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India's First Satellite-Tagged Ganges Softshell Turtle Released at Kaziranga

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ENVIRONMENT**SCIENCE & TECH**

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WHY IN NEWS:

On **Endangered Species Day (May 15, 2026)**, the **Wildlife Institute of India (WII)** in collaboration with the Assam Forest Department released India's first **satellite-tagged Ganges Softshell Turtle** into the **Brahmaputra River** at Kaziranga National Park. The project, funded by the **National Geographic Society** and led by Dr. Abhijit Das (WII), will track the turtle's seasonal movements and identify critical habitats for conservation.

THE GANGES SOFTSHELL TURTLE – PROFILE

FEATURE	DETAIL
Scientific name	<i>Nilssonina gangetica</i>
Family	Trionychidae (softshell turtles)
Common names	Ganges soft-shelled turtle, Indian softshell turtle
Distribution	Ganges, Brahmaputra, Mahanadi, and Indus river systems; Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan
IUCN Red List status	Endangered (EN)
India – Wildlife Protection Act	Schedule I, Part II (highest protection)
CITES	Appendix I (commercial trade prohibited)
Primary threats	Riverine habitat loss; sand mining; fishing net bycatch; hunting for meat and eggs; dam construction; river pollution

Physical Characteristics

- Among the **largest freshwater turtles in Asia**; adults can reach **90-100 cm** carapace length and weigh **50+ kg**
- Distinctive features: soft, leathery carapace (no scutes); elongated snout; webbed feet

- **Highly aquatic**; rarely comes ashore except for nesting (females excavate sand nests on river banks)
- Can remain submerged for extended periods using **cloacal bursae** for underwater breathing

INDIA'S SOFTSHELL TURTLE DIVERSITY

India has **8 species of softshell turtles**; five are found in Kaziranga:

SPECIES	IUCN STATUS
<i>Nilssonia gangetica</i> (Ganges softshell)	Endangered
<i>Nilssonia hurum</i> (Indian peacock softshell)	Vulnerable
<i>Nilssonia leithii</i> (Leith's softshell / Indian giant softshell)	Vulnerable
<i>Chitra indica</i> (Indian narrow-headed softshell)	Endangered
<i>Lissemys punctata</i> (Indian flapshell)	Least Concern

THE SATELLITE TAGGING PROJECT

How It Works

A **satellite transmitter** (Platform Transmitter Terminal / PTT) is attached to the turtle's carapace using an epoxy harness. The device:

- Transmits location data via the **Argos satellite system** (NOAA/CLS partnership) when the turtle surfaces
- Records water temperature, dive depth, and time-at-surface
- Battery life: 6-12 months

What the Data Will Tell Researchers

- 1 **Seasonal movement patterns** – how far turtles move up/downstream
- 2 **Critical nesting sites** – where females come ashore (enabling targeted protection)
- 3 **Overwintering locations** – deep pools used during winter torpor
- 4 **Impact of dams and barrages** – whether structures block migration
- 5 **Interaction with fisheries** – identifying bycatch hotspots

KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK AND TIGER RESERVE – CONSERVATION CONTEXT

Kaziranga (Assam) is one of India’s most significant biodiversity hotspots:

FEATURE	DETAIL
Established	Wildlife Sanctuary 1905; National Park 1974; Tiger Reserve 2006
UNESCO World Heritage	1985
Area	~430 sq km (core) + ~1,307 sq km (buffer)
Location	Between Brahmaputra River (north) and Karbi Anglong hills (south)
1-horned rhino	Houses ~70% of world’s One-Horned Rhinoceros (<i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i>) population
Wild water buffalo	Largest population in the world
Royal Bengal Tiger	Highest tiger density in the world
Biodiversity	5 of India’s 8 softshell turtle species; 480+ bird species

ENDANGERED SPECIES DAY

Endangered Species Day is observed on the **third Friday of May** each year – in 2026, this falls on May 15.

- Established by the **Endangered Species Coalition** (USA) in 2006
- Celebrated in India and globally to raise awareness about species facing extinction
- 2026 theme focused on **freshwater biodiversity** – turtles, river dolphins, otters

INDIA’S FRESHWATER TURTLE CONSERVATION FRAMEWORK

Regulatory Protection

INSTRUMENT	COVERAGE
Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 – Schedule I	Highest level of protection; hunting, trade, possession prohibited
CITES Appendix I	International commercial trade banned
Environment Protection Act, 1986	River habitat protection
National Biodiversity Act, 2002	Access and benefit-sharing for biological resources

Conservation Programmes

- **Turtle Survival Alliance India Programme** – surveys and community engagement
- **NMCG (National Mission for Clean Ganga)** – Namami Gange includes river turtle nest protection at several ghats
- **WII (Wildlife Institute of India)** – autonomous institution under MoEFCC; Dehradun; India's premier wildlife research institution

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3 – Environment and Ecology

- Freshwater biodiversity conservation; IUCN Red List categories; CITES Appendix I/II
- Role of satellite tagging in wildlife research
- Kaziranga as a biodiversity hotspot; UNESCO World Heritage criteria
- Threats to riverine ecosystems: sand mining, dams, fishing bycatch

Keywords: Nilssonina gangetica, Ganges softshell turtle, Kaziranga, WII, National Geographic Society, Endangered Species Day, CITES Appendix I, Schedule I WPA, satellite telemetry, Brahmaputra, freshwater turtle conservation.

Autonomous institution under MoEFCC; headquarters Dehradun; established 1982; conducts research, training, and capacity building in wildlife management; runs TRAFFIC India and multiple species recovery programmes.

EX (Extinct) – EW (Extinct in Wild) – CR (Critically Endangered) – EN (Endangered) – VU (Vulnerable) – NT (Near Threatened) – LC (Least Concern). Ganges softshell = EN.

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species; 1973; Geneva; 183 member parties; Appendix I = most threatened species (trade banned); Appendix II = trade regulated; Appendix III = protection in specific countries.

Jointly operated by NOAA (USA), CNES (France), and CLS; uses Doppler-shift positioning; used globally for wildlife tracking, oceanography, and weather monitoring.

Under natural criteria (ix) and (x) – outstanding example of ecological processes; exceptional biodiversity including the one-horned rhino, wild water buffalo, and now documented as a global softshell turtle diversity hotspot.

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