



**WWF-Pakistan**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **WWF-Pakistan successfully releases 200 freshwater turtles back into their natural habitat**

**Sukkur, September 24, 2014:** WWF-Pakistan in collaboration with the Sindh Wildlife Department successfully released approximately 200 freshwater turtles into their natural habitat. A ceremony was held at the Indus Dolphin Conservation Centre, Lab-e-Mehran, Sukkur. Naila Wajid Khan, Secretary Wildlife Forest and Environment was also present on the occasion, who announced that a notification has been issued stating that freshwater turtle is a *protected species* according to the Sindh Wildlife Act.

The Chief Conservator, Sindh Wildlife Department, Javed Ahmed Mehar, also spoke on the occasion stated that “This issue gave a strong message to poachers that they must refrain from illegal wildlife export or else they will be penalized under law. This turtle release is a joint effort of the Sindh Wildlife Department and WWF-Pakistan for conservation and I congratulate all involved on the successful achievement of the task at hand,” he added.

After the briefing, 50 turtles were released at Kalar Block, National Highway Rohri, whereas the remaining 150 turtles were released at other wildlife hotspots. According to Uzma Noureen, Coordinator Indus River Dolphin Conservation Project, member IUCN Tortoises and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, “By the time the turtles were rehabilitated in a quarantine facility, we took the opportunity to organize regular awareness sessions by inviting students from schools and colleges, including students from Khairpur University, and also conducting awareness sessions for Sindh Wildlife Department staff, so that awareness about turtle conservation can be further raised among all.”

The turtles were handed over to Pakistan last month in a ceremony conducted at the Pak-China border at Khunjerab Pass. Illegal trade of body parts of softshell turtle species has been reported since year 2000. A number of consignments have been confiscated in the past by the wildlife and customs authorities in Sindh, Punjab, and Islamabad; and at the Pak-China border in Sost. All of these consignments comprised of withered frozen meat of turtles or body parts of softshell species. These are used as food and in traditional medicines. It is very alarming to see that the hardshell species is also being targeted in illegal trade for sale as pets.

The freshwater turtles are found in the entire Indus river system, which is beneficial for the ecosystem, as they feed upon dead organic material, diseased fish and clean up the water resources. There are eight different species of freshwater turtles found in Pakistan; five of which are globally threatened according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. All eight freshwater turtle species are listed in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) Appendices I & II and their import and export without a legal permit is prohibited. Countless species including turtles are illegally poached and exported to other countries especially China and East Asian countries. Threats to freshwater turtles include habitat degradation, scarcity of water, and pollution. The biggest threat to the species’ survival is illegal trade to different countries on a commercial scale.

CITES is an international agreement between governments. It aims to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. CITES was drafted as a result of a resolution adopted in 1963 at a meeting of members of IUCN. Pakistan is also a signatory of CITES since April 1976.

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**About WWF-Pakistan:** WWF-Pakistan was formed in 1970 to address the growing environmental and conservation issues in Pakistan that not only affected the flora and fauna, but were also affecting the human population. WWF-Pakistan is a non-profit organization, working to preserve, conserve and save our environment and natural resources. Today, WWF -Pakistan works through 26 offices with a team of approximately 350 dedicated staff members. With its head office in Lahore, and five regional offices in major cities of Pakistan, it has project offices wherever there is a need and the potential to make a difference.

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