

OCCURRENCE OF ASIAN GIANT SOFTSHELL TURTLE, *PELOCHELYS CANTORII* (GRAY, 1864), IN NORTHERN KERALA

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The Asian Giant Softshell Turtle, *Pelochelys cantorii* (Gray, 1864) is a rare and little known species of turtle of the west coast of India. It is characterized by its large size, depressed shell, unusually small head and a short snout. The colour of the carapace is olive or brown, spotted or streaked with light or dark shades. In India, the species is better known from the east coast region in West Bengal, Orissa and Tamil Nadu. The species is also recorded from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, China and Vietnam (Das, 1995).

On 7 May 1995 we found a live specimen of this turtle displayed in a tank at Parassinikadavu Snake Park, Kannur District, Kerala. The specimen was caught from Mangadavu region of Valapattanam River (11°57'N & 75°20'E) by a local fisherman. The collection site which is about 7km inland from Arabian Sea is under the influence of tidal water. The specimen measured 90cm in length, 55cm in width and weighed about 45kg. Colouration was olive brown above and pale yellow ventrally and on the sides of the limbs. In captivity it took small dead marine fish like sardines or pieces of mackerel. When provoked, it exhibited jerky biting behaviour.

In April 1999, one more specimen was caught from the same locality and brought to the Snake Park, but it survived only for a few days.

The above records show that the species occurs, albeit uncommon, in the Valapattanam River. In the west coast, the species is extremely rare and is known only from the southern most district of Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala (Nair & Badrudeen, 1975). However, according to Webb (1981), Jerdon's (1853) record of *Gymnopus indicus* (currently, *Chitra indica*) from the estuarine habitat at Mahe on the west coast may actually be a reference to *Pelochelys cantorii*. The present record extends the known range of the species further north in the west coast of India. Since the species is rare in the Indian subcontinent



Figure 1. Asian Giant Softshell Turtle, *Pelochelys cantorii* (Gray, 1864) caught from Valapattanam River, Kannur District, Kerala

and protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, its trade, capture or possession is prohibited.

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