



Research **NEWS**

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Malaysia's giant softshell turtle on brink of extinction

By Megat Amir Ibrahim

JERANTUT: Over five decades ago, five to six female giant softshell turtles could be seen laying eggs daily – during the height of the nesting season in March and April – on the sandy banks of Sungai Tembeling in the Taman Negara area in Pahang.

However, throughout March and April this year, only seven of them were detected laying eggs, a clear indication that these reptiles from the Trionychidae family are dwindling in numbers in what could be their last habitat in Malaysia.

The giant softshell turtle, also known as 'resing' or 'labi-labi gergasi air tawar' in Bahasa Melayu, is a freshwater species that has been classified as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Besides Malaysia, it is also found in Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, with its habitats being rivers, estuaries, coastal brackish and marine waters, and lakes.

According to Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) researcher Mohd Ruzed Embong, besides the Taman Negara area, there is no recorded data of freshwater giant softshell turtles existing elsewhere in the country although some sightings have been reported by local communities.

He said seven active nesting sites have been identified along a 100-kilometre stretch of Sungai Tembeling.

"Sadly, this time we didn't

see any egg intact... we found only remnants of their nests with eggshells scattered everywhere," he said.

Mohd Ruzed, a lecturer at

UiTM Shah Alam's Department

of Parks and Amenities Management, told Bernama the giant softshell turtle's declining population can be attributed to natural causes including predatory animals such as eagles

and monitor lizards.

He said the situation is worsened by sand mining activities as well as humans who consume the eggs of the giant softshell turtle, which are

considered a delicacy and said to be 'tastier than the normal turtle eggs'.

Not only that, the flesh of the softshell turtle is also said to have medicinal value when consumed.

Conservation

Concerned about the endangered reptile's future, UiTM Shah Alam has set up a conservation centre here to breed giant softshell turtles, in collaboration with the residents of Kampung Gol in Tembeling Tengah near here, and the Department of Wildlife and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia (Perhilitan).

The Kampung Gol Giant Softshell Turtle Conservation Centre is Malaysia's first such facility. There are two others in Southeast Asia, one in Cambodia and the other in Vietnam.

Mohd Ruzed said it cost about RM90,000 to establish the centre, adding part of the funds came from the National Natural Resources Conservation Trust Fund and the remaining through a UiTM Bestari grant.

The centre, which started operating two years ago, is spread over an eight-hectare site and serves as a place for incubating giant softshell turtle eggs as well as a hatchery. It also conducts educational and awareness programmes to

educate the public about the species.

"Currently, we have about 100 eggs being incubated here. The incubation period is two months, after which the eggs will hatch. We will care for the hatchlings until they attain maturity, which will take a year, and then set them free in their natural habitat," he explained.

He said besides collecting the eggs themselves, the centre also purchases them from fishermen at RM3 each.

"We usually get the fishermen to find them because it is not easy to detect these eggs which are buried in the sand," he said.

Managed by the Kampung Gol community, the centre currently houses several species of giant softshell turtles, including the Asian giant softshell turtle (*Pelochelys cantorii*) and the Asian narrow-headed softshell turtle (*Chitra chitra*). These turtles can grow up to 60 centimetres in length and weigh between 20 and 30 kilograms each.

Difficult to find eggs

Meanwhile, Arif Ahmad, 54, who is among the residents of Kampung Gol involved in the conservation project, said one of the main challenges facing them is finding eggs to hatch.

"The eggs of the giant softshell turtle are highly sought after by the local community because people say it is more delicious than (normal) turtle eggs," he told Bernama, adding the species will become extinct if the theft of these eggs is not curbed.

He said on his part, he and his team take turns to patrol the riverbank throughout the turtle nesting season to deter people from stealing the eggs.

"But it's not easy to patrol the area because of the river's conditions. Sometimes, we spend the night by the river because of the distance involved. Another

thing is, these giant softshell turtles are hard to find," he said, adding a female softshell turtle can lay up to 100 eggs per season. — Bernama

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