

## CURRENT STATUS OF TORTOISESHELL TRADE IN SRI LANKA

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### Introduction

Tortoiseshells obtained from the hawksbill turtle have been ranked among the world's luxury goods for centuries. While all seven species of sea turtles are endangered today, hawksbills have been further threatened by the intensive shell trade. In Sri Lanka, under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance (FFPO, 1938 amended in 1972), it is an offence to capture, kill, injure or possess sea turtles, their eggs or other products. Since 1979 Sri Lanka is a member of the conservation treaty CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) which prohibits the import or export of sea turtles and their products. Until the mid 1990s, there had been a thriving and open market for tortoiseshell products in Sri Lanka (de Silva, 1996). In 1993 FFPO increased the punishment meted out to the offenders of the Ordinance. However, a survey of illegal tortoiseshell trade carried out in 1994 recorded 112 retailers openly selling tortoiseshell products in 6 towns (Richardson, 1997). A subsequent survey in 1996 recorded 83 shops selling tortoiseshells in 14 towns (Richardson, 1997). Killing of sea turtles for their shell has decreased gradually after the strict law enforcement and public awareness and

education programmes conducted by the government and non-government organizations which have been included as key components of the proposed Marine Turtle Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Sri Lanka (de Silva, 2005). Here we report the results of a survey carried out in major tourist cities and towns to assess the current status of tortoiseshell trade.

### Materials and Methods

Eleven major tourist cities and towns were selected based on information from the previous survey (Richardson, 1997). In each study site major tourist shops were identified and visited over a period of four months from September to December 2007. A verbal consent was sought from the participants after explaining the objectives of the study. Structured interviews were conducted with the sales associate/manager or the owner of the outlet in the vernacular (Sinhala or Tamil with a translator) using a questionnaire. Questions were asked to gather information about the age of the outlet, whether the retailers were aware that selling and/or possessing tortoiseshell products is illegal, how they learned about it, their current and past involvement in selling shell products etc. while an observation check list recorded the tortoiseshell

products if they had been displayed in the store.

### **Results and Discussion**

Of the 65 shops visited (Table 1), none of the retailers claimed that they currently sell any tortoiseshell products. One third of them (24 outlets) owned up that they had been involved in shell trade up until late 1990s. More than half of the shops (51 %; Table 1) visited were ten years or older and few items were seen on display in some of these outlets. When questioned about the items, retailers said that even though they still carry some of the previously stocked unsold items, they no longer buy new tortoiseshell products from suppliers. Three retailers from Tangalle and one from Kaluamodara claimed that they have been involved in selling tortoiseshells more than five years ago. One retailer from Tangalle said he had been punished for carrying the items but was reluctant to give further information. In the shops that were less than 10 years old (49 %), retailers had never been involved in shell trade. All of the respondents interviewed were exclusively aware that selling of tortoiseshell products is illegal and the sea turtles are protected animals. 14 % of the retailers said that the customers, mostly foreign tourists, still ask for tortoiseshell products. Most of them have learned about the Ordinance through the newspapers (51 %) and/or television (53 %). None of the respondents was aware or wanted to give information about the previous suppliers of tortoiseshell products.

The above information was based on the responses received during the interview from the retailers after informed consent. There may be shops that do not display shell products but still sell from hidden stocks. The two previous surveys were carried out by a team posing as tourists or tourist guides looking for suitable gifts for their clients, where they reported some shops carrying hidden stocks specifically in large cities (Richardson, 1997). However, it is doubtful if such survey would change the current conclusion drastically, given that the respondents' awareness about the legislations and increased punishments for offenders. Significant reduction in the shell trade seems that the effort of the government and non-government agencies to stop the shell trade has been successful to some extent. In addition to the prosecutions brought against retailers selling tortoise shell, Richardson (1997) suggests that decrease in shell trade could also be due to the publicity received in the national press. He also points out that, as the tourism industry has suffered due to the civil war in the country, retailers tend to believe that there is no longer a market for tortoiseshells in Sri Lanka. However, the increase in the tourist arrivals after the armed conflict was over may call for alertness in providing wide publicity to the punishments given for offences against turtles, educating the tourists and retailers about the law and organizing awareness campaigns with pleas not to buy tortoiseshell products in order to stamp out the shell trade completely.

**Table 1. Shops surveyed and information on respondents and outlets.**

City/Town	Number of shops	Respondent and outlet information		Percentage
Negambo	14	Respondent's	<18	8 %
Kandy	5	Age (years)	18-30	57%
Ahungalla	2		30 <	35%
Ambalangoda	1	Sex	Male	68%
Kaluamodara	3		Female	32%
Aluthgama	5	Interviewee's	Owner	51%
Bentota	4	status	Sales Associate	38%
Galle	10		Manager	11%
Tangalle	5	Age of the	< 2 yrs	11%
Hikkaduwa	11	shop(years)	2-10 yrs	38%
Kosgoda	5		10 – 35 yrs	46%
Total	65		35 <	5%

**Conclusion**

Even though tortoiseshell trade cannot be considered an ongoing and pervasive threat to hawksbill recovery and a major concern significantly affecting the conservation efforts in Sri Lanka, continued alertness is still needed. Despite the significant progress in reducing open market tortoiseshell trade in Sri Lanka, it is important to assess whether the clandestine trade still remains substantial and whether the items available are real or fake.

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**References**

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