

Population estimation of the Euphrates softshell turtle *Rafetus Euphraticus* in the Central Marshes (UNESCO site)

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Received 12/03/2023, Revised 13/04/2023, Accepted 15/04/2023, Published Online First 20/10/2023



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Abstract

The Euphrates softshell turtle *Rafetus euphraticus* was classified as Endangered species on the IUCN Red List and is thought to have undergone large, recent population declines. Species information in Iraq is limited to a few rapid surveys with little detailed information on breeding and distribution. The study aimed to estimate the population of *R. euphraticus* in the Central Marshes using simple extrapolation of the count. Quadrature methodology 5 km² size each was used to record the distribution of Euphrates softshell turtles within the study site and ten surveys were carried out from October 2021 to September 2022 except for the hibernation season (December, January and February). Turtles were recorded inside the water by setting nets in certain areas in the Central Marshes. Simple extrapolation of our counts to the entire Central Marshes suggested a maximum population size of 2526.55 individuals/ total area (219,700 ha). The Central Marshes is an important site for *R. euphraticus* as a total of 46 individuals were recorded.

Keywords: Central Marshes, Euphrates softshell turtle, Estimate the population, population, *Rafetus euphraticus*.

Introduction



Figure 1. The olive-green leathery skin that covers the carapace distinguishes the species.

Rafetus euphraticus (Daudin, 1801) known as the Euphrates softshell turtle is a species of the Trionychidae family Fig. 1, is an enigmatic and

highly aquatic trionychid distributed in Euphrates and Tigris rivers and their tributaries in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran ¹⁻³. The Euphrates softshell turtle *R.*

euphraticus is listed on the IUCN Red as Endangered species and is thought to have undergone a large, recent population decline in Iraq⁴. Although Iraq is expected to hold the biggest number of appropriate places for the Euphrates softshell turtle because it has suitable habitats for living and thriving⁵, there is a gap in information inside Iraq on this species⁶. The first published observations in Iraq (after anecdotal records in the 1960s) were in 1992 from the Euphrates River⁷. The species was subsequently recorded in Iraq from 2005 onwards during KBA (Key Biodiversity Area) surveys in nineteen sites all over Iraq; Two in Kurdistan area and Mosel⁶; eight in the central portion of Iraq and nine in the south⁵.

However, these surveys were rapid and more intensive surveys at finer spatial scales are needed to obtain a more accurate understanding of the species, distribution and conservation status⁸. The Central Marsh in southern Iraq is the focus of our research because it's been recognized as a potential stronghold for the species because of its ecological suitability⁵. As a result of the Tigris-Euphrates river complex, the Central Marsh is one of the three main wetlands in Iraq. The Central Marsh formerly covered around 300,000 hectares but was almost totally drained following the 1991 uprisings in Iraq and has since been reflooded in 2003 – 2004⁹. While the Central Marsh is Iraq's first national park officially

recognized as Mesopotamian National Park in July 2013¹⁰. The biggest dangers to the turtle's existence, according to studies from Iran and Turkey, are habitat alteration, water pollution, and persecution by fishermen. This may also be true in the Central Marshes^{11,4}. Also, because thorough studies have not yet been conducted in the region, it is unknown whether the softshell turtle confronts comparable concerns in the Central Marshes. The ecology of the turtle's reproduction and conservation in the Central Marshes is also little understood. For example, the research site is expected to see a rise in human activity due to the adjacent Chibayish city's growing population, while animals might suffer due to the Euphrates River's water shortage. Knowing how the turtle is distributed with respect to risks and if its nesting grounds are exposed to such threats might aid in the conservation of the species and the development of a population that is abler to withstand such challenges in the future⁸.

The Central Marshes in southern Iraq seem to be ecologically and climatically important for *R. euphraticus*; yet is little known about its population. Therefore, this study was conducted to add further knowledge to the biodiversity of the southern Iraqi marshes in a special case. This study aimed to Estimate the population of *R. euphraticus* in the Central Marshes using simple extrapolation of count.

Materials and Methods

The study area:

Central Marsh is one of the most important wetlands/ecosystems in the south of Iraq. The Central Marshes is an Important Birds Area (IBA), Key Biodiversity Area (KBA), and the first national park in Iraq¹². is a vast complex of permanent freshwater wetlands, semi-desert arid lands, and scrublands of the Central Marshes encompasses the geographical zone (31°11'N 46°59'E) that extends between Thi-Qar (Nassiriyah) and Mayssan (Emara) provinces¹³. The total area size of the Central Marshes is 219,700 ha (2197km²)¹⁴. The surveying plot's 4000 ha (40 km²) research area is located inside the Central Marshes. With an elevation of fewer than 6 meters, the Central Marshes are located in the Tigris-Euphrates Alluvial Salt Marsh Ecoregion. The

Tigris and Euphrates rivers provide water for Central Marshes, and these rivers' tributaries create huge wetlands with open freshwater lakes that are mostly covered with *Typha* species and common reed *P. australis* vegetation. One of the biggest marshes in the province of Thi-Qar is called Al-Chibayish (Central Marshes), and it is located south of the Tigris River which continues to pass through the Mayssan governorate. The Al-Bitera, Al-Majer Al-Kabeer Rivers and Al-Areedh, these branches are located on the right side of Tigris River. Euphrates River is situated between Sook Al-Sheyukh and Al-Qurna marshes on the southern side of the Central Marshes. During flood seasons, the Central Marshes' wet area is around 3000 km². The Central Marshes are connected to the Euphrates River by 12 outlets

Since this point is located in the west of the Central Marshes, this area is affected by water quality coming from Euphrates rivers. The water level is 130 cm and some portions of this area reach more than 400 cm. This site is located at a longitude of 47° 2'48.79"E and latitude of 31° 2'6.03"N.

Euphrates softshell turtle sampling:

Netting:

This technique (below) is recommended for sampling aquatic reptiles. It can provide an accurate indicator of the presence or absence of species at the most fundamental level and can contribute to estimations of relative abundance and absolute density¹⁶. The Euphrates softshell turtles (*Rafetus euphraticus*) were captured from the Central Marshes by a 200 x 2m seine net of mesh size 10 cm² and a fishing net with the same size¹⁶. Capturing samples was conducted for 2 to 3 days from each month from October 14, 2021, to September 17, 2022, except for the hibernation season (December, and January, and February). For all studied sites, the net was installed at about 5 A.M and collecting the net at approximately 5 P.M. Fishing nets were used instead of submerged traps because this equipment it's not available and the fishing nets provide good efficiency in our survey. In addition, recorded some observations of turtles during the study but the distance or angle of observation was not recorded. Ironic ruler tape was used to know the ages of the turtles. Animals that were sexually immature and had a carapace length of less than 250 mm were classified as subadults, while those with a carapace length of less than 110 mm were classified as juveniles¹¹.

Quadrats:

It is used for counting species that are relatively stationary. Primarily to determine the relative abundance of different species present in an area, but with multiple repetitions of the method, it can also be used to determine the absolute density of species. More suitable for baseline surveys, but also applicable for long-term monitoring¹⁴. During the 2021-2022 field quadrats survey conducted to detect Euphrates softshell turtles in the Central Marshes. The quadrats are taken fixed across the Central Marshes. The quadrats were conducted in three random sites every month to provide a representative

sample of the Central Marshes. A total of three distanced quadrats (5 km² size each) were identified and driven by motorboat (Marsh Arab canoe) covering 40,000 ha survey plot in the study area within the Central Marshes. Quadrat I (Q1): Al-Menthar (30°58'17.8"N 47°02'58.7"E) located in the east part of the Central Marshes. Quadrat 2 (Q2): AL-Baghdadi Lake (31° 0'12.90"N 47° 0'19.25"E) located in the middle part Of the Central Marshes. Quadrat 3 (Q3): Um-Alezam (30°57'53.1"N 46°58'01.5"E) located in the western part of the Central Marshes.

Data analysis:

Extrapolation is a general term used throughout this manual referring to the concept that if you are able to sample part of a population specifically, you can assume that this information can be extended to cover the rest of the population. Samples will often take many different forms, but in the end, the data will usually be extrapolated to estimate the population for a much greater area¹⁶. The calculation we need to do to extrapolate is usually one to determine density per unit area. Once we have surveyed a number of sample locations across the study area, the study can determine the relative density at each of the sample locations. This is done with the following simple¹⁶, Eq. 1: Density = n_i/A_i1

n_i : The number of individuals observed at the sample location. A_i : The area of the sample location. To determine the population of the entire study area, the study worked under the assumption that the density of the entire study area is an average of the densities of all the sample locations. The recent study should first determine the average density using the following Eq. 2¹⁶ : Average Density = $\sum n_i / \sum A_i$2

$\sum n_i$: The total number of individuals observed at all the sample locations. $\sum A_i$: The total area of all the sample locations. To determine the number of individuals in the total area, we use the following Eq. 3¹⁶, $n_T = A_T * \sum n_i / \sum A_i$3

n_T : The total number of individuals in the entire study area. A_T : The total area of the entire study area.

Results and Discussion

The presence of *Rafetus euphraticus*:

During the field surveys, 46 turtles were observed (Table 1). Sexes were not determined because there wasn't sexual dimorphism in size existing in the family Trionychidae¹¹. 41 were captured alive and 5 were found dead. Records of the Euphrates softshell turtle *Rafetus euphraticus* varied between the 12 months surveyed Turtles outside and inside the water were recorded in only 10 of the 12 surveys.

Most records came from May, June, July, August, and September surveys as the following: Four adult turtles were found in October, one adult in site 1, two adults in site 2 and one adult in site 3. Two adults, one of them dead, were found during November in sites 1 and 2 but no turtles were found from December to February. One adult was recorded in March in site 1. One adult in site 2 during April 2022. Four adults in May were found in site 3 but one was dead. In June the survey conducted one dead adult, two subadults and one juvenile was found at site 2, and one adult at site 3. Three adults were seen in site 3; one of them was found dead, while one subadult and two juveniles (one of them was dead) were in July. Sixteen adults and one subadult were recorded in site 3 during August. Six adults were recorded in site 3 during September. All records gave us 41 alive and 5 dead turtles. The current study showed that the highest number of turtles was recorded in August 2022 which was 17 in site 3. This may be due to the

scarcity of water in other sites, which encourages the turtle to leave their place and search for new habitats. Also, Water and air temperature are the important factors that affect turtles in terms of the life cycle, activities, and hibernation. The summer season has the greatest temperature, and the winter season has the lowest¹⁷. That was supported by several studies, noting water temperature followed by air temperature¹⁸. Decreasing temperature leads the turtle to winter hibernation by burying themselves in mud to maintain their body temperature. When the temperature rises, the turtle becomes active and returns to their activities¹⁹. Hibernation begins in November at the beginning of winter and ends with spring in March. At the beginning of the survey we observed and captured the turtles in site 1 and site 2 from October 2021 to April 2022 (except during hibernation season) than in site 3, which may be due to these sites having a good condition (water quality, abundance of water, richness of food) to live and thrived more than site 3 (Table 1) but, most specimens were observed and captured in site 3 from May 2022 to September 2022, demonstrating the good condition of this habitat in this period in comparison with other habitats in the Central Marshes. The other two sites were affected by water scarcity, which lead to a change in water quality and subsequently a decrease in food abundance, these conditions led the turtle to leave their sites and move to another site²⁰ (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of *Rafetus euphraticus* in the Central Marshes (October 2021 -September 2022).
The number of *Rafetus euphraticus*

Months	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3
October	1	2	1
November	1	1	0
February	0	0	0
March	1	0	0
April	0	1	0
May	0	0	4
June	0	4	1
July	0	3	3

August	0	0	17
September	0	0	6
Total number of <i>Rafetus euphraticus</i> for each site	3	11	32
Total number of <i>Rafetus euphraticus</i>	46		

Population estimation of the recorded *Rafetus euphraticus* in the Central Marshes:

Previous work in Iraq recorded *R. euphraticus* in 28 sites along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and their branches and tributaries. Between 2005 and 2010, *R. euphraticus* was discovered at 19 key biological areas (KBA) sites in Iraq, covering a total of

1,231,444 ha⁵, and there have been 55 individual records of the *R. euphraticus* in the Euphrates river from Faloja to Hammar Marsh (about 400 km) in 1992⁷. Further survey in the Central Marshes recorded the *R. euphraticus* in four transects between 2014 – 2015 (an area of 219,700 ha), with the maximum estimated population size of 212-283 individual records⁸.

Table 2. Species densities and estimated population size of *Rafetus euphraticus* recorded in the Central Marshes (2021-2022).

The density of <i>Rafetus euphraticus</i>			
Months	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3
October	0.002	0.004	0.002
November	0.002	0.002	-
February	-	-	-
March	0.002	-	-
April	-	0.002	-
May	-	-	0.008
June	-	0.008	0.002
July	-	0.006	0.006
August	-	-	0.034
September	-	-	0.0012
Total density of <i>Rafetus euphraticus</i> for each site	0.006	0.022	0.064
Total density of <i>Rafetus euphraticus</i> for whole study area.	0.0115 (individual/ha)		
Estimated population of <i>Rafetus euphraticus</i> for the Central Marshes.	2526.55 (individuals/ total area)		

This study was designed to be the first to estimate the total number of *R. euphraticus* inside and outside of water in the Central Marshes and suggests that the Central Marshes could be an important site for the softshell turtle in Iraq. The maximum estimated population size was 2526.55 individuals/total area

and 0.0115 individuals /ha based on 46 observations for 10 months (Table 2). Given this result, prioritizing the Central Marshes for future conservation of soft-shelled turtle in Iraq is recommended. (Table 2) shows the turtles density in our study fluctuated across monthly surveys and

seasons: the maximum density was observed during May, June, July, August, and September (the end of spring to the beginning of autumn), while there were no data during the winter hibernation season. The maximum population size (based on simple extrapolation) likely to be sustained by the Central Marshes is 2526.55 individuals/total area. The survey in site 3 contained the largest density of turtles (Table 2). This area is characterized by open water with dominant vegetation including *Typha domingensis* and *Phragmites australis*, with frequent records of the invasive fish species *Tilapia zilli*⁵.

Conclusion

With an estimated population size of 2526.55 individuals/total area and 0.0115 individuals/ha based on 46 observations over a 10-month period, the Central Marshes is a significant location for *R.*

There are some differences between the previous and current study that was conducted in the Central Marshes. The previous study included the turtle outside of water while the current study included turtles inside and outside the water and was conducted using nets for longer periods than the previous study to estimate the number of turtles in the Central Marshes, may be the reason for differences between the studies in the population size as the current study record 2526.55 individual/total area, while the previous study reported that 212-283 individual/total area)⁸.

euphraticus. Given this result, the Central Marshes will get priority for future soft-shelled turtle conservation in Iraq.

Acknowledgment

I am extremely grateful to Assistant Professor Dr. Mukhtar Khamis Haba and Dr. Nadheer Abod Feza'a (Department of Biology/ Collage of Science for Women/University of Baghdad) and my mentor Dr. Omar Fadhil Al-Sheikhly (Biology Department, College of Science, University of Baghdad) for their technical support, extensive assistance, and companionship in the field surveys which made the winter breeze and summer heat unforgettable

memories. It is essential to acknowledge the following institutes regarding their remarkable support of the fieldwork and scientific research of this study. I am grateful to the Iraqi Green Climate Organization (IGCO) and AlChibayish Ecotourism Organization for assistance during the field surveys; Department of Biology of the College of Science, University of Baghdad for their help in issuing the permission letters to facilitate the fieldwork.

Authors' Declaration

- Conflicts of Interest: None.
- We hereby confirm that all the Figures and Tables in the manuscript are ours. Furthermore, any Figures and images, that are not ours, have been

- included with the necessary permission for re-publication, which is attached to the manuscript.
- Ethical Clearance: The project was approved by the local ethical committee in University of Baghdad.

Authors' Contribution Statement

S.A. contributed to the design, analysis, interpretation, drafting, and writing of the

manuscript. H.S. contributed to the revision and proofreading the manuscript (supervisor).

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تقدير اعداد المجاميع السكانية لترسة الفرات لمساء الصدفة *Rafetus euphraticus* في الاهوار الوسطى (موقع تراث عالمي)

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الخلاصة

تم تصنيف ترسة الفرات لمساء الصدفة *Rafetus euphraticus* على أنها مهددة بخطر الانقراض ضمن القائمة الحمراء للاتحاد الدولي لحفظ الطبيعة، ويُعتقد أنها تعرضت لانخفاض كبير في أعدادها مؤخرًا. تقتصر معلومات الأنواع في العراق على عدد قليل من المسوحات السريعة مع القليل من المعلومات التفصيلية عن التربيعة والتوزيع. هدفت الدراسة الى تقدير اعداد سلاحف الفرات لمساء الصدفة في الأهوار الوسطى باستخدام استقراء بسيط للعدد. تم استخدام طريقة المربع (بحجم 5 كم² لكل منهما) لتسجيل توزيع سلاحفة الفرات لمساء الصدفة داخل موقع الدراسة وتم إجراء عشرة مسوحات ابتداءً من شهر تشرين الاول 2021 إلى ايلول 2022 باستثناء موسم السبات (كانون الاول وكانون الثانيو شباط). تم تسجيلها داخل المياه عن طريق وضع الشباك في مناطق معينة بالأهوار الوسطى. اقترح الاستقراء البسيط لتعداداتنا لكامل الأهوار الوسطى أن يبلغ الحد الأقصى لحجم المجاميع السكانية 2526.55 فردًا /المساحة الكلية (219.700 هكتار). تعتبر الأهوار الوسطى موقعًا مهمًا لـ *R. euphraticus* حيث تم تسجيل إجمالي 46 فردًا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاهوار الوسطى، سلاحفة الفرات لمساء الصدفة، تقدير عدد السكان، عدد السكان، *Rafetus euphraticus*.