



The 16th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties

U.S. Cosponsors Proposals with China and Viet Nam to Increase CITES Protections for 44 Species of Asian Freshwater Turtles

The United States of America has submitted 5 proposals for consideration at the 16th Meeting of the CITES Conference of the Parties (CoP16) to increase CITES protections for 44 Asian freshwater turtles. Two of these proposals are co-sponsored by China, and a third proposal is co-sponsored by Viet Nam. Adoption of these proposals requires a two-thirds majority of CITES Parties present and voting at CoP16.

What is CITES?

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an international agreement signed by 177 nations, is designed to ensure that international trade in animals and plants does not threaten their survival in the wild. The Parties to CITES meet every two to three years at a Conference of the Parties (CoP). During this meeting, they review and vote on (1) amendments to the Appendices under which species are included in CITES; and (2) proposed resolutions and decisions to improve the effectiveness of CITES. CoP16 will take place in Bangkok, Thailand, during March 3-14, 2013.

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. Trade is regulated through a permitting system.
- Appendix III includes species protected by at least one country, which needs assistance from other Parties to regulate trade.

Wibowo Djatmiko, Wikimedia Commons



Dogania subplana

Why is the United States proposing to increase CITES protections for Asian Freshwater Turtles?

Freshwater turtles and tortoises are a diverse and important component of the world's biodiversity and have existed for over 300 million years, since the time of dinosaurs. Currently, there are over 300 species worldwide. Freshwater turtles play an extremely important role in maintaining functional freshwater ecosystems, including rivers, ponds, streams, and wetlands. They help disperse seeds, limit the overgrowth of vegetation, control insect and snail populations, and help keep water clean.

Turtles are in serious trouble around the world. Increasingly, freshwater turtles are in danger, with over half of the 300 hundred species threatened with extinction. Tortoises and freshwater turtles are the most threatened of any major group of 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 indiscriminately with little regard for sustainability. Biological characteristics

such as late maturity, limited annual egg production, and high juvenile and egg mortality make turtles particularly vulnerable to overexploitation. Human exploitation of adults leads to too few eggs being laid to survive to maturity. Likewise, human exploitation of eggs leads to too few hatching to survive to maturity. Such exploitation leads to population collapse. Turtles are also threatened due to habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation in addition to introduced invasive species, environmental pollution, and disease.

Asian freshwater turtles are particularly vulnerable, with over 75% of the 90+ species found throughout Asia considered threatened. Trade in Asian turtles follows a boom and bust pattern in which harvest and trade shift from one species to another when either a species becomes so depleted that it can no longer satisfy the commercial demand or a species becomes regulated and is not as easy to exploit. Once either of these conditions occurs, new areas and species are exploited to replace those that became depleted or regulated. If adopted, the U.S. proposals will provide broad-scale CITES protection which will help prevent the successive depletion of these turtles, species by species.

What CITES protections is the United State proposing for Asian turtles?

To ensure the sustainability of Asian turtles, the Service is proposing to strengthen CITES protections for two families of Asian turtles, numbering about 41 species, as well as, 3 additional species in 3 other families.

The two family-level proposals, co-sponsored by China, are aimed at increasing CITES protections for the Asian hard-shelled (family Geomydidae) and the soft-shelled (family Trionychidae) turtles. Some species within these families are

already included in CITES. To increase CITES protections for these turtles, we are proposing to include 23 species in Appendix II, and to transfer 2 species from Appendix II to Appendix I. For 16 turtles that are already included in Appendix II and that are believed to be at greatest risk, we are proposing to establish zero quotas on these species for the export of wild specimens for commercial purposes; after more information has been collected and analyzed on these species, the export quotas will likely be re-evaluated.

In three other proposals, the United States is proposing the transfer of three species from Appendix II to Appendix I – the Roti Island snake-necked turtle (*Chelodina mccordi*), the Burmese star tortoise (*Geochelone platynota*), and the big-headed turtle (*Platysternon megacephalum*), the latter of which is co-sponsored by Viet Nam.

Adoption of the five proposals would result in a pro-active strategy that would afford CITES protection to the most vulnerable Asian freshwater turtle species, thereby, helping to prevent the successive depletion of these turtles, species by species, resulting from the boom and bust nature of the turtle harvest and trade.

What are some examples of species that will be better conserved if these proposals are adopted?

Below are highlights of turtles that will benefit from increased CITES protections proposed by the United States.



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Painted terrapin (*Batagur borneoensis*) – zero export quota on wild specimens for commercial purposes:

The painted terrapin was included in Appendix II at CoP10 (1997). These hard-shelled river turtles and their eggs are highly prized for human consumption, mainly because the turtle is large, and its habits make it easy to locate and harvest. They are

especially vulnerable to over-harvest as they congregate at favored nesting beaches during seasonal nesting periods. Collection of eggs has been so intense in recent years, that there has been little to no successful reproduction in the wild. A zero export quota on wild specimens for commercial purposes, if adopted, will ensure that wild specimens are not traded for commercial purposes until information is available to ensure that such export is sustainable. This turtle is included as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Leith's softshell turtle (*Nilssonia (Aspideretes) leithii*) – Inclusion in Appendix II:

Leith's softshell turtle, endemic to India, is widely exploited for consumption. Traditionally this turtle has been utilized for subsistence consumption, but in recent years it has increasingly been used for the large-scale domestic and international turtle meat trade. Leith's softshell turtle is a good example of a species that is subject to the boom and bust pattern in which harvest and trade shift from one species to another because certain species are regulated and others are not. Three closely related softshell turtles (Indian, Indian peacock, and black softshell turtles) in the same genus and also occurring in India are included in CITES Appendix I, but Leith's softshell turtle has no international protection and is easier to exploit than the other 3 species. Therefore, regulation and control of trade are needed to ensure sustainable use and better management of this species.

This species qualifies for inclusion in Appendix II because it is known, or can be inferred or projected, that regulation of trade in the species is required to ensure that the harvest of specimens from the wild is not reducing the wild population to a level at which its survival might be threatened by continued harvesting or other influences. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies this turtle as Vulnerable.

What previous research efforts led to the current U.S. proposals?

At CoP14, in 2007, the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group (TFTSG) was commissioned to conduct a study on the effects of CITES listings on the Asian turtle trade and to make recommendations based on

its results. The study found that trade in a species was greatly reduced once it was listed in a CITES Appendix. It also highlighted the massive scale of trade in Asian freshwater turtles not currently listed in CITES.

The international workshop on the Conservation of Asian Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles: Setting Priorities for the Next Ten Years was held in Singapore in February 2011. The workshop concluded that two genera of Asian freshwater turtles are especially vulnerable to trade and should be considered priorities in conservation efforts:

- *Batagur* spp.: These consist of large hard-shelled river turtles and are all highly sought for human consumption, mainly due to their size. They are especially vulnerable to over-harvest as they congregate at favored nesting beaches during seasonal nesting periods. Collection of eggs has been so intense in recent years, that there has been little to no successful reproduction in the wild.
- *Cuora* spp.: This genus of turtles command the highest prices of any turtles within both the international pet trade, the investment trade for turtle farming, and the trade of turtle products (flesh and bones) for traditional eastern medicine. With the added problem of habitat destruction, these turtles are especially vulnerable.

Consistent with these recommendations, the U.S. proposals seek to increase CITES protections for 11 species in the *Batagur* and *Cuora* genera, as well as proposing to increase CITES protections for a number of other species that were recommended by this workshop.

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