

Splendour in the Stream

I will never forget the day I first laid eyes on a Golden Coin Turtle in the wild. I was out hiking with my friend in the mountains near my home in Hong Kong when we came across a stream cutting through the forest. As I stepped carefully across the rocks, something caught my eye – a splash of vibrant colour in the dappled sunlight. There, floating serenely in the shallows, was the most captivating creature I had ever seen.

Its head was a brilliant sunny yellow, with striking black, tan and yellow patterns that seemed to glow against the dark rocks below. Its shell was a rich reddish-brown, decorated with three prominent black stripes running the length of its carapace. As the turtle slowly swam across the stream, its stripes shimmered and its patterned shell seemed to shift before my eyes. I was utterly transfixed.

"That's a Golden Coin Turtle!" my friend exclaimed. "I've always wanted to see one in the wild. They're getting so rare these days."

I nodded in agreement. As the turtle crawled up onto a large mossy rock to bask in the sun, I took one last long look at its shell before it slid fully into the water and disappeared downstream. I felt incredibly lucky to have witnessed this fleeting glimpse of one of nature's most majestic creatures. But I was also filled with a deep sense of sorrow and urgency – how much longer would these iconic turtles continue to grace my local wild areas before they vanish forever?

The Story of the Golden Coin Turtle

Scientifically named *Cuora trifasciata*, the Golden Coin Turtle is a semi-aquatic species native to southern China, including Hong Kong. Its rounded carapace can grow to around 12 inches in length and is characterised by three distinctive dark stripes running down its central keel (Smithsonian’s National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute).

Despite their small stature, Golden Coin Turtles play a vastly important role in the ecosystems they inhabit. As primarily scavengers, they cycle nutrients by consuming dead plant and animal matter from the bottoms of streams, effectively acting as janitors to remove sources of harmful bacteria. Their semi-aquatic lifestyle also allows them to transfer nutrients, bacteria, and seeds between terrestrial and freshwater habitats as they travel between the two. By dispersing these vital components of ecological restoration through their droppings, Golden Coin Turtles help new plants grow and whole ecosystems thrive (Turtle Guardians). In this way, the Golden Coin Turtle is instrumental in maintaining biodiversity wherever its range extends.

Through my research, I also discovered this species has long held cultural significance for local communities. In Chinese folklore, the turtle is a symbol of longevity and good fortune (Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden) – attributes applied to this particular species due to its crimson and gold coloration resembling gold coins. However, while they may have prospered as mythical icons, their numbers in reality are now plummeting toward extinction.

Culturally Esteemed but Critically Endangered

Sadly, what was once a common sight throughout much of southern China has significantly declined, with the International Union for Conservation of Nature classifying the Golden Coin Turtle as Critically Endangered (Turtle Survival Alliance).

Though their vibrant shells and faces may catch the human eye, the Golden Coin Turtle's greatest threat is humankind. Rampant exploitation and poaching has driven wild populations to the brink of local extirpation throughout much of their historical range (Green Power). Tragically, the qualities that rendered them objects of superstition and commerce have paradoxically precipitated sharp declines. Heavy commercial demand exists for the live turtle trade, where some perceive them as valuable status symbols or believe certain body parts possess medicinal properties (WildCreaturesHongKong). While captive breeding now supplies much of the marketplace demand, relentless poaching persists to supply remaining outlets that pay top dollar for genuinely wild specimens.

Concurrently, as one of China’s most rapidly developing cities, Hong Kong has experienced significant losses of natural habitat due to expansion of infrastructure and urbanisation. With a human population exceeding 7.4 million, land conversion for housing, transportation, industry and recreation exerts immense pressure on local wildlife. Loss and degradation of the Golden Coin Turtle’s natural habitat is clearly a contributing factor behind their local vulnerability. Streamside forests, where they lay eggs and take refuge, have been eradicated to make way for sprawling developments across the region.

The Battle for Conservation

Thankfully, some dedicated scientists and organisations still stand ready to ensure the Golden Coin Turtle’s survival.

Locally, Lingnan University Hong Kong herpetologist Dr. Jonathan Fong has initiated trailblazing research applying environmental DNA techniques to track the species' remnant free-living groups. By identifying traces of genetic material sloughed from scales and faeces left in streams, his non-invasive methods may pinpoint currently inhabited areas most urgently requiring habitat protection. (Lingnan University Hong Kong)

Meanwhile, the Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden (KFBG) takes a hands-on approach through ongoing headstarting and habitat restoration efforts. A key player in Hong Kong turtle stewardship for over two decades, KFBG has rescued many trafficked or injured animals from the wildlife trade, rearing them in specially designed enclosures until of size to survive predation risks on release. Their team additionally works with local villages to curtail poaching activity through alternative livelihood programs and environmental education. Revegetating degraded streamside corridors helps reconnect disjointed turtle territories while community outreach fosters local custodianship.

With wild turtle numbers hovering at such a low ebb, renewed collaboration across all sectors is needed most urgently. While scientific investigation and protective measures form the foundation, broader citizen involvement will prove pivotal to realise recovery goals. Together, by amplifying awareness on social media, avoiding purchase of any wild-sourced

products no matter how innocuous they seem, and donating where able to bolster ongoing conservation efforts, general citizens hold the key to influencing both individual behaviour and policy changes. Elevating the normally overlooked plight of the Golden Coin Turtle just may stir hearts and minds to concerted action.

Rekindling Hope

On that memorable day up in the mountains, I never could have imagined the wealth of significance this chance encounter would impart. What started as a glimpse of a tropical rainbow swimming past grey stones took on far deeper meaning when I learned of the endangered circumstances behind the Golden Coin Turtle. Through my subsequent research, an appreciation blossomed for their integral roles as ecological engineers, mythical mascots, and symbols of perseverance against towering threats. The vision of that singular turtle has never left me – it remains seared into my memory as a totem of wild nature's struggle against humanity's voracious advance.

Now, I find myself compelled to spread their story far and wide, broadcasting an urgent SOS in hopes of motivating wider support. For I believe with every fibre that if we band together to amplify our collective voice on their behalf, there remains hope of saving these icons from vanishing irretrievably into history. Local governments must mandate long-term habitat protection over streams grazing reserves and parklands, while enforcing measures suppressing illegal poaching and wildlife trade. Yet individual involvement matters too – each person choosing to educate others, avoid damaging consumption, or donate carries

impact. By supporting scientists’ research and existing conservation efforts, the flicker within Hong Kong’s streams just might be fanned back into a flame.

On the international stage, World Turtle Day each May 23rd offers a prime chance to stage awareness-raising campaigns celebrating the Golden Coin Turtle's incredible heritage. Filmmakers could lend support by documenting conservation success stories and struggles to further engage civilian advocates. With care, commitment and cooperation across all sectors, I am convinced this small species' big footprint on Hong Kong's natural and cultural identity can continue for generations amongst the rocks and ride the river's currents. Their survival relies on an outpouring of collaborative goodwill and guardianship – traits which together, just may grant these charismatic creatures a renewal and route to recovery. With a hand extended in aid, even the most endangered lives can find way back from the brink.

One Last Note

During what could well prove the Golden Coin Turtle's moment of greatest peril, I asked my fellow friends and family to envision a revitalised future where their calls ring out freely across Hong Kong. A future where schoolchildren wander streams not just hoping to catch a glimpse of nature's rainbow, but expecting to find it thriving without constraints. Where elders proudly pass cultural connections to descendants, not faded memories of what once was. With science informing protection and citizens empowering change, Hong Kong stands poised to redeem its role as the turtle's last stronghold. There could yet dawn brighter days for the glimmers of gold still flickering, if each of us lends our voice to their cry. I ask you to raise your voice with me – for our natural and cultural heritage, for wild places left yet

unspoiled, but most of all for the Golden Coin Turtle's right to persist on its native shores as it has for eras past. The time to act on their behalf is now.

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