

MEDIA RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE USE ON 3rd SEPTEMBER 2020, 8AM PHILIPPINE TIME

Pressure on the Philippine Forest Turtle continues

Manila, Philippines, 3rd September August 2020 – Demand for the illegal pet trade continues to be a key threat to the Philippine Forest Turtle *Siebenrockiella leytensis*, prized by collectors for its uniqueness and placed amongst the world's Top 25 most endangered turtles.

New research that documented seizures, online and market trade over different periods from 2004 found thousands of Philippine Forest Turtle trafficked over the years.

Records from 2004 to 2018 showed 23 seizure incidents resulting in the confiscation of 4,723 individuals. However, a single bust in 2015 in Palawan accounted for 83% of all the animals seized involving close to 4,000 turtles. No Philippine Forest Turtles were seized in 2019 and 2020.

At least 12 of 23 recorded incidents resulted in the arrest of 21 suspected traffickers. However, only two suspects were known to be convicted, fined, and served jail sentences, including a man who was arrested twice the same year at the Hong Kong International Airport, having come from the Philippines with a total of 157 turtles.

Eight out of 15 seizure cases in Palawan occurred in the Municipality of Taytay, which suggests its significance as an exit point of the Philippine Forest Turtle.

The endemic turtle has long been a fascination among hobbyists with collection pressure increasing after new populations were found in the early 2000s. It is uncertain if illegally-collected turtles were also destined for the food market.

The turtle has also been illegally offered for trade online in the past 15 years, in the domestic and international pet trade, said authors of the study published in the *Philippine Journal of Systematic Biology*.

The study recorded 22 of the turtles for sale online through monitoring of social media groups in the Philippines between 2017 and 2018. More recent unpublished trade monitoring found no individuals for sale in 2019, but four individuals were advertised online in April 2020. The authors separately observed over 1,000 Philippine Forest Turtles for sale online on a turtle trading site in China between February and September 2015.

Endangered by trade: seizure analysis of the critically endangered Philippine Forest Turtle Siebenrockiella leytensis from 2004–2018 also highlighted the issues of captive breeding and laundering of wild-caught species as captive bred.

It notes the Philippines reported exporting 74 apparently captive bred individuals between 2011 and 2018. However, the Philippine Forest Turtle—banned from any wild collection and trade since 2001—is widely recognised as notoriously difficult to breed in

captivity. The [first known successful instance](#) of captive breeding was documented only after a 10-year effort in June 2018.

Authors said there was a lack of credible evidence to authenticate captive breeding successes in the Philippines or elsewhere prior to 2018, and the Philippine government recently rejected an application by a facility attempting to export specimens declared as captive bred.

"The findings point towards the likelihood of wild-caught specimens being laundered as captive bred," said TRAFFIC's lead author Emerson Sy.

"Declaring an immediate moratorium on trade in the Philippine Forest Turtle would close this loophole, help the government prevent illegal trade and help ensure the continued survival of this endemic species," Sy said.

The authors also urged wildlife authorities to boost site-based protection, as well as enforcement and prosecution against smugglers.

They called for an inventory of all previously-registered captive Philippine Forest Turtles in private and public facilities in the country and ascertain that these are not permitted for any trade.

"We have recent evidence that illegal collection and trade continue, and that demand for this turtle has not diminished," said Dr. Sabine Schoppe a co-author of the study and head of a programme for the conservation of the species at Katala Foundation Inc.

"More protected areas with stronger management and enforcement should be created to address the threats to this turtle. We will continue to combat threats from illegal trade with the support of our partners Palawan Council for Sustainable Development, Department of Environment and Natural Resources and local governments," Schoppe said.

End.



TRAFFIC

All individuals in trade are suspected to be poached from the wild

The Philippines reported exporting **74 captive-bred individuals** between **2011 and 2018**

BUT

There was **no credible evidence** of successful captive breeding anywhere **before 2018**

After over a decade of dedicated attempts to breed the species for conservation, **the first documented captive bred Philippine Forest Turtle** was reported by Katala Foundation on **24 June 2018!**

The Philippine Forest Turtle has been documented for sale within the Philippines and internationally... **but where did they come from?**

Philippine Forest Turtle

Siebenrockiella leytensis



- Known as "Bakoko" in local Cuyonon language
- The only Philippine endemic freshwater turtle - a national treasure!
- Found only in Palawan
- CITES** Protected under Philippine law; CITES Appendix II
- IUCN** Critically Endangered
- Since 2004** Documented in illegal trade

TRAFFIC

PHILIPPINE FOREST TURTLE SEIZURES



TRAFFIC

| Region | Quantity | Incident |
|----------------|----------|----------|
| PALAWAN | 4478 | 15 |
| MINDORO | 130 | 1 |
| LUZON | 52 | 5 |

From 2004-2018, **4,723** individuals were seized in **23** incidents, with **3,921** of them from a single incident

21 suspected traffickers were arrested in 12 incidents. Only **2** were convicted, fined and jailed

8 seizures occurred in **Taytay**, thought to be a key exit point

*Seizures reflect trafficking levels and enforcement efforts, and seizures here may not be complete