

Status survey of *Batagur baska* and *Pelochelys cantorii* in the state of Odisha

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A survey was made in Subarnarekha river mouth and the adjacent available fishing village of Balasore district in Odisha. A boat survey was carried out from the river mouth of Subarnarekha for 50 km inland. There was no evidence of *Batagur baska* found, neither any foot prints nor crawl marks in the bank side of the river. However, one juvenile *Chitra indica* was found entangled in monofilament gill-net and it was carefully released from the net with the help of local fishermen. A questionnaire survey was also held with local fishermen (36 informants) in nine fishing villages and fishing jetties and it was evident that the species *Batagur baska*, locally called “Baligada” was available in the 20th century and for the last one and half decades not a single animal had been seen. Moreover, during the survey, the informants responded that the species became at risk due to indiscriminate poaching by local inhabitants for meat. They believe the northern river terrapin’s flesh is soft and tasty; so people usually hunt in the river during fishing and sell in the local market. The information about the occurrence of *Pelochelys cantorii* was not confirmed in this area. Nevertheless, we found another species, Indian roofed turtle (*Pangshura tecta*) in local village ponds of Balasore and Mayurbhanj district close to rivers Subarnarekha and Budhabalanga.

A similar survey was held upstream and downstream of the river Mahanadi in Cuttack district and a country boat was used to survey inland water. Nearly 50 km upstream from the estuary we did not find any evidence of our targeted species. Other species of fresh water turtles were recorded during the survey like Indian tent turtle (*Pangshura tentoria*), Indian peacock soft shell turtle (*Nilssonina hurum*), Indian softshell turtle (*Nilssonina gangetica*), Indian narrow-headed softshell turtle (*Chitra indica*), and Indian flapshell turtle (*Lissemys punctata*). Besides this, 42 people were interviewed and asked several questions in our targeted species. Photo-elicitation methods were also used. Two of these people (temple priests) responded that they have seen the species and described an umbrella-like turtle basking near the sand bar 30m away from temple during the last quarter of September 2017, probably the Asian giant softshell turtle *Pelochelys cantorii*, on the bank of the river Mahanadi at Vattarika in Cuttack district. We had also received analogous information from various sources regarding the predominance of *Nilssonina gangetica* in a small pond adjoining

the temple in Champeswar village in Cuttack district. The holy pond is located in close proximity to a God Shiva Temple.

A visit was also made to Puri and Jagatsinghpurs districts of Odisha and for two days we surveyed the river Devi near Devidola region, to ascertain sightings of *Batagur baska* and *Pelochelys cantorii*. Through photo-elicitation methods, local people and fishermen reported that both the species occurred in the river. The umbrella like specimen, probably *Pelochelys cantori*, was present in the deep area of the river and not frequently observed. But we were unable to photograph the species. However, one blurred photo from our camera depicts the evidence of *Batagur baska* in the river bank.

We surveyed the mangrove area of Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary, and although direct evidence was not found, substantial information was gathered from the local inhabitants and fishermen through photo-elicitation methods and a questionnaire. *Batagur baska* was present one and a half decades ago and it was sighted in tributaries of rivers Brahmani and Baitarani, described by old people during interview. Over the years the species might have been extirpated due to habitat destruction and intensive poaching. However, *Pelochelys cantorii* was last caught in a fishing net in the mouth of river Maipura, which is closed to the mass nesting rookery of olive ridley sea turtles. The specimen was 10-12 kg and entangled in fishing net in July 2017 (personal communication with forest people).

Some field related photos in this project are given below. Photos by S. Behera, except Indian peacock softshell turtle by Rajendra Prasad Mohapatra.



Probable occurrence of *Batagur baska* in river Devi, Odisha (extreme left turtle).



Capacity building programme for frontline staffs of forest dept. to conserve the fresh water turtles in Odisha, especially *Batagur baska* and *Pelochelys cantorii*.



Photo-elicitation methods being used during questionnaire survey among fishermen and temple priests in Odisha.



Stone patching is a major obstacle for fresh water turtle nesting in the river bank.



Indian roofed turtle (*Pangshura tecta*)



Indian softshell turtle (*Nilssonina gangetica*)



Indian tent turtle (*Pangshura tentoria*)



Indian flapshell turtle (*Lissemys punctata*)



Indian peacock soft shell turtle (*Nilssonina hurum*)



Indian narrow-headed softshell turtle, juvenile (*Chitra indica*)

