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Turtle Of The Month!

Cochin Forest Cane Turtle

(Vijayachelys silvatica)



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J. Vijaya (1959–1987) was a remarkable woman who rediscovered the Cochin Forest Cane Turtle (*Vijayachelys silvatica*) in 1982 and dedicated her life to their study until her passing. She was India's pioneering herpetologist. Discovered in 1911, two Cane Turtles were described in 1912 as a new species and remained elusive until Viji (as her friends used to call her) rediscovered them 70 years later in the forests of Kerala. Reiner Praschag obtained specimens during a period when it was legally permissible to possess them before international protection measures were enacted.

Subsequently, Peter Praschag conducted a comprehensive genetic analysis of the species, comparing them to closely and distantly related taxa. This investigation revealed the species' enigmatic nature, demonstrating their unique status as endemic to the area. It became evident that the taxonomy required the assignment of a new genus name. As a result, Peter chose to honor Vijaya in the naming process. Thanks to Peter, she lives on as an honorable namesake for the turtles, now referred to as *Vijayachelys* (Vijaya's turtle).

This species is a small reptile, distinguished by their unique coloring and found exclusively in the Western Ghats—a mountain range along India's southwest coast, inhabited by elephants, tigers, king cobras, and legions of blood-sucking leeches. As the country's smallest turtle, this species primarily inhabits semi-evergreen and evergreen-montane forests, displaying minimal interest in aquatic environments even during dry spells. Notably dichromatic, this turtle species shows distinct differences in coloration between genders. Males boast dark pink or scarlet markings on their heads, with vivid red sclera (white part of the eye) bordering pinkish-white irises, while females exhibit more subdued hues. Each turtle has their own distinct character and food preferences, making this species "personality plus!"

During their breeding season, essentially the June to November southwest monsoon season, males engage in aggressive confrontations that often result in shell damage, leaving visible marks. Unfortunately, the Cochin Forest Cane Turtle faces numerous threats, including deforestation, habitat flooding due to hydroelectric damming, forest fires, hunting by the Kadar tribe using detection dogs, and the illegal wildlife trade. Consequently, this diminutive turtle is classified as Endangered by the IUCN Red List, protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, and their trade is regulated under Appendix II of CITES.

Within the community of turtle enthusiasts, they are often regarded as the most sought-after or highly-prized specimens, often likened to a "holy grail" of sorts. Notably, Turtle Island cares for the only breeding group in the world, successfully breeding them for several years. This year, Turtle Island was proud to hatch the first, second-generation of the species.
