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PRESS RELEASE – Turtle Island | Peter Praschag

Breeding of the Narrow-headed Softshell Turtle (*Chitra indica*)

Dr. Peter Praschag displayed a picture of a narrow-headed softshell turtle (*Chitra indica*) to a fisherman at a weekend market on the Brahmaputra River in north-east India at sunrise in the spring of 1999. The fisherman quickly identified the species, which is a very popular food in its habitat. According to Peter, a woman purchased the solitary specimen taken in the previous week and drove it home. After hastily taking down the woman's name and address, a rickshaw was chartered and the difficult journey to her home was undertaken. Despite the communication difficulties, the woman led the eager biologist inside her kitchen. He was astounded to discover the animal alive but already in a soup pot. It was a lovely and healthy juvenile of this rare and massive turtle species.

Chitra indica is one of the largest turtle species, weighing up to 200 kg and measuring at least 110 cm in length. They are highly trained fish hunters who burrow in the sand to ambush passing fish. If a prey comes within their range, they shoot out their very small head at an unfathomable speed, and the fish is swallowed. It was established while capturing this activity in Graz that this striking head motion is one of the fastest in the animal kingdom. Although the fluttering of a hummingbird's wings or the tongue of a chameleon can be captured at 2000 frames per second, the striking of a *Chitra* requires at least 3000 frames per second to avoid grainy photos. The turtle's drawing, suggestive of a Persian carpet, fluidly transitions from the shell to the scarcely separated head and soft sections, distinguishing this species from the typical image of a turtle.

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This young animal was legally exported thanks to great relations through the Austrian Embassy in India, and it is still on Turtle Island in Graz today. We discovered she was a female after a few years of growth. Years later, more specimens might be purchased at Bangladeshi fish markets before being prevented from being eaten. Some Chitra were reintroduced into national parks, but four were chosen to form a breeding group in Europe. Because this species has been strictly protected since 2003, export and import permits were required. To keep the animals alive, a pond in Bangladesh was leased, gated, and an animal keeper was recruited to deliver live fish to the animals. The four softshell turtles arrived in Vienna two years later, in 2015, including a brilliantly patterned male on the verge of sexual maturity. All of the specimens adapt rapidly and well.

The pair was first attempted to mate in fall, with a carapace length of 80 cm for the male and 60 cm for the female. Unfortunately, the larger male only displayed hostile behavior toward the female, forcing the pair to be separated swiftly. However, the female was no longer bitten by the male in the spring of this year. Although no mating was observed, the female's neck displayed typical bite marks, indicating mating behavior. During mating, the male attaches himself to the female by biting her neck. At the beginning of July, the female became extremely frightened and attempted to escape the water several times. The eggs of this very aquatic species are placed on sandbanks near rivers in nature. The female accepted the artificial nesting beach right away and buried 44 spherical eggs. This species can lay up to three clutches of more than 100 eggs each year, however this is the first clutch from a young and still small female.

Sixty-six days later, the first hatchling appeared, followed by seven more in the days that followed. After a few days, the tiny juveniles began catching live fish. They are now significantly larger and consume frozen fish as well.

The Indian narrow-headed soft-shelled turtle is reliant on large, clean rivers. It is critically endangered since it is still poached today and its habitat is rapidly vanishing. Turtle Island intends to breed many more young animals of this remarkable species, with the goal of eventually being able to return young creatures hatched in Austria to their country of origin.

This species' first mating success happened this August at the San Diego Zoo. The success at Turtle Island came a few weeks later as the first breeding success in Europe, providing optimism for the species' future.



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Photographers: Peter Praschag, Shannon DiRuzzo



TURTLE ISLAND – at a glance

World's largest and most species-rich turtle conservation breeding station

Category A Zoo

Scientific institute & research facility

Animal shelter & sanctuary

Turtle Island in Figures

- Founded in **2013** by Dr. Peter Praschag (internationally recognized scientist and zoologist)
- Comprised of **4** scientifically recognized centers, located in Austria
- Approximately **2500** turtle specimens in total
- Home of **270** of the **360+** turtle taxa on the planet
- We house **37** of the **50** most endangered turtle species
- Home of approx. **90%** of the turtles within the two most endangered genera worldwide (*Batagur* & *Cuora*)
- Successful conservation breeding of more than **170** species
- **Six** of these species were the world's first captive-bred successes
- Successful breeding of **three** species that are already extinct in the wild

WE ARE

- a recognized scientific institution, research facility, and zoo, focusing on the conservation and breeding of the world's most endangered and overlooked turtle species
- a CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) certified institution (registration number AT033)
- a research station for the taxonomy and biology of turtles, with a focus on reproductive biology and ecology
- Austria's only official shelter and sanctuary for confiscated or unwanted turtles
- an European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) studbook keeper for 11 turtle species
- facilitators of in-situ reintroduction projects (e.g., Vienna Zoo and other internationally renowned zoos and research stations)
- public awareness advocates and educators for species conservation