

NO TOY NOR TART, LET IT LIVE IN LAKE

We suspected that the tortoise at the tea stall would soon become part of somebody's meal

By Nimesh Ved

We were at Phura, a small village surrounded by wet rice-fields in Saiha district of Mizoram. I worked in Saiha for three years and was involved in conservation education work with students and elders in the area. As we visited our favourite tea stall for the last time for the day, we saw a tortoise on a bench. One of its legs was tied with a thin string to the bench. After the initial confusion, we discovered that it was alive and one of us rushed to get a camera, pad and pen from the forest guest house where we stayed.

Mizoram is one of the eight states that form the bio-diversity rich part of our country, commonly referred to as the

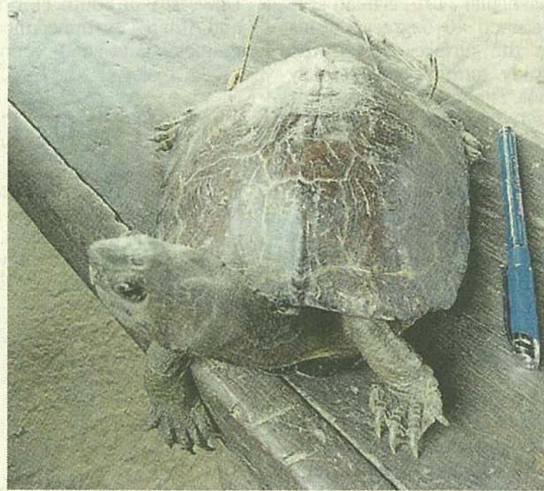


north-east. Saiha is the southernmost tip of not only Mizoram but also north-east India and its amazing forests are part of the vast wild landscape that stretches deep into Myanmar. A large portion of Mizoram's land is covered by forests and most of them are owned by villagers.

A delicacy

Tortoise meat is a delicacy in the region and we suspected that the tortoise at the tea stall would soon become part of somebody's meal. I immediately realised that interacting with the person who 'owned' the tortoise was more important than trying to identify the reptile! But the owner was initially reluctant to converse with us. Then he said he was surprised we were concerned about the tortoise as many people ate tortoise meat. His companion mentioned that tortoises were being hunted in their region with the help of dogs.

In the discussion that followed our cajoling, the owner



The tortoise described in the story! PHOTOS: AUTHOR

suddenly said he wished to take the tortoise home to his children. He said they would look after it as their pet! Cajoling was anything but easy. He insisted there was nothing uncommon or wrong about what he was doing, while we argued that hunting and keeping wildlife as pets is prohibited under a law called the Wild Life (Protection) Act.

This Act was passed in 1972 and is one of the strongest wildlife laws in our country that sets down punishment in the form of fines and imprison-

ment for hunting and other acts that harm wildlife. Removing wildlife species from their habitat and having them as pets is a serious problem; neither do the species get the diet nor the habitat they are accustomed to, and in most cases, move towards a slow, painful and unnatural death.

While we were at the tea stall, some members of a youth club joined us. Initially they were a little surprised and thought that we were making too much noise over a small tortoise but later they too



Palak lake in Mizoram.

joined us in pleading with the owner to hand over the tortoise to us for release. Finally, he consented. Amidst all the chaos of the arguments and counter arguments, I suddenly noticed that the tortoise had retreated into its shell in fear, not knowing that its future was being hotly debated!

Release plan

Within a short while, we decided that Palak Lake would be the best spot to release the tortoise. I was thrilled! Palak Lake was one of pristine beauty and

an area that attracted a large number of birds as well. Soon we left for the lake with the tortoise in tow! We released it near the lake's edge and stood silently watching it as it slowly made its way into the water. We then walked back in the moonlight towards Phura very pleased with ourselves.

Sharing the images with experts later, we identified our tortoise as the Asian brown tortoise or the Asian forest tortoise. This species of tortoise lives in evergreen forests in the hills near water and is the only

tortoise that lays its eggs above the ground in a nest. We then wrote about the incident in English to share it with supporters over email and in Mizo to share it with friends in Saiha! This incident was a beginning towards our joining hands with the youth club and village council in Saiha towards conserving the amazing wildlife in the region.

(The writer is interested in conservation-education and loves long walks. This series is coordinated with Kalpavriksh.)