

### Authorities Seize Turtles in Da Nang

**Location:** Da Nang, Vietnam

**Date:** March 17 2004

**Description of Event:**

Da Nang city police and Forest Protection officers seized 1160 kg of wildlife from a truck bound for the Chinese border. The shipment, reportedly originating from Kien Giang and Dong Nai Provinces in southern Vietnam, included approximately 900 turtles of four species, about a dozen pangolins and some monitor lizards.

According to Da Nang authorities, the turtles included 705 elongated tortoises (*Indotestudo elongata*), 168 giant Asian pond turtles (*Heosemys grandis*), 36 Malayan snail-eating turtles (*Malayemys subtrijuga*), and 4 Malayan box turtles (*Cuora amboinensis*).

“Based upon the species composition and numbers, it is likely that the turtles were smuggled into Vietnam from Cambodia”, says Douglas Hendrie, Asian Regional Turtle Conservation Coordinator for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Cleveland Metropark Zoo. Although the species are also native to Vietnam, Hendrie notes that it is unlikely that Vietnamese forests are producing these sorts of numbers of turtles for the trade.

“Wild populations of turtles in Vietnam have been decimated as a result of 15 long years of exploitation to feed the export markets”, Hendrie says. “I would be surprised today to see 705 of any species of turtle surviving in any single natural area in Vietnam”. Da Nang authorities seem to agree, speculating that the turtles came from Cambodia into Vietnam before being loaded on a truck for the trip to the northern border with China.

Two of the species in the shipment, the elongated tortoise and the giant Asian pond turtle, are protected under Vietnamese law, Decree 48, prohibiting hunting and trade of listed species for commercial purposes. Both of these species, in addition to a third species in the shipment, the Malayan box turtle, are listed under Appendix II of the Convention on Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) requiring permits from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) before the turtles may be imported or exported.

Mr. Bui Dang Phong, coordinator of the Cuc Phuong National Park Turtle Conservation Center (TCC) recommended several options to Da Nang authorities for dealing with the confiscated turtles, including placing them in permanent and temporary holding facilities such as those available at Cuc Phuong and Cat Tien National Park, releasing the turtles back into the wild within their native range and habitat, possibly returning them to Cambodia, or destroying the shipment.

Despite offers of assistance, on Saturday March 20 Mr. Phong was informed that the shipment would be released locally in the Da Nang area, outside the natural range of all but one of the species in the shipment, suggesting that measures need to be taken to raise the awareness of provincial authorities about what to do with turtles confiscated from the trade.

Hendrie acknowledges that the reality of the situation leaves few options for wildlife protection authorities. “Releasing the turtles is the most practical option available to wildlife protection

authorities". However Hendrie cautions, "Releasing animals by no means assures their survival, and animals should never be released outside their native range or in habitat that is not suitable for the species".

Like Mr. Phong at the TCC, Hendrie suggests that wildlife protection authorities seek help in resolving the difficult issue of dealing with confiscated animals. While the TCC at Cuc Phuong National Park, which Hendrie helped found in 1998, does not have the facilities to accommodate large numbers of turtles confiscated from the trade, experts there and elsewhere in the region are standing by and willing to help find permanent placement for confiscated animals or help facilitate releases that are carefully planned and carried out.

"Asia's tortoises and freshwater turtles are in trouble", Hendrie says. "We need to start working together to bring a stop to this systematic extirpation of turtles from the wild. Having survived 200 millions years in nature, turtles are simply not equipped to deal with current exploitation levels as we have witnessed in Vietnam, Cambodia, and elsewhere in the region."Hendrie calls on relevant authorities to "think nationally" and work with other institutions and agencies throughout the region to bring a halt to the illegal wildlife trade and protect the future of Vietnam's natural heritage.