

An initiative for propagation of *Aspideretes nigricans* (Trionychidae) Bostami Turtle in Bangladesh

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A grave in the top of the hill at Nasirabad in Chittagong, Bangladesh is known as the Mazar of Muslim saint Biejid Bostami. There is a pond near to mosque of Mazar at eastern side of the hill. The Bostami Turtle (Black softshell turtle) is present in this pond. The pond was dug in 1700 A.D. and has been re-dug and extended. Now the area of the pond is 0.58 hectares (length 95 meters and width 61 meters). Locally the Bostami Turtle is known as "Madari". People say that the Muslim saint Biejid Bostami himself brought the turtle to Chittagong.

At present 27 species of turtles and tortoises are found in Bangladesh. Among them five are marine species. The scientific name of this species is *Aspideretes nigricans*. Bostami turtle is endemic species of Bangladesh as known to turtle experts of the world. In 1875 Anderson first recorded the Black softshell turtle from two preserved specimens of the Indian Museum. These two specimens were collected from Chittagong Biejid Bostami Mazar pond in Bangladesh. After four decades in 1912 Annandale reported that once the Black softshell turtle found in a large area where the river Brahmaputra flows in to Myanmar. In 1914 Annandale and Sastri reported that the Bostami turtle could be found only at Muslim saint Biejid Bostami Mazar pond in Bangladesh. In the period of end of twentieth century the scientists had an idea that this turtle species was not found elsewhere in nature. As a result, the turtle was described as the only endemic aquatic species of Bangladesh, which was limited in Biejid Bostami Mazar. According to the research of Austrian zoologist Dr. Peter Pruchsag and Dr Richard Zimel in 2002, Black softshell turtle was recorded in eight different locations of the River Brahmaputra flow of Assam state, India such as Kamkajia and Nagshankar temple pond, Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Bishanath Ghat and Kaziranga National Park. When this research paper was published in a journal of Germany it stirred much interest among the herpetologists of the world. However, the turtle is only found in the Biejid Bostami Mazar in Bangladesh and included in the endangered species list of reptiles as Extinct in the Wild. (www.iucnredlist.org)

In 1986, a research work done by Professor Farid Ahasan and his team on Bostami turtles of Biejid Bostami Mazar pond. They reported 320 turtles in Biejid Bostami Mazar pond. Among the 320 turtles 54% were male, 36% were female and rest 10% were juvenile. The length was 39-78 cm, width was 33-71 cm and weight was 7-54 kg. Feeding of turtles depends on the visitors who come to Mazar as a holy place. Generally the turtles of this pond feed on bread, banana, lungs, flesh and *mori*

(puffed rice) offered by the visitors. Actually bread, banana, *mori* are not its natural diet because when they get flesh they avoided other food items. According to research it is seen that the visitors supply about 47 kg bread, 312 pieces of banana and 630 gm flesh (lung) daily for feeding of turtles.

Generally Bostami turtle lay eggs in the second week of February to third week of April around the pond and hill near the pond. A female adult lay 10-38 eggs at one time. The eggs are almost round and look like a white table tennis ball. The weight of eggs were 22-29 gm. In nature, it takes 93-108 days for hatching while in laboratory it takes 96-104 days. The length of the hatchling was 4.5-5.1 cm and weight was 14.3-17.9 gm. According to research information, the number of turtles in this pond is decreasing day by day and now the number of juveniles and hatchlings is very few. When the alarming information was broadcasted and published in mass media and newspapers of Bangladesh, an initiative was taken for the conservation of Bostami turtle by the District Commissioner, Chittagong and Mazar Authority with the financial and technical help of Dulahazara Safari Park, Cox's Bazar development project according to the order on Ministry of Environment and Forest, Bangladesh.

Dulahazara Safari Park project has already started many activities for conservation of Bostami turtle. There was a decision taken by D.C. Chittagong, Dulahazara Safari Park and Mazar authority to release some adult and juvenile turtles in Dulahazara Safari Park Lake and it was released in 2006.

The activities started for reproduction center of Biejid Bostami Mazar are as follows:

- Reconstruction of the reproduction center wall of west north side of the Mazar.
- Make a height of 1-1.5 feet sand bank in reproduction center.
- Give a upward net at the height of 4 feet in the total reproduction center to save the turtle's eggs from predators.
- The adult females that come to lay eggs in steers of pond and ground should be moved to the reproduction center by trolley.
- After laying of eggs, adult female again can be replaced from reproduction center back to pond.
- A rearing house constructed in which offspring will rear for a short period.
- When the length of offspring reaches 10-20 cm, they will be released to Mazar pond.

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