

# Why Care for the Wild International wants Tesco to stop selling live turtles and frogs in its Chinese stores



## 1. Introduction

China's hunger for turtle meat has sparked an acute extinction crisis. By selling freshwater turtles for food in their Chinese outlets, western supermarket chains, including Tesco act as accessories to the escalating conservation demise of these species.

Care for the Wild International has been campaigning to dissuade Tesco from selling live frogs and turtles for food in its Chinese outlets since June 2006. These animals are either butchered in store or sold alive to be slaughtered at home.

## 2. Animal Welfare Concerns

Until last week, Tesco relied on decapitating turtles as a slaughter method. However, veterinary and scientific guidelines explicitly state that decapitation is inhumane and is not recommended. Because of their slow metabolism, which uses up oxygen very slowly, turtles and other reptiles can remain conscious for an hour following decapitation and will experience extreme pain during this period.

After assessing information provided by Care for the Wild International and carrying out its own research, Tesco introduced changes to address some of the animal welfare problems associated with selling live turtles.

- Tesco will no longer sell hardshell turtles, because of humane killing concerns related to access to the animals' head.
- Tesco has decided to only sell one species, the Chinese softshell turtle, *Pelodiscus sinensis*.
- Tesco has replaced decapitation as a slaughter method with decapitation followed by crushing of the skull, which significantly reduces the animals' time to death.

### **This is encouraging, but doesn't go far enough.**

- Tesco has no control over the behaviour of customers who wish to buy live turtles for home slaughter. Common methods include dismembering, eviscerating or boiling the animals alive.
- Frogs sold alive are commonly skinned before being killed. There is no question that this is an utterly unacceptable slaughter method, which can not be considered humane under any circumstances.
- Conditions on turtle farms and during transport are poor and animals are over-crowded, which affects their welfare. In-store display for these sub-tropical to temperate species too is inappropriate (e.g., on ice or in nets), raising further significant concerns.

## 3. Conservation Concerns

China's booming economy and one billion-plus population fuels the demise of turtle species across Asia and beyond. Two fifths (41%) of the world's tortoises and freshwater turtles and three quarters of Asian species are already threatened with extinction as a result of human consumption. But despite legislation restricting trade in many turtle species, enforcement is weak, and many internationally and nationally protected species still find their way onto Chinese plates. Up to 20 million turtles a year are consumed in China, and in 2000 alone, 25 tons were imported from Sumatra each week.

Despite legislation restricting trade in many turtle species, enforcement is weak, and many internationally and nationally protected species still find their way onto Chinese plates. Any action that endorses or participates in this devastating trade pushes wild turtles one step closer to extinction. No western supermarket should have a hand in the extermination of these imperilled animals.

Tesco argues that turtles sold in its stores are farmed, but this does not mean there is no impact on wild populations. Recently published research by Dr. Shi Haito and colleagues confirmed that turtle farming represents a major threat to the survival of wild turtles.

Initial optimism about turtle farming amongst conservation experts has given way to disappointment, because of a growing list of wide-ranging problems:

- Selling softshell turtles for food supports a destructive market that is fuelling a global extinction crisis.
- Because consumers believe that wild-caught individuals possess better potent tonic qualities, wild turtles continue to be exploited.
- Successive generations of farm-raised turtles show a marked decrease in reproductive capability. Farms therefore rely on supplementing existing stocks with wild-caught individuals. Wild turtles are also caught to establish new breeding facilities.
- Turtle species on farms are hybridised and escape into the wild, and high levels of parasites and water-borne pollutants are discharged into the environment. Turtle farms therefore also endanger the health and viability of local wildlife.

Darrell Senneke, one of the world's leading authorities on tortoises and turtles and Director of the World Chelonian Trust told CWI: *"When an adult turtle is removed from the wild, it is not just that turtle that is being removed, but also the reproductive potential of that animal over a breeding life that may exceed 50 years. As a result, removal of even a few adults from a population can result in the decline and eventual loss of the entire population."*

The softshell turtle *Pelodiscus sinensis* is now the only species Tesco continues to sell. *Pelodiscus sinensis* is listed as 'Vulnerable' in the Red List of Endangered Species, as a result of harvesting for food. This means that *Pelodiscus sinensis* faces a high risk of extinction in the wild in the medium-term. Tesco should therefore cease all live turtle sales in its Chinese stores, including *Pelodiscus sinensis*.

#### 4. Human Health Concerns

Turtles are also likely to carry salmonella, and for this reason alone, Tesco and others should think twice about the selling turtles for food.

#### 5. Conclusion

Tesco's Corporate Responsibility Policy states that the company is *"committed to conducting business in an ethical and socially responsible manner"*, and that Tesco uses *"up-to-date knowledge of research, ethics, scientific facts and legislation to ensure this happens"*.

Turtle farming does not eliminate hunting pressures on wild populations, and no British supermarket should be a party to this drive towards extinction.

Care for the Wild International is committed to continuing its dialogue with Tesco in the hope that the company will be convinced by scientific facts. This would set a glowing example for other retailers operating in China and send an important and timely conservation message.