

The Asian Turtle Crisis *Bulletin*

News from around the Region

Volume 1

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The Asian Turtle Crisis Bulletin includes a brief summary of activities involving turtles conservation and research in the region that have been reported over the previous month through the Asian Turtle Conservation Network (ATCN). This bulletin is produced periodically by the ATCN and distributed electronically to individuals with interest in the Asian turtle crisis.

Region

The following south-east Asian turtle species have been listed as Appendix II as a result of decisions made during the CITES CoP13 in Bangkok, October 2-14.

Malayan snail-eating turtle: *Malayemys subtrijuga* was listed in Appendix II (Prop.17).

Malayan flat-shelled turtle: *Notochelys platynota* was listed in Appendix II (Prop.19)

Southeast Asian soft-shell turtle: *Amyda cartilaginea* was listed in Appendix II (Prop.20).

Pig-nosed turtle: *Carettochelys insculpta* was listed in Appendix II (Prop. 22).

Rote Island snake-necked turtle: *Chelodina mccordi* was listed on Appendix II

Cambodia

Royal University of Phnom Penh Central Cardamom Mountain Project: A team of students from the Royal University of Phnom Penh are currently conducting research in a large wetland in the Central Cardamom Mountains. The marsh, called Veal Veng, is already a focus for herpetological attention as it holds the largest remaining wild population of the Siamese crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*). Veal Veng is an unusually high-altitude marsh, situated at 560m above sea level. It is approximately 8km long and 3km wide at its widest point. It is made up of shallow, reedy marshland around deeper channels and weed-filled pools. Flora and Fauna International (FFI) have worked closely with local communities to designate the site a Crocodile Sanctuary, with minimal human impact in core areas within the marsh. Any turtle populations within the marsh will also benefit from this protective management.

Preliminary research has tentatively suggested the presence of the leaf turtle, *Cyclemys dentata complex*, and the Asiatic softshell turtle, *Amyda cartilaginea* in the marsh. Based on previous research by the turtle team in similar habitats in the Cardamom Mountains, the marsh could also hold several additional species such as the black marsh turtle, *Siebenrockiella crassicollis*, and the Asian giant pond turtle, *Heosemys grandis*.

The students aim to assess the diversity of turtle species within the marsh using baited traps and hunting dogs. The objective is to see which species are benefiting from the blanket protection that the Crocodile Sanctuary is providing and, if necessary, to provide recommendations for the inclusion of conservation activities within the sanctuary that focus on turtles.

Also, villagers in the area have reported the presence of elongated tortoises, *Indotestudo elongata*, in the surrounding area, so one of the aims of the field survey is for the students to confirm whether this species still occurs in the evergreen forest that surrounds the marsh. The field team plans to conduct timed searches in suitable habitat, using hunting dogs.

The Royal University of Phnom Penh project is supported by a BP Conservation Award grant with technical support and training provided by Conservation International.

Batagur baska Conservation Program: In October, the *Batagur baska* conservation team visited schools along the Kaong River and talked to students about the need to help protect the critically endangered river terrapin as nesting season approaches. The Kaong River is the principal nesting area for *Batagur baska* in the Sre Ambel area. Each year, local villagers and members of the conservation team monitor and guard nesting beaches to ensure that people and other would-be predators do not disturb the nests. Amongst other efforts, the conservation team carries out awareness activities in local schools and villages as part of broader efforts to encourage local participation in protecting the species.

In October the *Batagur* conservation team also produced and distributed a t-shirt in villages along the Kaong River with a picture of a large female *Batagur* and the words: "Please Help Us Save the Royal Turtle" in Khmer and English.



Two students, Chhun Sopheak and Loak Sophon of Chamkar Dong University, also recently completed field research projects working with the Batagur Conservation Project. Mr. Sopheak examined movement patterns of *Batagur baska* on the Sre Ambel River, while Mr. Sophon studied variation in nesting beaches within *Batagur* habitat on the Kaong River.

The *Batagur baska* Conservation Project is supported by the Wildlife Conservation Society Cambodia Program.

Hong Kong

KFBG Big Headed Terrapin Ecology Project: A total of 44 big-headed turtles (*Platysternon megacephalum*) were captured, marked, measured and released during the month of October as part of an ecology and monitoring project being carried out by the Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden (KFBG). Inhabiting cool streams on steep mountain slopes, the turtles involved in the project include 16 hatchlings, 14 juveniles, eight adult males and six adult females.

In January 2004 the KFBG expanded the monitoring project to include a field research component. In partnership with the Savannah River Ecology Laboratories, six adult *Platysternon* (three males and three females) were fitted with radio transmitters and released back into their native habitat. The turtles are currently being tracked three times each week utilizing KFBG staff and dedicated volunteers as part of an effort to learn more about the home range and natural ecology of this endangered species. Data-loggers are also being used to record the water temperature within the turtles' habitat, in addition to the streamside air temperature and humidity.

Research Insight: Fruit appears to comprise a significant proportion of the diet of *Platysternon* where fruit is naturally available along the stream within the study site.

KFBG Chelonian Conservation Project: Conservation of the Three-line Box Turtle: Captive numbers continue to rise at the Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden where efforts have focused on developing an assurance population of the critically endangered golden turtle, *Cuora trifasciata*. Nine new hatchlings have emerged so far during this season with seven more eggs under incubation. On October 29, the program achieved a major new landmark with the first successful birth of a hatchling from parent stock of known origin in Hong Kong. Additional hatchlings are expected during the coming weeks! The KFBG project hopes to establish a founder stock of locally sourced animals that will reproduce and serve as a living gene bank for

Hong Kong *Cuora trifasciata*, with the ultimate aim of future restocking.

KFBG also works with the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) to protect the known habitat of *Cuora trifasciata* and conduct market inspections.

Indonesia

Rote Island Project: No developments reported for October

Laos

No turtle conservation efforts currently underway

Myanmar

Arakan Forest Turtle Surveys: The Forestry Department and WCS turtle team coordinator Win Ko Ko have initiated a survey in the Tanlwe Ma-e chaung region of Rakhine State (Arakan Forest) as part of efforts to determine the status of the Arakan Forest Turtle (*Heosemys depressa*). *Heosemys depressa* is endemic to Myanmar, and little is known about the status or distribution of wild populations. The survey team will spend several weeks in the area and the results of the field survey will be reported in November.

Yadanabon Zoo *Kachuga trivittata* Project: No new developments reported for October

Malaysia

New Study in Malaysian Borneo: In July, a survey of the freshwater turtle community was conducted at Loagan Bunut National Park (LBNP). Kitti Jensen from the Sarawak University of Malaysia and personnel from the UNDP-GEF Peat Swamp Forestry Project performed the survey. Trapping and searching on foot yielded *Amyda cartilaginea*, *Cuora amoboensis*, *Cyclemys dentata*, and *Notochelys platynota*. A large, burned carapace of *Cyclemys dentata* was found behind a LBNP residence and *Amyda cartilaginea* was readily sold in the wet market outside LBNP. This effort is part of a larger biodiversity assessment of LBNP and supported by the Sarawak University of Malaysia, UNDP-GEF, and Sarawak Forestry Corporation. It is also part of a larger ecological study on the freshwater turtle community within LBNP.

Setiu River Conservation Project 2004 Review: In 2004, 20 clutches of eggs obtained from local fishermen produced 236 hatchlings. Those hatchlings are currently being raised in a terrapin head-starting facility at the University College of Science and Technology, Malaysia (KUSTEM) in Terengganu. Chen Pelf Nyok, a post-graduate student, is presently running tests using a variety of food sources such as tilapia feed and kangkung (*Ipomoea aquatica*) to identify a diet that will ensure the most productive growth rate of hatchlings. Besides, she is also conducting several other experiments to determine the best head-starting practices, for example the terrapin's feeding time and ration, food conversion ratio and gut evacuation time.

Two surveys for Setiu and Dungun Rivers were conducted in August. Only three nesting beaches on the Setiu River were identified as nesting sites for *Batagur baska*. Trapping surveys involving use of nets resulted in the capture of one captive-raised river terrapin, and eight adult male and six adult female painted terrapins (*Callagur borneoensis*).

On the Dungun River, 14 sandy beaches were found to be suitable nesting sites for river terrapins. According to local villagers, the largest nesting still occurs on two sandy banks (Pasir

Kumpal and Pasir Tok Chu) that have been gazetted as sanctuaries by Perhilitan, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks. Interviews with local villagers indicated that river grass was the major food source for *Batagur* and *Callagur* on the Dungun River.

Trapping surveys on the Dungun River resulted in the capture of four adult river terrapins (one adult male and three adult females) and one female painted terrapin during the first survey in June of 2004 but none during the second survey in August, 2004.

The Setiu River Conservation Project is funded in part by the Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF) and the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA).

Thailand

Kanchanaburi *Chitra Chitra* Conservation Breeding Program: No developments reported during the month of October.

Vietnam

Stay Tuned for Turtles: The BBC Children's Television Show, "Really Wild Show", will air a segment of the Asian turtle crisis, featuring the Turtle Conservation Center and the *Pyxidea mouhotii* field study at Cuc Phuong National Park. The show is hosted by well-known presenter Michaela Strachan. After three days of filming at Cuc Phuong that involved multiple takes, uncooperative turtles, and a day out with WCS turtle research coordinator Tim McCormack and his radio telemetry team tracking *Pyxidea mouhotii* in the forest, the segment was completed, and will air sometime in 2005.

Taronga Zoo Keeper Helps Out at Cuc Phuong: Taronga Zoo reptile keeper Deb Olsen spent a week helping out at the Cuc Phuong's Turtle Conservation Center. During her weeklong visit, Deb reviewed keeper performance and assessed food allocations for specific species maintained at the TCC. Taronga Zoo has been a tremendous supporter of Vietnam's efforts to protect tortoises and freshwater turtles. Deb's involvement at the center was funded under a small grant provided by the zoo to support field projects carried out by zoo staff.

Training of Park Tourism Staff: A turtle training workshop was carried out at Cuc Phuong National Park for tourism department staff, October 22, aimed at providing park guides with a basic knowledge of turtles and enhance visitor interpretation efforts at the park. During the morning session presented by Bui Dang Phong of the Turtle Conservation Center (TCC) and Doug Hendrie, participants were introduced to the basic ecology of turtles, followed by an overview of the Asian turtle crisis, and the role of Cuc Phuong National Park in helping conserve Vietnam's tortoises and freshwater turtles. In the afternoon, the guides toured the TCC and attended a field lecture by Tim McCormack on the keeled box turtle (*Pyxidea mouhotii*), a native of Cuc Phuong and present subject of a radio telemetry study at the park.

TCC Hatchings: Seven more *Mauremys annamensis* hatchlings were found in the free-ranging breeding enclosure during the month of October bringing the total of births to 15 for 2004. This year's births were down from 23 in 2003, partly as a result of the unexpected loss of two females. October also yielded seven additional *Cuoa amboinensis* and 16 *Cyclemys pulchristriata* hatchlings.

Hoan Kiem *Manouria impressa* recovered: In October, guards turned over an adult impressed tortoise (*Manouria impressa*) to Professor Ha Dinh Duc that was found swimming along the edge of Hanoi's Hoan Kiem Lake. The tortoise was probably released into the lake by Buddhist worshippers. Professor Duc had the turtle transferred to the TCC at Cuc Phuong.

Rafetus swinhoei Conservation Project: The ATCN Bulletin for September 2004 noted that Peter Pritchard and members of the Vietnam Turtle Conservation Program team that includes WCS research coordinator Tim McCormack and Bui Dang Phong of Cuc Phuong National Park, investigated several new sites in three provinces in September. The news piece should have noted that the project is in cooperation with Hanoi National University, and that Professor Ha Dinh Duc and a university student also participated in the September field surveys. Sincere apologies from the ATCN for the oversight.

Trade Seizures Reported

Hong Kong Authorities Continue Excellent Efforts to Halt the Illegal Trade in Turtles

The Hong Kong Government's Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) confiscated 800 hatchling Pig-nosed turtles (*Carettochelys insculpta*) at Hong Kong airport in October. Of the seizure, 360 turtles were taken to the Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden (KFBG) where efforts are currently underway to have them placed in permanent homes through the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA).

In addition to the *Carettochelys* confiscation, a further 50 Asian freshwater turtles rescued from an earlier seizure in April 2004 were shipped to the TSA on the 27th of October. The species sent included 2 Malaysian Giant Turtles (*Orlitia borneensis*), 24 Malayan flat-shelled Turtles (*Notochelys platynota*), 20 Asian Leaf Turtles (*Cyclemys dentata*), and 4 Spiny Turtles (*Heosemys spinosa*). The TSA has been working with Hong Kong government authorities and the KFBG to find permanent placement for turtles that are confiscated from the trade, and develop assurance populations of the most critically endangered Asia species.

Nghe An – Vietnam: On September 22, provincial traffic police intercepted a bus traveling to Vinh City carrying wildlife including 277 kg of turtles. Local police said that they believed the shipment was part of a network involving cross-border trade coming in from Lao PDR.

The turtles, which reportedly included as many as ten species were transferred to the Forest Protection Department where many of them were released at Pu Mat National Park. Some of the turtles are being maintained in captivity by Pu Mat National Park pending final determination by the province as to their disposition. The species confiscated in the shipment reportedly include: *Cuora amboinensis* (4.4 kg), *Cuora galbinifrons* (?? Kg), *Cyclemys dentata* complex (44 kg), *Heosemys grandis* (24 kg), *Hieremys annandalii* (97.7 kg), *Malayemys subtrijuga* (21.6 kg), *Pyxidea mouhotii* (4 kg), *Siebenrockiella crassicollis* (21kg), *Indotestudo elongata* (38 kg), *Manouria impressa* (15 kg)

Turtle Seized in Eastern Cambodia: Wildlife Protection officers from the Forestry Department and Military police nabbed a taxi transporting 35 *Indotestudo elongata* through Monduliri towards the Vietnamese border. The turtles, with an estimated value of \$500 were confiscated, along with the taxi. The driver was also reportedly fined \$1500 or three times the estimated value of the shipment as is customary for wildlife seizures. According to local reports, Cambodian wildlife protection authorities in Monduliri have seized between 300-400 kg of turtles over the past three months. Shipments have included *Heosemys grandis*, *Indotestudo elongata*, *Hieremys annandalii*, and *Amyda cartilaginea*.

Binh Thuan – Vietnam: October 2nd, Binh Thuan traffic police discovered an illegal consignment of wild animals on a bus with fake number plates traveling on National Highway No. 1. Approximately 200 kg of wildlife were confiscated from the bus including macaques, lizards, turtles, and snakes. All of the animals were reportedly released at Nui Ta Kou Nature Reserve. Further investigation indicated that there were 17 turtles in the shipment including 1 *Cuora amboinensis*, 2 *Indotestudo elongata*, 9 *Malayemys subtrijuga*, and 5 *Cyclemys tcheponensis*.

Thanh Hoa – Vietnam: On October 29 provincial wildlife protection officers confiscated nearly a ton of wildlife from a bus reportedly originating in Da Nang city. The shipment was comprised of lizards and snakes of unknown species (not observed), and 116 turtles (89 kg) representing six species including *Cuora galbinifrons*, *Platysternon megacephalum*, *Heosemys grandis*, *Pyxidea mouhotii*, *Indotestudo elongata*, and *Manouria impressa*.

Urgent Needs

Turtle publications and printed resources needed

Folks working in the ATCN region are universally requesting resources and copies of publications relevant to turtles. There are several practical ways to get resources out to a growing group in a more systematic fashion: (1) Provide electronic or PDF copies of resources and permission for ATCN to put these publications in the online resource library, (2) advise the ATCN of websites where resources are already posted, or (3) send hard copies to the address below and they will be distributed on a case by case basis as appropriate.

Support for Rescue and Relocation of Confiscated Turtles: The Turtle Conservation Center (TCC) needs support to assist provincial wildlife protection departments in placing and translocating turtles that have been confiscated from the illegal trade. Working in cooperation with the WCS and Cleveland Metropark Zoo Turtle Program, the TCC hopes to help provincial governments improve current practices relating to arbitrary release of wildlife in national parks and protected areas. Past support for such activities was proved by the Humane Society International (HSI).

Attention Field Programs

The ATCN presently has developed a database of current field records for Asian tortoises and freshwater turtles based upon reports from researchers and field staff working across the region. A very simple field record report form has been developed and distributed. If you do not have it and would like a copy, either email the ATCN or download the word version from the ATCN website in the library resources section. The database will be accessible to people that are specifically working with turtles in the region or have a clear scientific or conservation interest in the information. Special thanks to those of you that are already providing field records and photographs.

The Asian Turtle Conservation Network

For reports and other news-worthy notes of interest, visit the ATCN website at www.asianturtlenetwork.org

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