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## **LU study: three species of HK wild freshwater turtle is disappearing Scholars and conservationists urge for urgent actions to combat rampant poaching**

According to a study conducted by **Lingnan University (LU) Science Unit**, three species of Hong Kong wild freshwater turtle are on the brink of disappearing. Today (23 May 2023), on “World Turtle Day”, the LU research team and conservation-focused NGOs urge the Hong Kong SAR Government to take action and stop the devastating poaching that’s threatening the survival of rare and globally significant turtle populations in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is the last stronghold for globally threatened freshwater turtle species, supporting breeding wild populations of the two Critically Endangered species (Golden Coin Turtle [*Cuora trifasciata*] and Big-headed Turtle [*Platysternon megacephalum*]), and one Endangered species (Beale’s Eyed Turtles [*Sacalia bealei*]). However, for the past 15 years, researchers from LU Science Unit have studied and monitored freshwater turtle populations in Hong Kong and have found the disappearance of these three species due to poaching.

They found that the Golden Coin Turtle, the most heavily trapped species for over three decades, has likely become functionally extinct because no young juveniles have been detected. Further, wild populations of the Big-headed Turtle and Beale’s Eyed Turtle have been extirpated or are no longer viable (less than two adults detected) in nearly 90% of sites. What remains are a few small, remnant populations. Sadly, poachers have been detected at all of these sites with the use of infrared cameras and over half of these remnant populations have exhibited drastic decline in the last five years.

**Prof Sung Yik-hei, Assistant Professor of the Science Unit**, estimates that there are only several hundred adult Big-headed Turtles, and less than 100 Beale’s Eyed Turtle adults left in the wild in Hong Kong. Given their low reproductive rate and long time to reach sexual maturity, freshwater turtle populations are unlikely to recover after overexploitation. If the

current poaching pressure continues, Hong Kong freshwater turtle populations will likely be extirpated in 3–5 years.

The critical status of the freshwater turtle populations in Hong Kong has attracted the attention of NGOs and conservationists. **Dr. Michael Lau, Founder and Executive Director of the Hong Kong Wetlands Conservation Association and a member of Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles Specialist Groups (TFTSG) of IUCN**, stated that “Although only few remnant freshwater turtle populations remain in Hong Kong, these small populations are probably among the most robust populations across Asia. Without these populations, these species would go extinct. As such, protection of the freshwater turtle population in Hong Kong is of global conservation importance.”

Earlier this month (May 2023), many NGOs, academics and legal experts wrote a letter to the Hong Kong Government to express their concerns about wildlife poaching. Sophie Le Clue, CEO of ADM Capital Foundation (an environmental foundation who signed the letter), said that “Urgent action is essential to strengthen investigation, enforcement and deterrent of wildlife poaching, otherwise, imminent extinction of freshwater turtles in Hong Kong is inevitable.” In the letter, three specific recommendations were made: (1) establish an operation protocol between the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) to facilitate routine and proactive involvement of the HKPF in the investigation and enforcement of poaching and illegal wildlife trade, similar to the protocol for illegal taking of incense trees; (2) AFCD should establish a special anti-poaching enforcement unit that undertakes regular, targeted night patrols; and (3) review and revise current shortcomings in relevant laws, including CAP.170 Wild Animals Protection Ordinance and CAP. 208 Country Parks Ordinance.

“Wild freshwater turtles have disappeared across most of mainland China, and the small populations that remain in Hong Kong represent a unique opportunity for conservation collaboration across the Greater Bay Area” said **Prof Jonathan Fong, Associate Professor of LU Science Unit**. For example, if the freshwater turtle populations in Hong Kong can be effectively protected, a proportion of individuals could be used to help restore turtle populations in streams throughout the region where they have disappeared. However, accomplishing this requires urgent action to strengthen enforcement against poaching in Hong Kong.

– END –

2023 年 5 月 23 日

## 嶺大研究指三種香港野生淡水龜瀕臨絕跡

### 學者敦促政府立即採取行動打擊猖獗捕獵行為

嶺南大學（嶺大）科學教研組一項調查發現，三種香港野生淡水龜瀕臨絕跡。今日（5月23日）是世界龜鯢日，嶺大的研究團隊與保育團體促請香港特別行政區政府採取行動，打擊猖獗的盜獵淡水龜活動。

香港是數種全球受威脅淡水龜物種的最後重要據點，包括兩種極危物種（金錢龜／學名：*Cuora trifasciata* 和大頭龜／學名：*Platysternon megacephalum*）和一種瀕危物種（眼斑水龜／學名：*Sacalia bealei*）。然而，在過去的15年的研究中，嶺大科學教研組的研究人員研究和監測香港的淡水龜種群，發現這三個物種因被非法捕獵而瀕臨絕跡。

團隊發現，金錢龜是最嚴重被捕捉的物種，在研究中從沒有發現過幼龜，很可能已經功能性滅絕。此外，在近九成的研究地點，大頭龜和眼斑水龜的野生種群已經消失或不具繁殖能力（被發現成體少於兩隻）。現在只剩零星的殘存種群，更可悲的是，團隊利用紅外線相機在所有地點均有發現到捕獵者的行蹤，調查發現一半以上的殘存種群在過去五年龜的數量出現了嚴重下降。

嶺大科學教研組助理教授宋亦希教授表示，估計現時香港野外的成年大頭龜只剩數百隻，而成年眼斑水龜則不足一百隻。鑑於它們的繁殖率低且需長時間達至性成熟，淡水龜在捕獵後難以恢復。如果目前的捕獵活動持續，香港的淡水龜種群可能會在三至五年內滅絕。

香港淡水龜的危急狀況引起了不同組織和環保人士的關注。香港濕地保育協會創辦人兼執行董事、世界自然保護聯盟陸龜及淡水龜專家組成員劉惠寧博士表示：「儘管香港只

剩下少數殘存淡水龜種群，但這些小種群可能是整個亞洲最健康的種群之一。沒有這些種群，這些物種將很大機會滅絕。因此，保護香港的淡水龜種群具有全球保育意義。」

本月初，不少環保組織、學者和法律專家聯署致函予香港特別行政區政府，表達他們對野生動物盜獵的憂慮。ADM Capital Foundation (其中一個聯署的組織) 行政總裁 Sophie Le Clue 女士表示：「政府必須盡快採取行動，加強對野生動物捕獵的調查、執法和預防工作，否則香港的淡水龜滅絕將不可避免。」在給予政府的書信中，團體提出了三項具體建議：(1) 香港警務處與漁農自然護理署建立合作行動協議，以促進香港警務處例行和積極參與調查和執法捕獵和非法野生動物貿易，類似於非法採伐土沉香樹的行動協議；(2) 漁護署應成立專門的反捕獵執法隊伍，定期進行有針對性的夜間巡邏；(3) 審視和修改相關法律的現行不足，包括第 170 章《野生動物保護條例》及第 208 章《郊野公園條例》。

嶺大科學教研組助理教授方健恩教授表示：「野生淡水龜在中國大陸大部分地區已經消失，而留在香港的少數種群為大灣區的跨區域保護合作提供了難得的機會。」他指出，如果香港的淡水龜種群能夠得到有效保護，則可以利用一部分個體來幫助恢復南中國已滅絕地區溪流中的龜種群。然而，實現這一目標，香港必需要盡快採取行動加強打擊捕獵的執法。