

Down to last 4, hope breeds for Yangtze turtles

For the endangered Yangtze turtle, it's all down to sex between a centenarian male and an octogenarian female. If they breed, a species will be saved.

Conservationists are desperately hoping they will. For, there are just four Yangtze giant softshell turtles left - making it the world's most critically endangered marine animal.

A still reproductive, more than 80-year-old, female, living in China's Changsha Zoo, has been flown to the only known male in China, aged over 100 years and living more than 900 km away at the Suzhou Zoo.

Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) provided funding for the project, as well as animal reproduction and technical expertise, while the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) provided veterinary and logistical support along with wildlife partners in China.

On May 5, turtle biologists, veterinarians and zoo staff convened at Changsha Zoo to collect and transport the female to Suzhou Zoo where she joined her new mate to potentially save their entire species.

The move was coordinated to coincide with the female's reproductive cycle.

"This is a story of hope for a species truly on the brink," said Colin Poole, WCS director. "Now that the turtles are together, we are optimistic that they will successfully breed."

"I hate to call this a desperation move, but it really was. With only one female known worldwide, and given that we have lost three captive specimens over the past two years, what choice did we have?"

"The risks related to moving her were certainly there, but doing nothing was much riskier," said Rick Hudson of TSA.

The turtle has been listed at the top of the World Conservation Union's Red List. Its status in the wild has long been recognised as grim, but extinction risk now is believed higher than ever.

Much of its demise has been attributed to pollution, over-harvesting for Asian food markets and habitat alteration. Biologists saw no other alternative but to save the species by any means necessary.

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