



# Illicit Trade of Tortoises and Hard-Shell Turtles

**For Prelims:** [Turtles](#), [Indian star tortoise](#), [Olive Ridley](#), [Green Turtle](#)

**For Mains:** Major threats to tortoises and turtles, Wildlife trafficking.

[Source: TH](#)

## Why in News?

A recent study titled '*From Pets to Plates*,' published in **Oryx, The International Journal of Conservation**, has provided insights into the **illicit trade of tortoises and hard-shell turtles**.

- The study was conducted by experts associated with the Counter Wildlife Trafficking Programme of the Wildlife Conservation Society-India.

## What are the Key Highlights of the Report?

- **Chennai Leads the Network:**
  - **Chennai emerges as the primary node** in the tortoise and hard-shell turtle trafficking network.
    - The city plays a central role in the global pet trade, facilitating the illicit trade in these reptiles.
  - Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Anantapur, Agra, North 24 Parganas (in West Bengal), and Howrah (near the India-Bangladesh border) are also crucial in the network, contributing significantly to the trafficking of tortoises and turtles.
- **Predominantly Domestic Soft-Shell Turtle Trafficking:**
  - Soft-shell turtle trafficking is **primarily domestic** in nature. International trafficking of soft-shell turtles to and from India is **mostly limited to Bangladesh**.
- **The Asian Turtle Crisis:**
  - Wild populations of tortoises and freshwater turtles face immense pressure from **illegal trade for pets, food, and medicines**.
    - At least **15 of the 30 threatened TFT (Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles) species** in India are illegally traded.
    - Freshwater species, such as the **Indian flapshell turtles**, are in great demand in illegal markets.
      - The Indian Softshell turtle, also known as the **Ganges Softshell turtle**, is a **freshwater reptile** found in the [Ganges](#), [Indus](#) and [Mahanadi rivers](#) in northern and eastern India.
- **Comparing Networks:**
  - The study found that the **tortoise and hard-shell turtle network had a more extensive geographical scale** with more international trafficking links compared to the soft-shell turtle network.
  - Complex routes were recorded in tortoise and hard-shell turtle smuggling, whereas soft-shell turtle trafficking primarily followed a one-directional route from source to destination.

▪ **Dire Condition of Trafficked Turtles:**



- Turtles involved in the illegal trade often arrive dehydrated, starved, and with injuries.
- High mortality rates among trafficked turtles highlight the urgency of addressing this issue.

**Tortoise and Hard-Shell Turtles:**

- All tortoises are turtles as they belong to the order Testudines/Chelonia.
- Tortoises are distinguished from other turtles by **being land-dwelling**, while many (though not all) other **turtle species are at partly aquatic**.
- Hard-shell turtles have rigid and bony shells that provide protection and cannot be easily compressed.
- According to the [International Union for Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\)](#) most of the species of turtles and tortoises are vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered.
- [Indian star tortoise](#), [Olive Ridley Turtle](#) , and [Green Turtle](#) are a few examples of Tortoise and Hard-Shell Turtles in India.

**Soft-Shell Turtle**

- Softshell turtles are a large group of reptiles in the family **Trionychidae**.
- They are called softshells because their shells lack **hard scales, and are instead leathery and flexible**.
- They often lie buried in mud, sand, and shallow water.
- Commonly found Soft-Shell Turtles in India are [Indian Flapshell Turtles](#), [Indian peacock softshell turtles](#), and [Leith’s Soft-shelled Turtle](#).

Characteristic	Tortoises	Turtles
		
<b>Shell Shape</b>	High-domed, rounded, heavy shell	Thinner and more streamlined
<b>Habitat</b>	Primarily terrestrial (land-dwelling)	Adapted for life in water
<b>Diet</b>	Primarily herbivorous	Omnivorous or herbivorous
<b>Limbs</b>	Thick, columnar legs, claw-like toes	Flipper-like legs, webbed feet