

Note on the availability of Philippine Forest Turtle *Siebenrockiella leytensis* in online reptile markets

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ABSTRACT

The Philippine Forest Turtle *Siebenrockiella leytensis* is a critically endangered species endemic to the Palawan group of islands, where it is better known under the English name of Palawan Forest Turtle. No permits have been issued by the Philippine authorities to collect and/or trade in native live wild-caught reptiles since 2001, yet, the trade of captive-bred individuals is allowed. Regardless, evidence of this species breeding in captivity is very scarce and limited to two documented events. Although strictly protected, illegal trade seems to continue with sightings of this species in China, USA, and Europe. Here we report the results of a six-month survey in nine countries/regions carried out to estimate the availability of this species in the online pet trade. We monitored over 60 social media platforms (e.g. Facebook groups, MeWe) and reptile classified websites in Europe, United States of America, Malaysia, Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong SAR and the Philippines between 1 February 2019 and 31 July 2019. Only one advertisement offering two Philippine Forest Turtles was observed during the study period. On 30 June 2019, two adult Philippine Forest Turtles were offered for sale in a Japanese pet store. In addition, an advertisement was found outside the study period in Hong Kong, suggesting that there is still international demand for this critically endangered species.

Keywords: Philippine Forest Turtle, Palawan Forest Turtle, *Siebenrockiella leytensis*, Illegal Wildlife Trade, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

The Philippine Forest Turtle *Siebenrockiella leytensis*, endemic to the Palawan group of islands, is among the rarest of the world's chelonians. It is currently classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Asian Turtle Trade Working Group 2000) and is listed as one of the world's 25 most endangered turtle species (Stanford 2018). With only four recorded specimens between 1921 and 1988 (both in the wild and in trade), very little was known about the Philippine Forest Turtle until the species' rediscovery in 2001 (Diesmos et al. 2004). The species is also listed as

“critically endangered” under the Philippine national law (Republic Act No. 9147), making possession and trade of this species illegal and punishable by a maximum imprisonment of four years and/or a fine of PHP 300,000 (USD 5,760). The Philippine Forest Turtle is currently listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which means an export permit is required if one is to conduct any international trade in the species. No permits have been issued by Philippine authorities for native wild-caught reptiles, since 2001. However, illegal trade seems to continue with sightings of this species in China, USA, and Europe (Sy 2018; Sy et al. in prep.). Here we report the results of a six-month survey in nine countries/regions carried out to estimate the availability of this species in the online pet trade.

METHODS

We monitored social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, MeWe) and reptile classified websites in Europe, United States of America, Malaysia, Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong SAR, and the Philippines between 1 February 2019 and 31 July 2019. Exact sale platforms and keywords used are kept confidentially to prevent displacing trade to other potentially unknown platforms. The total number of platforms monitored encompassed over 60 known reptile classified platforms. For each advertisement, we collected 1) country where offered, 2) online platform, 3) price of animal (converted to USD), 4) origin, and 5) size of the animal. We monitored each platform twice a week and used keyword searches to look for our target species such as known code words or trade names, scientific names, and the name of this species in Mandarin and Japanese. We used the exchange rate of USD 1 = PHP 52.086 and USD 1 = JPY 107.74 (<http://www.oanda.com> as of 12 September 2019).

RESULTS

Only one advertisement, offering two Philippine Forest Turtles was observed during the study period. On 30 June 2019, two adult Philippine Forest Turtles were offered for sale in a Japanese pet store specializing in reptiles at JPY 400,000 (approximately USD 3,713), with the male having slight injuries. The same pair was offered for sale on a different website for JPY 500,000 (USD 4,641). No information was provided on the origin of these turtles.

Leyte turtle (Philippine turtle) pair

¥ 400,000

quantity

1

add to cart

f g+ t p y

お問い合わせ
退出中

Super rare! Immediate combat adult pair!

Figure 1. Advertisement of a pair of Philippine Forest Turtles observed for sale on 30 July 2019 in Japan. Advertisement translated using Google Translate.

DISCUSSION

Only two Philippine Forest Turtles were observed for sale over a six-month period, during a survey covering the most important reptile markets globally. Considering their rarity, this is not a surprise. The fact that both animals were adults, with one having eye damage, suggests that these two turtles were most likely wild-caught. Nevertheless, it should be said that eye damage is not exclusive to wild-caught specimens. The high price asked for this species raises concerns that the trade is very lucrative and is clearly a driver of the continual poaching of this species. Rare and endemic species often fetch high prices, making this trade highly profitable for smugglers and illegal traders.

For Critically Endangered species, even the smallest numbers can have an impact on the wild population. Previous studies have estimated densities of 4.4 to 121.7 individuals per hectare (Schoppe et al. 2010). In the wild this species faces challenges of habitat destruction, exploitation for the illegal pet trade, and (national and international) human consumption. The rediscovery has catalysed poaching efforts, culminating in the species' largest recorded seizure to date in Palawan in June 2015. This seizure involved 3,921 individuals, supposedly representing a large proportion of the species'

estimated population size, which is thought to be highly restricted (Fidenci and Maran 2009). No permits have been issued by Philippine authorities to collect and/or trade in live native wild-caught reptiles since 2001, yet, trade in captive-bred individuals is allowed. Evidence of this species breeding in captivity is very scarce and limited to two documented events (Katala Foundation Incorporated 2018; Formoso 2019). Furthermore, evidences of laundering (fraudulently declaring wild-caught animals as bred in captivity) involving this species by zoos and wildlife breeding farms have been reported (Diesmos et al. 2012; Sy 2018). This species was documented for sale in Japan, Malaysia, Europe, and United States prior to the first legal export of supposedly captive bred individuals from the Philippines in 2011 (Diesmos et al. 2012; Schoppe and Shepherd 2013; Sy 2018). It cannot be denied that these animals have been within the country for a longer time, as this species has been observed for sale in Japan in the past. Despite the fact that only two animals were observed during this study, it provides evidence that this species is still available outside the Philippines and trade appears to continue. Although outside our study period, an additional specimen was observed for sale in Hong Kong on 24th October 2019. In addition, Sung and Fong (2018) found 10 specimens in seven advertisements between September 2013 and August 2016 in Hong Kong as well, but no price data were available for these advertisements.

The online sale of wildlife has received greater attention over the last few years, with several authors reporting high quantities of often protected species available on social media like Facebook and Instagram (Krishnasamy and Stoner 2016; Sy 2018). Recently, Facebook has started to increase efforts in removing platforms that allow the sale of wildlife, resulting in displacement of these advertisements to other platforms such as WeChat, WhatsApp, Telegram, and other classified websites which are increasingly difficult to monitor. It could therefore be possible that the sale of these Critically Endangered turtles is taking place on different platforms other than those included in this study. The removal of sale platforms by Facebook also influenced platforms monitored for this study and it is more likely that that trade levels are higher than observed under this study. In addition, trade might have moved to closed or secret groups, which can only be entered on invitation or approval of an administrator.

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