

## The Turtle Woman from Nepal – and the Animals That Couldn't Go Home

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### A Failed Return

The rewilding of 50 Critically Endangered turtles to Nepal was thwarted by Austrian bureaucracy. Now criticism is mounting, with the Austrian liberal party NEOS demanding consequences.



Peter Praschag (Turtle Island) and Nepali biologist Asmita Ranapaheli with a parent and a juvenile of the critically endangered Peacock Softshell Turtle.

When biologist Asmita Ranapaheli talks about turtles, her eyes light up. She is 28, shy, gentle – and deeply committed to dedicating her life to the protection of these animals. “They are beautiful and at the same time so vulnerable,” she says. “Most people have no idea how rare they’ve become.” In her home country of Nepal, turtles are considered food, not something worth protecting.

After earning her master’s degree in biology and conducting her first research project in Bardiya National Park in western Nepal, Asmita applied for an internship at Turtle Island in Graz, Austria – a world-renowned turtle conservation organization. Since February, she has been part of the team led by zoologist and biologist Peter Praschag PhD, an internationally recognized turtle expert, and president of the Amphibian and Reptilian Conservation Center (ARCO) in Nepal. He continues the life’s work of his father, who aimed to rescue animals from illegal trade, care for them, breed them – and one day reintroduce them into their natural habitats.

### **Authorities Block Reintroduction**

Asmita's stay in Graz was originally intended to be linked with a turtle reintroduction project in Nepal. Fifty juvenile Peacock Softshell Turtles, a Critically Endangered species, were supposed to return to Nepal. Together with ARCO Nepal, a local conservation organization, the plan was to reintroduce them into their native habitat and study them. But the Austrian authorities blocked the export. According to project leader Peter Praschag, this was because they could not definitively verify that the parent animals came from legal sources. For the Styrian conservationist, this sends the wrong message: "It's completely absurd to prevent animals that were born in human care, intended for reintroduction, from returning to their natural habitat – all in the name of species protection."



Asmita Ranapaheli with a young specimen of the Critically Endangered peacock softshell turtle, which was intended for release into the wild in Nepal (its native habitat).

"I have a valid CITES document for one of the parents," says Praschag. The other was given to us by an animal shelter after being confiscated at a reptile show. CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) certificates confirm that animals were legally obtained and not taken from illegal wildlife trade. According to the authorities, the photo on it was apparently too blurry. Now we're left with 50 juveniles that must be housed individually – taking up urgently needed space." The cost is steep: around €13 per animal per day – for turtles that could have been released long ago.

### **Austrian liberal party NEOS: 'Species protection must not fail because of bureaucracy'**

The Austrian liberal party (NEOS) in the province of Styria reacted with outrage. According to regional parliament member and animal welfare spokesperson Robert Reif, it's absurd when species protection itself becomes a victim of bureaucracy: "This is a textbook case of administrative obstinacy that helps no one. If even the return of turtles to their native habitat is blocked by authorities and excessive red tape, something is seriously wrong," says Reif.

He is calling for a task force within the Ministry of Agriculture that can mediate between science, government agencies, and international partners in such cases. The goal must be a practical solution – without absurd hurdles. "Anyone who takes global species protection seriously must act pragmatically, not paralyze animal advocates and researchers with endless paperwork," says the NEOS representative.

### **Research Over Career**

Asmita Ranapaheli is now returning home alone. "Of course I'm disappointed," she says. Nevertheless, she intends to continue her work in Nepal – even if it barely pays. "Turtles aren't tigers or elephants. You can't market them as easily." Yet they are a vital part of the ecosystem – as scavengers, seed dispersers, and bioindicators.

Together with ARCO Nepal, which has been chaired by Praschag since 2022, she wants to conduct research, raise awareness, and produce studies. "I want to show how important these animals are. Even if it's not a job that makes you rich." Her family supports her and is proud of the young woman. "I'd never been abroad before – not even to India," she says. "Going straight to Austria was a big step for me and my parents." She returns now with many new experiences – and with the hope that knowledge can lead to change.

### **Is Turtle Island Leaving Graz/Austria?**

Peter Praschag continues his fight – against Austrian bureaucracy and for the survival of Turtle Island. More than 3,000 turtles from all over the world are cared for at four locations in Graz – from an aging building to a rented greenhouse. "Three of the four sites are far from ideal for housing the animals," says zoologist and biologist Praschag. "We urgently need a central facility – with space, public access, and long-term perspective – and we already have sponsors interested." At least 15,000 square meters would be required. He has been searching for years but has only been offered a 1,800 m<sup>2</sup> plot so far. "Much too small," says Praschag. If no solution is found in Graz, relocating abroad may be the

only option: “We’ve already looked at land in Crete. But that would be a loss for Styria, because I believe there’s enormous potential here for a future-proof species conservation center. This is the largest and most species-rich turtle collection in the world – every animal has a story.” Many of the turtles were confiscated or rescued from illegal trade. In Graz, they receive protection and care.

Turtle Island is not a modern-day Noah’s Ark, but a conservation breeding and rescue center with a global network. But its future is uncertain, Praschag emphasizes. The monthly cost of operations is around €50,000 – for staff, energy, and animal care. Without a central facility and a clear future perspective, it will be difficult to carry on his father’s legacy.

What remains is hope: that species protection will no longer be thwarted by bureaucracy, that the dedication of young people like Asmita Ranapaheli won’t be stopped by borders – and that Peter Praschag will keep going despite all the setbacks. Because he believes: “If animals are taken from nature through illegal trade – even though we are not the ones who took them – we can still give back by releasing their healthy, captive-raised offspring to the wild, even if it’s a generation later.”