Reintroduction of Asian giant tortoise in Nagaland

Prelims: *Current events of national and international importance*

Why in News?

Ten Asian giant tortoise has been reintroduced into the Zeliang Community Reserve in Nagaland by the Nagaland Forest Department and the India Turtle Conservation Program (ITCP).

> *The released tortoises are marked and tagged with a VHF-based telemetry system to study their dispersal and survival in deep rainforests.*

- It is the ***largest tortoise*** in mainland Asia. They are considered one of the oldest tortoise lineages globally.
- **Scientific Name -** Manouria emys.
- It is also known as the Asian forest tortoise or Asian brown tortoise and small elephants of the forests.
- **Size & weight -** They can weigh up to 37 kg and reach a shell length of 60 cm.
- **Appearance**
  - **Shell -** Broad, flattened carapace and a large plastron.
  - **Limbs -** Thick, scaly legs with elephant-like feet, used for digging.
  - **Head -** Flattened with a sharp beak for tearing vegetation.
  - **Color -** Grayish-brown as hatchlings, darkening to charcoal as adults.
- **Habitat** - Hilly, wet tropical and subtropical forests, often found near streams or in damp soil.
- **Distribution** – These species are found in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia and other places.
- **Unique nesting -** It is the only tortoise species that builds an above-ground nest.
- Females construct large mounds of leaf litter and guard their nests, protecting their eggs from predators and potentially regulating the incubation temperature.
- **Diet –** Primarily herbivorous, feeding on leaves, fruits, fungi, bamboo shoots and other vegetation, occasionally consume invertebrates or small amphibians.
- **Threats -** Habitat loss, especially due to logging, agriculture, forest fires, and hunting for consumption and the illegal pet trade.
- **Conservation status**
  - **IUCN** - Critically endangered.
  - **CITES** - Appendix II
- **Significance for ecosystem-** They play a vital role in forest health by dispersing

seeds, turning over soil, and grazing on plants.
- They are considered a keystone species, meaning their presence is crucial for the health of their ecosystem.

Quick Facts

• **India Turtle Conservation Program (ITCP)** is a joint countrywide initiative focused on the conservation of freshwater turtles and tortoises and their habitats across India.
• It's spearheaded by the Turtle Survival Alliance Foundation India (TSA India) in partnership with the Government of India and State Forest Departments.
• **Zealiang community reserve -** It plays a crucial role as a wildlife corridor and reservoir, linking to the *Ntangki National Park and the Dhansiri Reserve Forest in Assam.*
• The local communities, particularly the *Zeliang Naga tribe*, are actively involved in conservation efforts within the reserve.
• They practice sustainable farming and are engaged in protecting the forests.
• **Tortoise Guardians -** Youths from the local community have been engaged by the project as 'tortoise guardians' to ensure protection of the released tortoises and assist in data collection.

Reference

The Hindu | Asian giant tortoise

