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Scales and Tails

Amphibians and Reptiles Making Their Mark on Banknotes

FROM the vibrant forests of South America to the rugged outback of Australia, amphibians and reptiles have fascinated humans for centuries. These remarkable creatures, often symbols of adaptability, resilience and mystique, have found their way into art, literature, and even the design of currency. For some nations, these species are a symbol of national pride and represent a profound connection between a nation's identity and its natural heritage. Banknotes that depict these animals are not just monetary instruments; they are artistic representations of both biodiversity and cultural significance. These cold-blooded creatures, often misunderstood or overlooked, are now celebrated through these miniature canvases that provide insight to their ecology, conservation and mythology. Here, we explore a number of these banknotes from around the world featuring amphibians and reptiles, delving into their designs, importance, and the impact they have.



Sitting front and centre, the poisonous Madagascan frog (*Mantella baroni*)

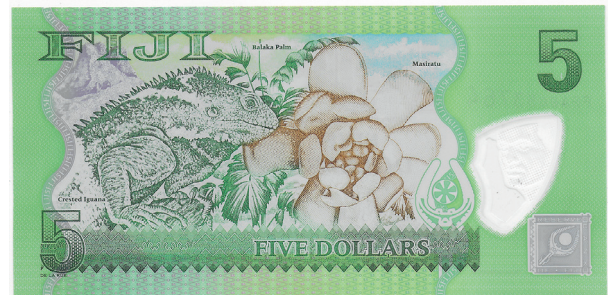
The choice to feature these animals on banknotes is more than aesthetic—it's a call to action. Reptiles and amphibians are among the most threatened groups in the animal kingdom due to habitat loss, climate change, and human activity. By placing them on currency, nations are not only celebrating their natural heritage but also raising awareness about the need for conservation. For instance, the Madagascar poisonous frog (*Mantella baroni*) on the reverse of the 100 Ariary banknote, issued between 2017 and 2022, highlights Madagascar's unparalleled biodiversity and the country's commitment to preserving the remainder of its unique ecosystems. This small frog is indigenous to Madagascar and grows to 32mm in length. Their bright colouration helps to warn predators that these diminutive frogs are toxic and should be avoided. Conservation efforts for the Madagascar poisonous frog focus on protecting the country's forests and regulating their collection for sale in the lucrative exotic pet trade.



The Seychelles tree frog graces the reverse of the Seychelles 50 Rupee note.

How quickly would you guess the Seychelles if I asked you to name another country bold enough to feature its indigenous amphibians on a banknote? This stunning archipelago is made

up of 115 islands in the Indian Ocean, located off the eastern coast of Africa. The 50 Rupees banknote from this small corner of paradise renowned for its pristine beaches, turquoise waters and lush tropical landscapes, issued in 2016, as part of the country's vibrant and nature-inspired currency series. This note celebrates the unique biodiversity of the Seychelles, featuring a prominent depiction of the Seychelles tree frog (*Tachycnemis seychellensis*) on the reverse. The small green frog blends seamlessly in with this suitably coloured banknote.



An endangered crested iguana features on the reverse of the Fiji \$5 note.

The Fiji 5 Dollars banknote, issued between 2012 and 2022, celebrates the unique wildlife of Fiji with the critically endangered Fiji crested iguana (*Brachylophus vitiensis*) on its reverse. The design of this polymer note also includes detailed depiction of the iguana in its natural habitat surrounded by balaka palm and the flower masiratu (*Degeneria vitiensis*), emphasising its importance to the island's biodiversity. The note's reverse also incorporates advanced security features, such as transparent windows and holographic elements. The iguana is known for its distinctive blue-green colouration and crest along its head and neck, the details of which stand out in the minimalist detail of this design. Conservation action for the Fiji crested iguana have been focused on protecting its remaining populations, which are confined to a few small islands, including Yadua Taba and other parts of Fiji's isolated archipelagos. The reverse is almost identical to one previously issued between 2007–12, before Fiji adopted polymer notes.

If I asked you to name what you thought was the most iconic species of reptile, there is a good chance you'd probably have suggested the Galápagos giant tortoise. And Ecuador would agree with you—which is why the 5,000 Sucres banknote, which was issued between 1991 and 1999, features the critically endangered Española Island giant tortoise (*Chelonoidis niger*

Paper money



The iconic and endangered giant tortoise features on Ecuador's 5,000 Sucres.

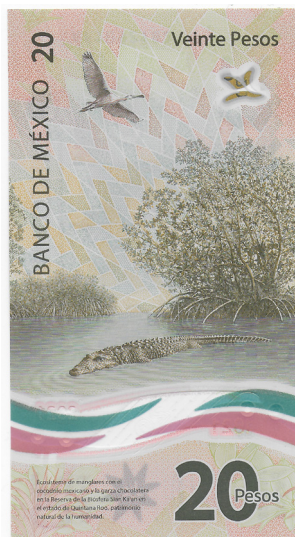
hoodensis). Giant tortoises are not only a symbol of Ecuador's unique ecological diversity, but they also played an important part in helping Charles Darwin establish his theory of evolution by the means of natural selection. Captive breeding and habitat restoration have been instrumental in helping this species avoid extinction; with less than 15 individuals known in the 1970s, there are now more than 2,000 in the wild.



Aruba's native green iguana and striped anole both feature on the obverse of the 100 Florin note.

Some reptile species are far more numerous in the environment, yet they have still made an impact on the countries where they are found. For example, the 100 Florin banknote introduced by Aruba in 2019, is a vibrant and artistically rich note that highlights some of the island's lizards. On the obverse are both the green iguana (*Iguana iguana*) and the striped anole (*Anolis lineatus*). These two species are native to the Caribbean and play a vital role in Aruba's ecosystems, reflecting the island's understanding and respect for its natural heritage. The intricate illustrations capture the lizards extremely well, with high levels of detail. Additionally, on the reverse, is a smaller iguana above a group of women and various cultural motifs.

The 20 Pesos commemorative banknote, issued by the Bank of Mexico between 2021 and 2023, celebrates the 200th anniversary of Mexico's independence from the Spanish Empire, as well as highlighting



20 Pesos from Mexico depicts the Mexican crocodile on the reverse.

the nation's natural and cultural heritage. On the reverse side, the note features a striking depiction of the Mexican crocodile (*Crocodylus moreletii*), a species found in the wetlands and coastal regions of Mexico. The crocodile is shown in its natural habitat among mangroves, highlighting the importance of Mexico's rich ecosystems and the need for their conservation.



Critically endangered axolotl on the reverse of Mexico's 50 Peso note.

For the second example from Mexico, the 50 Pesos banknote, released between 2021 and 2023, is another visually stunning piece that helps to celebrate the nation's rich culture and biodiversity. The reverse of this polymer note features the axolotl (*Ambystoma mexicanum*), an iconic and critically endangered aquatic salamander indigenous to Mexico. The axolotl, known for its unique ability to regenerate limbs and retain larval characteristics throughout its life, represents resilience and a deep connection between Mexican culture and its environment. The axolotl is depicted surrounded by Lake Xochimilco and the canal system within which was recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987. This design highlights the ecological and cultural importance of Xochimilco, to both the people and wildlife of Mexico.



Lithuania's 1 Talona banknote prominently displays the native sand lizard.

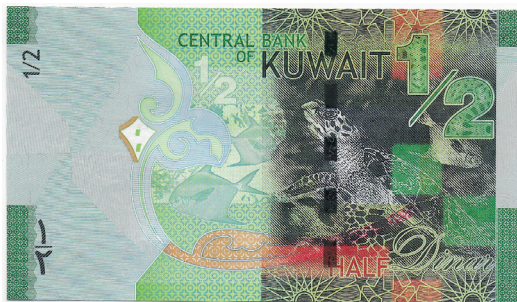
The 1 Talonas banknote, issued by Lithuania between 1991 and 1993, was part of the provisional currency introduced during the country's transition to independence from the Soviet Union. This note featured a minimalist yet meaningful design, with the reverse showcasing the sand lizard (*Lacerta agilis*), a species native to Lithuania and other parts of Europe—including Great Britain. The sand lizard, depicted in a stylised form, symbolised the nation's natural environment and its resilience during a time of significant political and economic change.

The 20 Ringgit banknote from Malaysia, issued as part of the fourth series of Malaysian currency (known as the "Pilipala" series) from 2011 to 2024, featured a vibrant and symbolic design celebrating Malaysia's natural heritage. On the reverse, the note prominently displays two marine turtles, the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and the leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) swimming gracefully in a backdrop of Malaysia's rich marine ecosystem. The imagery highlights



Graceful hawksbill and leatherback turtles decorate the reverse of Malaysia's 20 ringgit note.

the country's biodiversity and commitment to conservation, particularly for endangered species such as these turtles, and the ecosystems that they inhabit. If there is one species that seems to dominate currency from around the world, it is the aforementioned hawksbill turtle.



Kuwaiti 1/2 Dinar note showing the critically endangered hawksbill turtle.

The 2014 issue of the Kuwaiti ½ Dinar banknote is a striking example of how currency can celebrate natural heritage as well as environmental awareness. Part of the Sixth Series of Kuwaiti banknotes, this denomination prominently features the critically endangered hawksbill turtle, which can be found in the warm waters of the Persian Gulf. The turtle is depicted swimming gracefully amidst coral reefs, reflecting Kuwait's rich marine biodiversity. The vibrant colour palette, featuring shades of green, white, and red, highlight the marine theme in the colours of the Kuwaiti flag. The image captures the turtle's intricate scale pattern, a nod to its natural beauty.



The hawksbill turtle is also featured on the 10 Rupee note from the Seychelles.

Our second entry from the Seychelles is the 10 Rupees banknote issued to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of Independence from the United Kingdom, featuring the hawksbill turtle. First introduced in 2016, the reverse design highlights the importance of marine life to Seychelles' identity and economy. Interestingly, the 2016 banknote's design is a subtle homage to a similar note introduced in 1998. This continuity reflects Seychelles' long-standing efforts to raise awareness about its environmental treasures and the challenges facing endangered species like the hawksbill turtle. By linking the past and present through a shared design, the banknote serves as a reminder of the nation's enduring commitment to conservation and the sustainable use of its natural resources.

On the reverse of the 2 Reais note, issued between 2001 and 2009, depicts the hawksbill sea turtle. The design showcases a lifelike illustration of the turtle swimming amidst a vibrant underwater environment, complete with coral reefs, seagrass, and three baby turtles. Unlike most of the banknotes we



Brazil's 2 Reais banknote displays the hawksbill sea turtle, highlighting its beauty and ecological importance.



have explored so far, this one was orientated in portrait. The intricate detailing of the turtle's characteristic patterned shell and its elegant movement through the water highlights its beauty and ecological importance to people of Brazil. Printed on a blue background with minimalistic colouration, the aquatic background is rendered in a way that creates a sense of immersion in the marine world. A similar design was released between 2013 and 2024 in landscape this time, with the hawksbill turtle on the reverse.



500 Dobras of São Tomé and Príncipe also showcases the endangered hawksbill turtle.

The 500 Dobras banknote issued by São Tomé and Príncipe in 1993 is a striking representation of the nation's cultural and natural heritage. The obverse of the 500 Dobras note prominently features a portrait of Rei Amador, a celebrated national hero and symbol of resistance against Portuguese colonial rule. Rei Amador led a significant slave rebellion in the late 16th century, fighting for freedom and justice for the enslaved people of São Tomé and Príncipe. His image on the banknote reflects the nation's struggle for independence and pride in its history. In front of him, as he looks off to the left is a hawksbill turtle. Bet you didn't see that coming! The reverse of the banknote is dedicated to the nation's extraordinary biodiversity and natural beauty, featuring the Cascata de Praia Pesqueira.

Paper money



20 Córdoba from Nicaragua uses turtles within the watermark.

For all of the notes we have seen thus far, the hawksbill turtle is a prominent feature of the main artwork from each country. The 20 Córdoba polymer banknote, issued by Nicaragua between 2014 and 2019, changes this as the turtles featured on this banknote are part of the watermark. The prominent images are the Moravian church, Laguna de Perlas, on the obverse and the Mayo Ya Festival on the reverse.



The 20 Bolívares (above) and 5,000 Bolívares (below) from Venezuela prominently display two hawksbill turtles on their reverses.



We're almost there and I hope you have a new found appreciation for the majesty of sea turtles! The Venezuela 20 Bolívares banknote, issued from 2007 to 2014, features a striking design. The obverse captures Luisa Cáceres de Arismendi perfectly, a prominent Venezuelan figure known for her role in the country's struggle for independence from Spain. On the reverse there are two hawksbill turtles, the coat of arms of Venezuela, and the Montañas de Macanao. Due to increasing inflation rates, a 5,000 Bolívares banknote was issued with a very similar design between 2016–17. Both of these capture the

energy and character of the hawksbill turtle perfectly. For now, the turtles have returned the oceans whence they came until they emerge on a tropical beach to nest in a couple of years' time.



Burundi 500 Francs note features the Nile crocodile on its obverse.

The Burundi 500 Francs banknote, issued from 2015 to 2023, features the Nile crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*) on its obverse, along with both the coat of arms and Flag of Burundi, and a coffee plant branch. On the reverse is an outline of Burundi and a boat on Lake Tanganyika. This denomination highlights the coexistence of cultural identity and environmental heritage in its currency design.



5 Bolívares banknote of Venezuela features the critically endangered Rancho Grande harlequin frog.

Let's not forget that not all banknotes feature reptiles. The 5 Bolívares banknote, released in 2018 as part of Venezuela's Bolívar Soberano currency series, features a striking design that pays homage to the nation's biodiversity and one of Venezuela's rarest amphibians. On the reverse, the Rancho Grande harlequin frog (*Atelopus cruciger*), a critically endangered species indigenous to Venezuela, is prominently displayed. Known for its striking yellow and black patterns, the frog symbolises the country's efforts to highlight and protect its unique wildlife.

As these scaled and tailed ambassadors make their mark on the world's currencies, they remind us of the incredible diversity and fragility of life on Earth. Banknotes featuring amphibians and reptiles are not just currency; they are works of art and powerful statements of ecological and cultural pride. So, the next time you come across a banknote, take a closer look, you might find a story of scales, tails, and the timeless beauty of nature.