

The Chinese Softshell Turtle Established in the Philippines?

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The Chinese softshell, *Pelodiscus sinensis* (Wiegmann, 1834) (*sensu lato*), is one of the most widely distributed species of trionychid turtle. Its natural range includes Russia between the Ussuri and Amur River drainages, extreme southeastern Siberia, adjacent Korea, and China from Heilongjiang Province to Taiwan and Hainan Dao. It is apparently absent from Xizang (= Tibet), Qinghai, Xinjiang and Ningxia autonomous regions (Zhou and Zhou, 1992), and northern Vietnam (Iverson 1992; Ernst, Altenburg and Barbour, 2000). It has been introduced to the Hawaiian Islands, Guam, one of the Bonin Islands and Timor (McKeown and Webb, 1987; Ernst, Altenburg and Barbour, 2000). The Japanese population as a whole appears to be of mixed origin (Ota and Sato, 1997).

Pelodiscus sinensis is farmed extensively in China (Lau and Shi, 2000), Taiwan (Chen *et al.*, 2000), Thailand (van Dijk and Palasuwan, 2000), and possibly Vietnam (Hendrie, 2000). Rearing-farms that raise hatchlings imported from these countries exist in at least Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak and Sumatra. This may represent a potential invasive species problem since "some farmed softshell turtles escape and may establish feral populations" (van Dijk *et al.*, 2000).

The earliest record of *P. sinensis* in the Philippines by Siebenrock (1909) and de Rooij (1915) date back to Casto de Elera (1895) (Taylor, 1920). This was based on a single specimen collected at the Batanes Islands, and then deposited in the University of Santo Tomás Museum. This specimen is no longer in existence. Das (1996) observed that Casto de Elera listed many turtle species from the Philippines that were "totally undocumented", and "far out of their known geographical ranges".

We wish to report *P. sinensis* from the Philippines on the account of a live specimen housed at the Museum of Natural History, University of the Philippines at Los Banos, Los Banos, Laguna, Luzon Island (Figure 1). The specimen was collected in Lake Bunot, San Pablo, Laguna, Luzon. The turtle is a young male with an approximate carapace length

of 15 cm (no measurements were taken). The leathery carapacial margin of this individual was heavily mutilated, most probably by conspecifics.

According to a market survey conducted by Emerson Sy, some farmers in Mindoro buy and raise hatchlings of this alien species, and sell them to a retailer at Arranque Market in Manila after they have reached a marketable size (Figure 2). Wholesale prices for *P. sinensis* average PhP 450/kg (\$8US/kg) and retail PhP 600/kg (\$11US/kg). We believe that our specimen had accidentally escaped from a keeping or rearing facility, and has not been purportedly released to gain merit, a practice common in Buddhist countries (Smith, 1931; Farkas, 1999; and van Dijk and Palasuwan, 2000). As such, it does not substantiate the natural occurrence of *P. sinensis* in the Philippines. Nevertheless, the existence of established feral populations at several locations (e.g. Rizal, Bulacan, Laguna and Nueva Ecija) and Mindoro is very likely.

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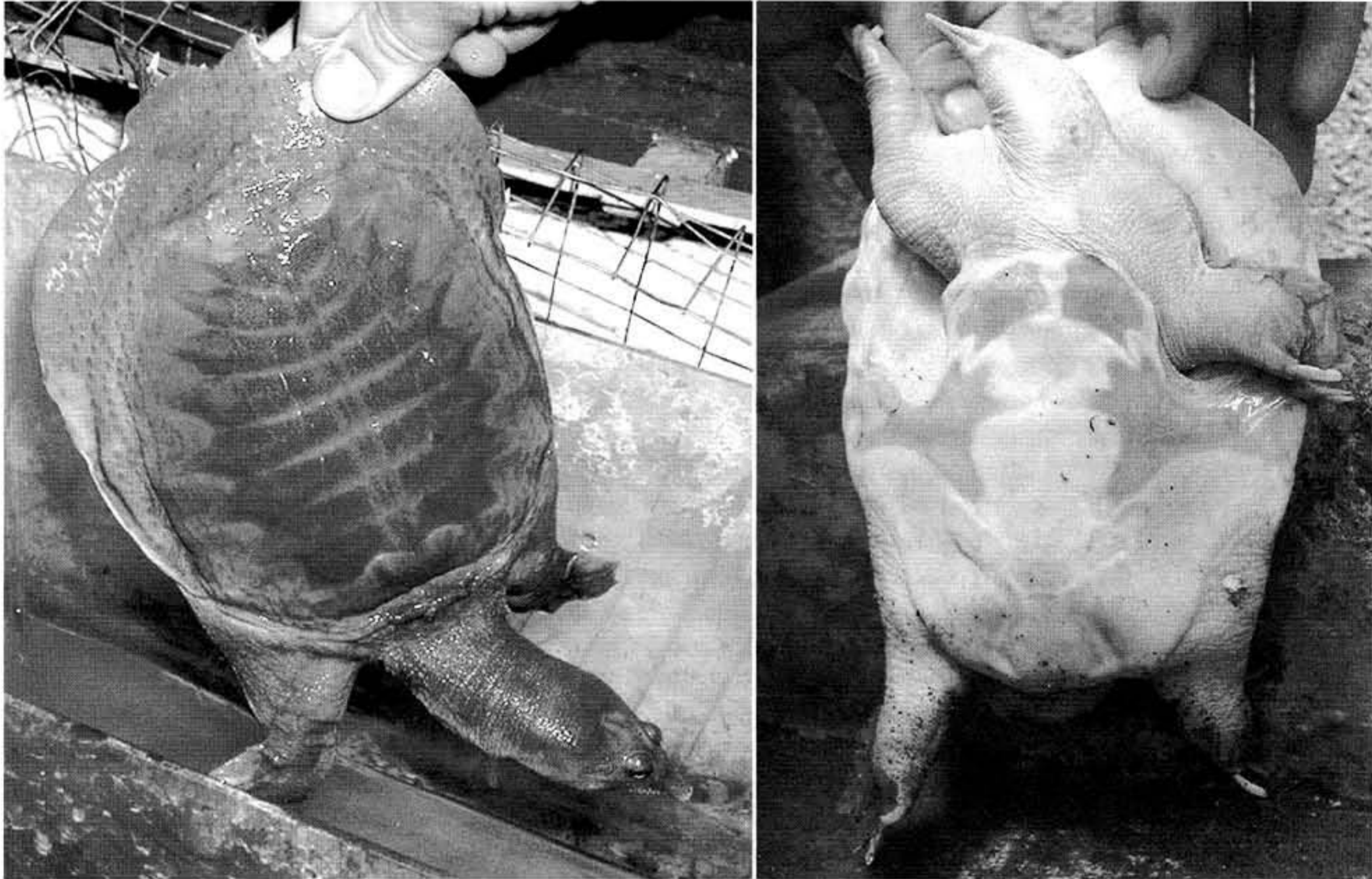


Figure 1. *Pelodiscus sinensis* caught in Bunot Lake. Photo by Emerson Sy.



Figure 2. Chinese softshell turtles being transported from rural Mindoro to Manila. Photo by Emerson Sy.

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