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PRESS RELEASE – Turtle Island | Peter Praschag

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

At dawn in the spring of 1999, Dr. Peter Praschag showed 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. The species, which is consumed as a very popular food in its range, was immediately recognized by the fisherman. Peter was told that a woman bought the only specimen caught in the last week and drove home with it. After quickly jotting down the name and address, a rickshaw was chartered and the bumpy journey to that woman's home was tackled. Despite all the communication problems, the extremely friendly woman led the excited biologist into her kitchen. He was amazed when he found the animal alive but already in a soup pot. It was a beautiful and intact juvenile of this unique, huge turtle species.

Chitra indica is one of the largest turtle species, weighing up to 200 kg and having a shell length of at least 110 cm. They are highly specialized fish hunters, burrowing in the sand to ambush passing fish. If a prey comes within their range, they shoot out their very small head at a speed that is untraceable by the human eye and the fish is swallowed. While filming this action in Graz, it was confirmed that this striking head motion is one of the fastest movements in the animal kingdom. The flapping of a hummingbird's wings or the tongue of a chameleon can be filmed at 2000 frames/second, the striking of a *Chitra* requires at least 3000 frames/second in order not to produce blurry images. The drawing of the turtle, reminiscent of a Persian carpet, seamlessly transitions from the shell to the barely separated head and soft parts, so that this species differs greatly from the usual image of a turtle.

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Thanks to excellent contacts through the Austrian Embassy in India, this young animal could be legally exported and is still in Turtle Island in Graz today. After a few years of growth, we could see that she was a female. Years later, more specimens could be bought at fish markets in Bangladesh before they were saved from their fate of being eaten. Some Chitra were rewilded out in national parks, but 4 specimens were selected to form a breeding group in Europe. Since this species has been strictly protected since 2003, export and import permits had to be applied for. In order to keep the animals alive, a pond in Bangladesh was leased, fenced and an animal keeper hired to provide the animals with live fish. Two years later, in 2015, the 4 softshell turtles arrived in Vienna, including a beautifully patterned male which was already on the verge of sexual maturity. All specimens settle in quickly and well.

With a carapace length of 80 cm for the male and 60 cm for the female, the first attempts were then made in autumn to mate the pair. Unfortunately, the larger male only showed aggressive behavior towards the female, so that the pair had to be separated again very quickly. But in the spring of this year, the female was no longer bitten by the male. Although no mating could be observed, the female's neck showed characteristic bite marks, which indicate mating activity. The male attaches himself to the female by biting her neck during mating. At the beginning of July, the female became increasingly nervous and repeatedly tried to leave the water. In nature, the eggs of this highly aquatic species are laid on sandbanks along the rivers. The female immediately accepted the artificial nesting beach and buried 44 spherical eggs. This species can lay more than 100 eggs up to 3 times a year, but this is the first clutch from a young and still small female.

Sixty-six days later the first hatchling emerged; 7 more followed in the following days. The tiny juveniles began catching live fish after a few days. Now they are slightly larger and are also eating frozen fish.

The Indian narrow-headed soft-shelled turtle depends on clean, large rivers. Since it is still hunted today and its habitat is increasingly disappearing, it is highly endangered. Turtle Island plans to

breed many more young animals of this extraordinary species and ultimately to be able to bring young animals hatched in Austria back to their country of origin.

The first breeding success of this species occurred this August at the San Diego Zoo. The success at Turtle Island followed a few weeks later as the first breeding success in Europe and gives hope for the future of this species.



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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