

## Wildlife Conservation Society Launches Global Effort to Save Endangered Turtles

By *Anna Sanders*  
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Roti Island Snake turtles are currently being bred at the Bronx Zoo along with other turtle species as part of a global effort to save turtles. (Photo: Julie Larsen Maher/[Wildlife Conservation Society](#) <sup>[1]</sup>)

In the classic fable, the tortoise taught us that “slow and steady wins the race.” Unfortunately for many of the earth’s endangered tortoises and freshwater turtles, time is running out: Over half of the group’s approximately 330 species are threatened with extinction from habitat loss, illegal trade, and hunting. Unless swift action is taken, many species will go extinct in the next decade, a [2011 report](#) <sup>[2]</sup> by the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Turtle Conservation Coalition says. Taking their own advice to heart, the Wildlife Conservation Society [launched](#) <sup>[3]</sup> an international effort to save some of the world’s most endangered turtles this week, utilizing the organization’s zoos, aquarium, and global programs.

“We have an entire taxonomic group in danger more than any other group,” explains vice president of species conservation at the organization, Elizabeth Bennett. “You hear about the amphibian crisis, but the turtle crisis is far worse. We could lose a large proportion of a taxonomic group.”

The organization, which established the Bronx Zoo in 1899, will breed some threatened

species in its facilities (including the Bronx Zoo) before reintroducing them into the wild. They are still deciding which species to focus on, but the Roti Island snake-necked turtle, the golden box turtle, and the Vietnamese pond turtle are already being bred in the zoo.

“We’ve got the history on this, both working with turtles in the field, in our zoos,” says Bennett. “We have a long history saving species from the brink of extinction and we have the resources to do it.”

The group will also establish an off-exhibit, captive breeding program in the zoo for several imperiled species native to New York State, including the spotted turtle, Eastern box turtle, and wood turtle. Partnerships with other groups like the Turtle Survival Alliance and the Turtle Conservancy — where Bronx Zoo director Jim Breheny serves on the [board of directors](#) <sup>[5]</sup> — were developed to create “assurance colonies” for other turtle species.



Unlike captive breeding programs in zoos, assurance colonies are larger captive groups of animals maintained for their diversity, explains Rick Hudson, president of the Turtle Survival Alliance.

“Zoo populations are generally smaller and the breeding is very controlled,” Hudson says. “In an assurance colony, you may have larger numbers in your colony that are randomly breeding and therefore capable for preserving more genetic diversity.”

Imperiled turtle species native to New York State like the Eastern box turtles above will also be bred in the Bronx Zoo. (Photo: [National Park Service](#) <sup>[4]</sup>)

The Turtle Survival Alliance and the Wildlife Conservation Society have been partnered for five years. Because of the organizations’ different expertise, Hudson says, it’s been going well.

“Our expertise is in captive management, the Wildlife Conservation Society focuses on field work. Captive work is not something that they’ve embraced historically but that’s starting to change,” Hudson adds.

The Wildlife Conservation Society will also work with governments in Cambodia, China, Columbia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The society has already begun this international threat mitigation with four critically endangered species, including the Burmese starred tortoise, the Burmese roofed turtle, the Southern River terrapin, and the Central American river turtle. Bennett believes hatchlings bred in these programs could be released back into the wild in five years.

In addition to population supplementation, the mitigation programs will also focus on reducing the number of creatures threatened from the commercial turtle trade and fishing industry.

“The core thing that’s driving a lot of these species to the brink of extinction is trade,” Bennett says. “Rarer and



The Wildlife Conservation Society has already begun working to protect species like the Burmese starred tortoise above. (Photo: Yuki315/[CC-by-3.0](#) <sup>[6]</sup>)

prettier” turtles will be exchanged as pets, while turtle meat is sold by the ton every day in some of the meat markets in southern China. Some turtles are even used in traditional Asian medicine, but Bennett doesn’t support that use, either.

“Not if it’s going to drive species to extinction, no,” she says. “There are alternatives that might be more sustainable.”

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