

# Smuggled tortoises back in Chennai

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**AFTER** almost two months in Malaysia, Indian star tortoises seized at Kuala Lumpur International Airport returned home safely on an Indian Airlines flight on Tuesday.

The 580 tortoises arrived at Chennai International Airport after Malaysia's Wildlife Protection and National Parks Department decided to return the dome-shaped protected species, with star patterns on their shells, to their native land.

In April, Malaysian authorities seized the tortoises from an Indian national at KLIA, who was believed to have smuggled them from India, which had banned the export of star tortoises to protect the endangered species.

Chennai Customs Commissioner C. Rajan said that all the tortoises were alive when they landed at the airport and they would be returned to the local wildlife authority.

"We have sent the tortoises for health checks before they are sent to the relevant authorities," he added.

He said these tortoises could have been smuggled from Bangalore or Cochin airports after Chennai Customs stepped up its vigilance to prevent trafficking of the protected



**IN SAFE HANDS:** A zoo official shows the star tortoises at the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad yesterday

species.

"Over the last two years, the number of incidents have declined but there are still attempts to smuggle tortoises out of India," he said.

Between 2003 and 2005, the Malaysian authorities had seized at least 1,000 similar species

which were smuggled out of India but all returned to the native country.

This species, which cost anything between RM50 and RM70, are in popular demand in Malaysia, China and Hong Kong, where tortoises are kept as pets or their meat served as exotic

dish.

According to Rajan, the tortoises that returned from Malaysia would easily fetch RM60,000 in the local market.

So far, the authorities have not detained anyone in connection with the trafficking — Bernama