



CERD Green Chronicles

A NOTE ON RESCUING INDIAN POND TURTLES, MELANOCHELYS TRIJUGA (NEAR THREATENED)

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It was around 10:30 in the evening on a Friday night, 1st of May, 2020. I was standing in the balcony of my apartment, when I suddenly heard the sounds of leaf litter and movement in the garbage dump nearby. I am new to this city, Kochi, and I had previously heard from neighbours about turtles and snakes living near my apartment in Panambukkadu, Vallarpadam Island. Excited at the prospect of spotting reptiles, I rushed outside with my phone and binoculars as it was pitch dark. I switched on the flash light and tried to see through the binoculars. To my great surprise, I saw two fully-grown turtles searching for food in a garbage dump. I found them there again the next morning - camouflaged and hiding in garbage. In subsequent days, I also found two juvenile turtles. The garbage enclosure had walls that were high enough that the medium- turtles couldn't possibly navigate their way out of it. There was a small pile of sand outside the enclosure that possibly allowed the turtles to enter, but it offered them no way out. I realised they were not merely there in search of food but that they were stuck inside the dump.

After a little research on internet I figured out that these were Indian Pond/Black turtles or Cochin black turtle (*Melanochelys trijuga coronata* Schweigger, 1812). It is widely distributed in India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, and the Chagos Archipelago. It lives in water bodies like ponds, marshes, streams and rivers and has also been spotted in artificial water bodies such as rice-paddies (Indian Back turtle (*Melanochelys trijuga*), 2013). This species is found active usually during early morning and evening and they like spending day time in sun basking. It is considered to have omnivorous diet ranging from aquatic plants to aquatic insects and carrion. This species is listed as Near Threatened (NT) by the IUCN (Asian Turtle Trade Working Group, 2000). I spotted a pond nearby and released them on the morning of 6th May, 2020. I spotted them three days later sun basking on a floating log.



A juvenile with yellow streaks on face and brown edged

Releasing turtles in the pond



I noted down its characteristic features like medium sized (size range- 38-45cm, Indian Back turtle (*Melanochelys trijuga*), 2013) black coloured outer shall (dorsal surface) with sub-pentagonal flower like formations and a lifted ridge like structure running from the middle dividing it equally into two halves. The Plastron (ventral surface) is slightly brown coloured, yellow streaks on face and scaly limbs.





An adult turtle in the middle of the garbage

There are bigger issues at play here. I realized the threats faced by these reptiles when I saw that someone had set the garbage on fire the day after I had released them. If we are to effectively protect our biodiversity, it is important to focus on the problem of mismanagement of waste in our cities and how it can affect not only human health, but also wildlife. Household waste – containing a lot of plastic - attracts foraging animals (Brittel, 2016). They consume this plastic and choke to death. As it can be seen in this case, wild animals can easily get trapped in plastic. From trying to find food and home in garbage to getting stuck in such enclosures, the waste we generate poses great threats to biodiversity. I would conclude by saying we have to make an effort to reduce – and eventually stop – producing and disposing waste irresponsibly. Garbage burning also has adverse environmental and health impacts. Plastics burning in the garbage release Dioxins which tend to adhere to the waxy surface of leaves and enter to the food chain (Wisconsin DNR, 2020). Garbage burning must be stopped. We'll otherwise end up losing our health as well as creatures that we share urban spaces with – in this case, three Indian Pond Turtles.