

Nesting Sites of the Nearly Extinct Nubian Flapshell Turtle

by Luca Luiselli and Gift Simon Demaya

The Nubian Flapshell Turtle (*Cyclanorbis elegans*) is a Critically Endangered large softshell turtle that historically occurred in large rivers of the Sahelo-Sudanese belt from northern Ghana to South Sudan. It is now restricted to a few remnant populations along the White Nile in South Sudan and northern Uganda. In South Sudan, its eggs are collected and the meat of adults is eaten locally or illegally sold in markets. Females nest between late July and mid-October in sandy river banks along smaller tributaries of the White Nile in areas with abundant vegetation. Several females appear to nest communally in the same sites and seem to return to the same nesting site annually. This unusual reproductive pattern for softshell turtles (more common in large hard-shelled riverine turtles) appears to be one of the reasons for the extirpation of this species from most of its range, as it may have facilitated harvest of adult females and eggs from known nesting sites.

From 2002–2022, TCF has funded 323 of 884 submitted proposals, for total disbursements of \$1.38 million; average awards were \$4,271, with projects conducted in 60 nations. TCF has provided four grants for work on Nubian Flapshell Turtle, including this most recent one, for a total of \$16,500.

With continued support from Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF), we have monitored the number of females coming to nest in two previously discovered nesting sites. These are the only known nesting sites of the Nubian Flapshell Turtle. In August 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, local informants reported that five females had nested at these two sites. Sadly, the females were killed and their meat was illegally sold to Chinese expats. The alleged perpetrators justified their actions as due to economic hardship and COVID-related unemployment. The following year, we returned and observed two females nesting at

one of the sites, but did not see any at the second site. We also found tracks of several nesting crawls, but could not locate any nests or eggs. We observed tracks in several locations throughout a 330-meter-long strip of river bank, suggesting that the nesting site may actually be larger than previously estimated.

We have launched an awareness campaign with the local community, which is now serving to minimize the risks to nesting females. This year, with additional support from Turtle Survival Alliance, we have been monitoring the beaches daily since mid-June. We are hopeful and confident that some females will return to these nesting beaches and that their eggs can be located and actively protected. The future and continued existence of this species hangs in the balance. 🐢



From left to right: John Sebit Benasio, Luca Luiselli, and Gift Simon Demaya lead the surveys and conservation efforts for Nubian Flapshell Turtle in South Sudan and Uganda.

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