

# Turtle Conservation Vietnam

## Newsletter of the Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project (TCEP)

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## Provincial Ranger Training Aims at Increasing Enforcement Capacity

The Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project (TCEP) has expanded its efforts to increase the enforcement capacity of regional ranger units through a training program launched in March for rangers of the Soc Son Rescue Center (Hanoi region). The Soc Son rangers participated in a three-day workshop hosted by the TCEP on "Turtle Ecology and Trade in Vietnam". The training workshop, designed specifically for rangers, combines classroom training with experience working with turtles maintained at the TCEP, and is aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding amongst wildlife protection officers about the ecology and threats to Vietnam's turtle fauna, and more specifically, how their unique ecology and reproductive potential, combined with the impacts of trade and habitat loss, has evolved into a serious crisis, threatening the future of Vietnam's remaining wild populations. The workshop also works with rangers to improve their identification skills, develop monitoring procedures for trade shipments, and encourage practical and more ecologically sound means of dealing with turtles confiscated from the trade.

In April, a second workshop for Ninh Binh rangers brought 16 officers from the mobile enforcement unit out to the TCEP for training. Ninh Binh rangers have maintained a long history of cooperation with Cuc Phuong National Park, and lead national efforts in developing more effective enforcement and disposal procedures for animals confiscated from the trade. Ninh Binh also lies along the principal road transport route from areas within southern Vietnam, and has nurtured a reliable network of informants that provide information about trade shipments heading north along Highway One.

A third workshop in May brought 13 rangers from the Hanoi Forest Protection Branch (FPB) to Cuc Phuong. Hanoi rangers are in the position to play a particularly important role in wildlife trade enforcement due to the nature of the trade network, with most overland trade passing through Hanoi, before being shipped north via several routes to China. Enforcement in recent years has led to a series of trade seizures at Nho Bai Airport, as well as the central train and bus stations, and major road routes. Some of the country's largest traders also reside within the immediate Hanoi region.

Plans call for further training of other provincial units, as well as for the protection staff of some parks and nature reserves. The TCEP will also work with ranger units that have received training through the center on increasing monitoring and enforcement activities, as well as helping to establish clear guidelines for dealing with animals confiscated from the trade.

## Training and Education

### The Adventures of Lucky Turtle

A new educational resource for children focusing on conservation and protection of Vietnam's turtles was printed and released by the project in May. "The Adventures of Lucky Turtles", a three-part illustrated children's story, depicts a forest turtle that is caught by hunters and sold to an evil trader, only to escape while being shipped to China with a truck full of other animals. "Lucky" must (of course) try to find his way home, wary of the dangers that lurk on the road ahead.

The new series is presently being used in the community-based conservation education program, but will also be included in an educational package, focusing on turtle conservation and protection, being developed for distribution to other education projects at protected areas in Vietnam. Special thanks to the Columbus Zoo (USA) for supporting the development of this important resource.

## **NYTTS Website: Turtle Conservation in Vietnam**

Thanks to the efforts of Jim van Abbema and the New York Turtle and Tortoise Society (NYTTS), the Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project — Vietnam can be found on the World Wide Web. NYTTS webmaster Jim van Abbema constructed the Web site from information and photos provided by the project in early 2000, and is consistently updating the site with new information and reports that can be read online. Current efforts include development of a Vietnamese language version of the site that will soon be available. The site can be found at: <http://nytts.org/vietnam/>

## TCEP Turtle Ecologist to Train at Wetland Institute

Project Turtle Ecologist Le Thien Duc will be traveling to the United States for an eight-week training program through the Wetlands Institute, during which he will work with institute staff radio tracking and monitoring nesting populations of diamondback terrapins (*Malaclemys terrapin*). The training program was funded and organized by William Espenshade of the Philadelphia Zoo, in cooperation with Roger Wood and the Wetlands Institute. Upon conclusion of the training, Mr. Duc will return to Vietnam and initiate his Masters program on some aspect of turtle ecology, and participate in a planned radio telemetry study of the impressed tortoise (*Manouria impressa*) early in 2001.

## **Turtle Conservation Center Activities**

### **Indotestudo Births Mark New Beginning for Rescued Turtles**

On December 9, 1999, one of the project's female elongated tortoises (*Indotestudo elongata*) chose a patch of sunny ground during the late afternoon hours and began digging a shallow nest. The female was one of approximately 480 *Indotestudo* that had been confiscated by Ninh Binh rangers in August 1998. She was also the first of the Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project's (TCEP) tortoises to breed in captivity. The female deposited two large eggs in the hole and covered the nest with dirt. The eggs were later moved to a secure environment where they spent 139 days incubating. During the late evening of April 25, project staff were amazed to see the nose of one of the hatchling tortoises breaking through the shell of its egg. By 4:00 p.m. the next day, the first of two hatchlings had emerged entirely, the second egg hatching four days later (143 days). Both hatchlings promptly took to eating, and are growing rapidly in captivity.

The turtle births mark the first such known breeding in captivity of this species in Vietnam, and an important step forward for the TCEP's fledgling breeding program. Since early March, breeding and nesting by several other species has resulted in additional eggs being laid in captivity, including those from *Cuora galbinifrons* and *Cyclemys pulchristriata*, all currently in incubation.

The TCEP aims to establish a captive breeding population for seven of Vietnam's 22 turtle species, and initiate a head-start program for certain species that will supplement the project's planned translocation efforts. Translocation and head-start sites will be selected based on habitat requirements, native range, potential impacts on existing populations, and the historic level of "genetic disturbance" (e.g. previous releases in the area that may have compromised the genetic composition of local populations).

### **TCEP Center Expansion Continues**

Expansion of the Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project center at Cuc Phuong National Park continues with the addition of six terrestrial enclosures, four large aquatic tanks, and a semi-natural stream and pond enclosure. The expansion brings the total space for turtles to approximately 850 square meters, including 28 terrestrial or semi-aquatic enclosures, and 18 aquatic tanks, each with a terrestrial platform. At least 26 additional terrestrial enclosures are planned for 2000, as well as a secure cage for quarantine, small greenhouse, and research building.

The semi-natural stream and pond enclosure, supported with funds from the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) was completed in May, and includes a small constructed stream, which winds across a 120 square meter terrestrial enclosure before reaching a large sunken aquatic pool. This special environment will be used for the housing and breeding of *Mauremys annamensis*, Vietnam's only endemic turtle species. The Turtle Conservation and Ecology Center is intended as a halfway house for turtles confiscated by authorities from the illegal wildlife trade. Presently the project maintains nearly 200 turtles representing 18 of Vietnam's 22 species. Plans call for the translocation of healthy turtles back to their native habitat, as well as research and breeding of captive populations maintained at the center.

## Turtle Trade Journal

### Winter Lull Ends with March Trade Seizures

During the period of February 1 to May 31, Ninh Binh authorities seized four separate shipments of wildlife that included turtles. On March 14, trade activity appeared to pick up following a three month lull, with a seizure of 350 kg of Malayan snail-eating turtles (*Malayemys subtrijuga*) and a ton of snakes: 800 kg of Burmese pythons (*Python molurus*) and 200 kg of water snakes (*Enhydris bocourti*). A second shipment confiscated the following day included 83 turtles of eight species (107.4 kg), including *Indotestudo elongata*, *Manouria impressa*, *Cyclemys pulchristriata/atripans*, *Heosemys grandis*, *Hieremys annandalii*, *Malayemys subtrijuga*, *Siebenrockiella crassicollis*, and *Cuora amboinensis*.

Two subsequent enforcement actions resulted in apprehending a small-time trader from the Ha Tinh region, and another large shipment from the south, consisting of Malayan snail-eating turtles, Tokay geckos, and birds. Several other trade enforcement actions by Ninh Binh FPD (that did not involve turtles in the shipment) resulted in the confiscation of two golden cats, and several Asiatic black bears. Meanwhile in Hanoi, Forest Protection Branch rangers seized a single shipment of 280 Malayan snail-eating turtles during the first five months of the year.

One of the difficulties facing provincial rangers in the north of Vietnam is that traders often possess permits for their wildlife cargo issued by provincial FPD units in the south of Vietnam (province of origin). Active enforcement units have little choice but to honor valid permits and return wildlife to the traders, unless the trader has violated other restrictions on the permit such as exceeding the gross weight authorized or if the shipment includes species not listed on the permit. The province of origin listed for some observed shipments suggests that many of the turtles and other wildlife shipped from the extreme south of Vietnam may have been smuggled in from Cambodia.

The TCEP is working with provincial rangers to address the critical threat to Vietnam's turtles through training, partnership on specific conservation-focused efforts, and improving enforcement and monitoring of the wildlife trade. Many difficulties face wildlife protection authorities as they seek to tighten their grip on the illegal trade. One major need in the coming year will be to bring southern-based provincial units up to speed with their northern counterparts, and bring a halt to the issuance of permits by southern units that hasten the drain on the country's wildlife resources.

### New Wildlife Identification Guide for Ranger

A new resource for wildlife protection authorities produced by TRAFFIC Vietnam (Vietnamese) includes color photos or illustrations, a description, and information about the ecology and range of Vietnam's most heavily traded wildlife, including birds, reptiles and amphibians, and mammals. The resource is intended for use by rangers within protected areas and parks, as well as provincial authorities and border guards to help them identify animals within the trade in order to improve enforcement and monitoring of trade volumes. Contact TRAFFIC Vietnam: Mr. Man at 822-0640.

### **Stolen Turtles Recovered with Assistance from Local Community**

In May, the TCEP experienced its third theft of turtles since 1998. However, this particular incident has a happy ending.

Sometime during lunch hour on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May, three elongated tortoises (*Indotestudo elongata*) were stolen from a perimeter enclosure, apparently by a local man who was in the area collecting bamboo. Following discovery of the theft that afternoon, the park's ranger department was notified and requested to provide assistance in attempting to recover the turtles. At the same time, the chairman of Cuc Phuong Commune, Mr. Dinh Thuy Hai (the commune that includes all local villages at the eastern end of the park), was also notified and requested to assist the project in tracking down the thief. While rangers and project staff were meeting and questioning local wildlife traders, Mr. Hai organized local village leaders and initiated an immediate investigation with the assistance of the commune police chief, Mr. Dinh Cong Sinh. Initial information from local traders indicated that an unknown man from Nga 3 hamlet (Cuc Phuong Commune) had tried to sell the turtles in Nho Quan district town to a district trader. Subsequent inquiries with this particular trader in Nho Quan were unsuccessful in learning any additional information. The trader denied that he sold wildlife, and claimed that he had no knowledge of any turtles for sale. By the 18<sup>th</sup> of May, project staff assumed the worst: that the turtles had made it into the hands of traders and were on their way (again) to China. Trade inquiries extended to mid-level regional traders out near Highway One. A number of turtles were observed, but not the three stolen tortoises.

However, as project and ranger staff had all but given up hope in recovering the stolen tortoises, Mr. Hai and the Cuc Phuong commune police notified the project that they had caught and obtained a confession from the thief, who was offered a lighter penalty if he was willing to cooperate in recovering the turtles. The local man led commune authorities to Nho Quan where all three tortoises were being held at a relative's house. The man had tried to sell the turtles that day (to the trader that had denied any knowledge of the turtles), but the local traders had been unwilling to buy the turtles at the normal price because he was aware that they were stolen and had been visited by commune officials, as well as park rangers and project staff.

The turtles were repatriated with the project that evening, marking a happy ending for three turtles that had twice in their long lives, been sent to China, only to be rescued from the trade. Special thanks and recognition to the commune chairman, Mr. Hai, police chief Sinh, his deputy, and other local residents for their time and effort in helping to recover the turtles.

### **A Rising Star Joins the TCEP**

Nguyen Van Trong, a young herpetologist from the Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources (IEBR) has joined the TCEP as the project's associate field herpetologist. Mr. Trong has conducted herpetological field studies at Pu Mat Nature Reserve (Nghe An), and worked on a number of projects for the American Museum of Natural History over the past few years. Considered one of Vietnam's "rising young stars" in the field of herpetology, Truong has a special interest in turtles, and will be involved in translocation site assessments, a proposed *Manouria* radio telemetry project, and possibly efforts to locate a rumored population of *Rafetus* in on the Red River delta.

### **New TCEP Staff Ecologist to Work with Turtles**

The project would like to welcome Mr. Nguyen The Cuong as the project's second turtle ecologist. Cuong recently graduated from the Xuan Mai Forestry College and initially volunteered for the project to pursue his interest in turtles. Mr. Cuong will take over responsibilities for the project's resident turtle ecologist, Le Thien Duc, during Duc's eight-week training tour with the U.S.-based Wetland Institute, beginning June 26.

### Securing a Future for the Hoan Kiem Softshell Turtle

A new partnership between the Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project (TCEP) and Professor Ha Dinh Duc of Hanoi University will investigate ways to provide greater protection for a species of softshell turtle (*Rafetus sp.*) residing in Hoan Kiem Lake. Professor Ha Dinh Duc has been researching the Hoan Kiem softshell turtles for nearly ten years, and is eager to move forward with efforts that will ensure the species's long-term survival in the lake.

Hanoi residents understand well the cultural significance of the softshell turtles that reside within Hoan Kiem Lake. According to legend, a great turtle that resided in the lake delivered a sword from the bottom of the lake that enabled Emperor Le Loi (1400s) to lead Vietnam's armies to victory against occupying Chinese armies. Following the victory, the great turtles was reported to surface and retrieve the sword from the emperor's hand, returning it to the bottom of the lake, hence the name, Hoan Kiem Lake, or "Lake of the Restored Sword".

One particularly large softshell turtle (~ 1 meter in length) has gained the attention of the nation. Swarms of people converge upon the lake's edge each time the giant softshell surfaces. According to traditional belief, a mere glimpse of the Hoan Kiem turtle is said to bring good luck to the fortunate observer. However, the future of Hoan Kiem's softshells appears to be threatened due to lack of suitable nesting grounds that would enable the species to reproduce. Through this cooperative effort with Professor Ha Dinh Duc, the TCEP will seek funds to establish a small nesting area on a small island at the center of the lake (where eggs have been discarded in the past), as well as initiate a head-start program for the species. The head-start initiative will involve collection of a portion of each year's egg output (<50%), incubating and hatching the eggs, and raising the young to a size of 8-10 cm before releasing them back into the lake. The principal goal of head-start efforts is to secure the survivability of the species by ensuring that newborn hatchlings reach a minimum size that will afford them a higher level of protection in the lake against predators such as large fish and birds. Through the combined outputs of natural nesting and head-starting juveniles, Professor Ha Dinh Duc believes that the lake's legendary softshell turtles will remain a visible reminder of Vietnam's cultural history well into the future.

### Visit to Cat Tien Yield No Turtles

A visit to Cat Tien National Park (Dong Nai Province) during late May failed to result in finding any turtles at Bao Sao, the park's largest undisturbed wetland. Searches were carried out during the day and evening hours by Peter Paul van Dijk, Doug Hendrie, and project biologist Le Trong Dat, including many areas that appeared "prime habitat" for turtles. Likely occupants would have included *Hieremys annandalii*, *Malayemys subtrijuga*, and *Siebenrockiella crassicollis* (already recorded for the park). Despite the existence of apparent ideal habitat, no turtles were found. However, lack of findings could be a matter of timing. Local rangers report that turtles still exist in the wetland, but it was clear from our efforts that turtle populations are not thriving in what would appear to be a well-protected and suitable wetland.

The visit was not without some success in other areas though. Unlike regions in the north of Vietnam, mammal observations were frequent with sambar deer, gaur, binturong, wild pigs, and several civets readily observed during brief forays within the park.

### Survey at U Minh Thuong

Surveys of U Minh Thuong Nature Reserve for amphibians and reptiles will get underway soon as part of a project administered by Care International. WCS herpetologist Bryan Stuart will work with IEBR scientists to survey the U Minh Nature Reserve, which includes a large wetland area in Kien Giang province. Amongst other potential findings, Siamese crocodiles are reportedly still known to exist in the area.

## CITES Protection for Three More Species of Turtles in Vietnam

Three more of Vietnam's turtle species were added to CITES during the COP11 meeting in Nairobi. A proposal to include all species of the genus *Cuora* on Appendix II was passed, prohibiting international trade of any *Cuora* species without a national CITES office -approved export permit. Vietnam is a range state for three *Cuora* species, including *Cuora trifasciata*, *Cuora galbinifrons*, and *Cuora amboinensis*. Both *C. galbinifrons* and *C. amboinensis* are somewhat common in the trade. *C. trifasciata* is considered rare.

A total of five species of Vietnam's freshwater turtles and tortoises are now listed under CITES Appendix II. In addition to the three *Cuora* species, *Manouria impressa* and *Indotestudo elongata* were previously listed.

## **The Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project: An Overview**

The objective of the Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project is to initiate immediate and urgent action in response to the threat to Vietnam's 22 native turtle species resulting from illegal wildlife trade and loss of habitat. The project is working with national and regional authorities, as well as other institutions and organizations, to implement a strategy aimed at providing greater protection for Vietnam's turtles, as well as establishing and building long-term public interest in conservation of chelonians (turtles and tortoises).

The project involves seven main components:

- (1) Public awareness and education
- (2) Training and institutional capacity building of national protection authorities
- (3) Research on captive ecology and reproduction.
- (4) Translocation of turtles back into suitable habitat
- (5) Field research on the natural distribution and status of Vietnam's turtles
- (6) Investigation and monitoring of the wildlife trade
- (7) Building interest and expertise in turtles within national scientific institutions

The project is represented by a steering/advisory committee including the following specialist:

**Chris Banks, Melbourne Zoo**  
**Dave Collins, (AZA/CHAG)**  
**Peter Paul van Dijk, TRAFFIC SEA**  
**Rolland Wirth, Zoological Society for Conservation of Species and Pop.**  
**Douglas Hendrie (FFI – Vietnam)**

The Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project has received support from the following institutions and individuals:

**The Columbus Zoo (USA)**  
**Melbourne Zoo (Australia)**  
**American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA)**  
**James Bazyrk Fund (USA)**  
**Rotterdam Zoo (Netherlands)**  
**WVF (J. Paxton) Japan**  
**Humane Society International (HSI)**  
**DBH Fund (USA)**  
**WWF Sweden**  
**Partidge Films**

The project would also like to acknowledge the support and assistance from the following other individuals:

Dr. Nguyen Ba Thu, Director, National FPD  
Mr. Rong, Director, Ninh Binh Provincial FPD  
Dao Van Kuong, Director, Cuc Phuong National Park  
Jim van Abbema, New York Turtle and Tortoise Society  
Dr. Charles Innis, Veterinarian  
James Compton, TRAFFIC Indochina  
Bryan Stuart, WCS Lao PDR  
Edgar Lehr, Scientific Institute for Nature Research  
Dave Lee, North Carolina State Museum  
Nguyen Tri Man, TRAFFIC Vietnam  
Henk Zwartepoortensv, Rotterdam Zoo  
William Espenshade, Philadelphia Zoo

## The Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project (TCEP)

The Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project center presently holds about 200 turtles, representing 17 species native to Vietnam. An area of approximately 2,800 square meters is dedicated to holding facilities, including enclosures suitable for both aquatic and terrestrial turtles.

### **Immediate funding priorities include:**

1. Holding facilities and care for confiscated turtles
2. Training of provincial wildlife protection authorities
3. Trade studies and translocation site assessment
4. Education and public awareness initiatives

**To help support our efforts, please contact us at:** [cpcp@fpt.vn](mailto:cpcp@fpt.vn)

*For more information, please contact us at:*

### **Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project – Vietnam**

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