

CONSERVATION FACT SHEET



Hicatee Conservation Initiative

The Central American River Turtle, or “Hicatee”, is a critically endangered species of aquatic turtle that used to range through most of the rivers and lagoons in the Yucatan peninsula area of Mexico, Belize and Guatemala. It has been almost completely extirpated from its former range in Mexico and Guatemala due to commercial overharvesting. The species last stronghold is some of the remote lagoons and rivers of Belize. Little is known about this turtle’s behavior, nesting habits or population status in these remote areas of Belize. In order to properly protect this turtle from extinction, we need to find out what this species needs to survive, help make informed management decisions to preserve it and form captive assurance colonies to ensure its survival if the wild populations are not able to be saved.

If we can gain protection for the last few populations, begin learning how to breed them in captivity, learn what they require in the wild to survive, and curtail commercial harvesting, we can hopefully reverse their sharp population decline. These turtles have been celebrated as a part of the culture in these regions since the times of the Mayan. It is also a unique species and the only member of its genus to still exist. We cannot even fully appreciate or know the role this turtle may play in the environment and what we may be potentially losing until we can study this elusive and endangered species.

Zoo Miami staff has begun surveys in the rivers and lagoons of Northern Belize to look for these critically endangered turtles. Despite flooded conditions, dark pigmented waters, plentiful crocodiles and large expanses of habitat, Zoo Miami staff and our partners were able to affix radiotransmitters to several turtles of various ages and sexes to begin to learn more about this species and its behaviors. Further surveys, developing better trapping techniques, and continued monitoring of the turtles already with transmitters attached will still be needed in the near future. When we gain a better understanding of this species, this knowledge can be passed on to policymakers in Belize to help shape land and natural resource management to ensure the survival of this iconic animal. A man-made pond near the study area is being assessed as a possible site to create an assurance colony that may serve as test site to learn how to maintain a population in captivity.