

## Eating Turtles

By Russ Case

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Turtles for sale in Asian food markets are often kept in deplorable conditions. Tropical fish are extremely popular in China, and being an editor on Aquarium Fish International, Freshwater and Marine Aquarium (FAMA) and other fish magazines, I was instructed in 2007 to embark upon a trip to Beijing that October. The trip's primary purpose was to attend CIPS (the China International Pet Show), but while in Beijing I would also take the opportunity to visit fish-related businesses, such as importers/exporters and fish retailers. Luckily, I was also able to find some time to visit some of the country's world-famous landmarks, such as the Great Wall, Forbidden City, Summer Palace and other historical sites. It was a fascinating trip and one that I'll never forget.

One night I was perusing a thick, book-like menu at a classy Beijing restaurant, the kind with white linen tablecloths. As was common, the menu featured photos of the different dishes. I was looking at page after page of tasty items, when, lo and behold, I came upon a clear color photo of a large red-eared slider. The turtle was whole, shell and all, and it looked just like my pet Helmut, except it was sitting on a platter in a puddle of broth nestled among what looked like Chinese vegetables.

Over the years I have learned that the Chinese have no qualms about eating animals, such as red-eared sliders (and other turtles, such as softshells and snapping turtles), that Americans don't consider standard fare. For instance, also in Beijing is the Night Market, which has achieved some degree of notoriety as being a place where one could taste a large assortment of food items that would make many people gasp. These include insects of various types, seahorses, scorpions, starfish, baby birds and other animals, many served on thin wooden skewers. I drove by the Night Market – I wanted to take photos there -- but it was closed. I'm not sure I would have tried any of these exotic dishes, but I will admit that for a second I considered ordering the red-eared slider in that restaurant.

The ethical question in regard to the eating of turtles is a sticky one. Red ears are not an endangered species, and many are bred in captivity and shipped to Asia specifically for dining purposes. The revenue that results can help U.S. businesses. However, many wild turtles are also shipped there to be eaten, too, and many people, including myself, believe that this is an important factor in regard to imperiling the world's turtle populations. Worse yet, the proclivity for turtle eating in Asia does not end with red-eared sliders. Endangered species are also eaten.

Because of this, in my case, when confronted with the red-eared slider on the restaurant menu, rather than differentiate between common or rare turtles and whether I thought it was acceptable to eat one but not the other, I decided not to personally condone the eating of any turtles. I ordered something else instead.

It would be great if people could be told, "Hey, please stop eating these turtles, there are hardly any left" and be taken seriously. But getting people to stop who have been eating these animals for generations is no easy feat. Educational programs have been initiated, enlisting locals to help buck tradition by raising and protecting endangered turtles rather than eating them. Some headway has been made in some areas, but there's still a lot of work to do, and rare turtles can still be found as ingredients in some Asian markets. This is sad and unfortunate.

I recently learned about another Asian "delicacy" involving a type of reptile, which I will discuss in tomorrow's blog. This one is a doozy, and guaranteed to make you wonder, "Who the heck thought of this?"

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