshwater turtles are the most threatened of any major group of terrestrial vertebrates – more than mammals, birds, or amphibians. They are being collected, traded, and utilized in overwhelming numbers. They are used for food, pets, and traditional medicine. Eggs, juveniles, adults, and body parts are all exploited with little regard for sustainability. In Asia, turtles are used primarily as food and in traditional medicine, although a growing pet trade across the region impacts a number of threatened species.

The global commerce in turtles in the last 20+ years has followed a well-known pattern in international wildlife trade – once a species is depleted or regulated, the trade shifts to other species that are not as threatened or are less regulated.

“We must address this issue by taking a broad scale approach to protecting freshwater turtles and tortoises. If we fail to consider these trade patterns, we risk the depletion of turtles and tortoises one species at a time,” said Arroyo.

CITES is an international agreement initiated in 1973 and is currently signed by 178 countries regulating global trade in imperiled wild animals and plants including their parts and products. A meeting of the Conference of the Parties is held every 2-3 years to review, discuss, and negotiate changes in the management and control of trade in the various wildlife species covered by the agreement.

Species protected by CITES are included in one of three appendices. Appendix I includes species threatened with extinction and provides the greatest level of protection, including restrictions on commercial trade. Appendix II includes species that, although currently not threatened with extinction, may become so without trade controls. Changes to Appendices I and II must be proposed at a CoP and agreed to by a two-thirds majority of the Parties present and voting. In contrast, listings to Appendix III can be requested by individual Parties at any time. Appendix III includes species protected by at least one country that needs assistance from other Parties to control trade.

For additional biological and trade information on freshwater turtles and tortoises, please visit <http://www.fws.gov/international/cites/cop16/turtles-and-tortoises.html>. To learn more about the Asian freshwater turtle and tortoise proposals that were submitted for consideration to CoP16, please refer to our fact sheet at <http://www.fws.gov/international/cites/cop16/cop16-asian-turtle-proposals-factsheet.pdf>.

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