Conservation of Freshwater Turtles

Why in news?

Recently, many incidents of smuggling freshwater turtles are reported across various States by international trafficking networks.

What are freshwater turtles?

23rd May marks the World Turtle Day.

- Freshwater turtles are reptiles that are **ectothermic, or "cold-blooded"** (their internal temperature matches that of their surroundings).
- They also have a scaly skin enabling them to live outside of water.
- Turtles are **oviparous** (lay eggs).
- Turtles have a shell, composed of a carapace in the back and a plastron on the belly, is made of bony plates.
- Turtles have an impressively long life for such small animals.
- Freshwater turtles are smaller than their marine counterparts and their looks are more varied.
- India has 29 species of freshwater turtles (24) and tortoises (5).

Not all turtles are tortoises, but all tortoises are technically turtles.

What are the major threats for turtle?

India ranks 3rd in the list of countries with the largest number of threatened turtle and tortoise species in the world after China and Vietnam.

- Smuggling, Poaching, Habitat destruction, etc. are the major threats to turtles.
- Turtles are smuggled primarily
  - For their meat (mainly within the country)
  - As pets (within and outside India)
  - To extract their calipee (a gelatinous layer found in the lower shells of turtles, believed to be used in traditional Chinese medicine)
- Pollution of waterbodies, incidental entanglement in fishing gear, etc. adds to the issue.
- **West Bengal** remains the hotspot for the illegal trade of turtles for meat.

- During the annual Kali Puja festival, over 1 lakh turtles such as the northern river terrapin and black-spotted turtles are slaughtered as part of sacrificial rituals in West Bengal, Assam and Bangladesh.

What efforts were taken by India for conservation of turtles?

- The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) launched '**Operation Save Kurma'** to prevent poaching, transportation and illegal trade of live turtles and tortoises.
- **'Operation Turtshield-I'** and **'Operation Turtshield-II'** were taken up to tackle the illegal trade of live turtles.
- The Conference of Parties (COP) adopted India's proposal to transfer **Red-crowned roofed turtle** (*Batagur kachuga*) and **Leith's Softshell Turtle** (*Nilssonia leithii*) to Appendix I of Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild fauna and flora (CITES).
- 11 of the turtle species are protected under **Schedule I of The Wildlife Protection Act,** enjoying the same protection as tigers.
- Smuggling of turtles, one of the Class 1 species of the water animal, is a non-bailable offence under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.
- **The Wildlife Conservation Society - Turtle Survival Alliance - India** team have been employing ex-situ conservation measures and capacity building of enforcement agencies to minimize illegal turtle trade.
- Indian biologist Shailendra Singh has been awarded the **Behler Turtle Conservation Award** for bringing three critically endangered turtle conservation species back from the brink of extinction.
- **Other projects**
  - Red-crowned Roofed Turtle Recovery Program in Chambal
  - Northern River Terrapin Recovery Project in Sunderbans
- The Assam Biodiversity Board has declared the **Hajong tortoise lake** which is home to several threatened freshwater turtle species as a biodiversity heritage site.

Related links - Northern River Terrapin, Indian Flapshell Turtles

Quick Facts

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

- CITES is an international agreement between governments and is **legally binding** on the Parties.
- Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of the species.
- It has 3 appendices to protect threatened and vulnerable species.
  - **Appendix I** - For species currently threatened with extinction.
  - **Appendix II** - For species not necessarily threatened with extinction but demands intervention to keep a check on trade and avoid its utilisation that may threaten their survival.
  - **Appendix III** – For a given species, when a specific country wants to regulate

trade.

Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB)

- It is a statutory multi-disciplinary body established under the Ministry of Environment and Forests, to combat organized wildlife crime in the country.
- Under **Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972**, it is mandated
  - To collect and collate intelligence related to organized wildlife crime activities
  - To establish a centralized wildlife crime data bank
  - To assist foreign authorities and international organization concerned to facilitate co-ordination and universal action for wildlife crime control
  - To advise the Government on issues relating to wildlife crimes having national and international ramifications, relevant policy and laws
  - Capacity building of the wildlife crime enforcement agencies for scientific and professional investigation

References

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2. WCCB | About Wildlife Crime Control Bureau
3. Wildlifesos | All Eyes On Indian Turtles This World Turtle Day
4. PIB | India's conservation efforts towards tortoise and turtles
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