

Lucky Turtles Receive Another Chance at Life in Cat Tien

Press Release

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Sixty four turtles were released in Cat Tien National Park in a bid to repatriate with nature turtles that were confiscated from the illegal wildlife trade. The turtle's arrival at the park marked the end of a long journey that began with their capture several years ago by hunters. The turtles were then bagged and shipped north destined for the markets of China. However, Ninh Binh and Thanh Hoa Forest Protection officers seized the illegal shipment as it passed through the province in late 2000. The turtles were then moved to the Cuc Phuong National Park's Turtle Conservation Center where they were quarantined and cared for by turtle specialists. On the 20th of September, the turtles were carefully packed in crates and shipped to Hanoi by truck before being loaded on a train to Ho Chi Minh City. Two days later they arrived at Cat Tien National Park along with their ranger escort. Over the next three days, Cat Tien National Park staff and their Cuc Phuong counterparts released all of the turtles in suitable forest and wetland habitat with hopes that these few lucky turtles might have an opportunity to live the remainder of their natural lives in nature.

The release included 45 elongated tortoises (*Indotestudo elongata*) and 19 orange-headed temple turtles (*Heosemys grandis*). Additionally, amongst the turtles were 12 juveniles that had been hatched in captivity at the Cuc Phuong turtle center, the offspring of adult turtles confiscated from the trade. Both species are native to Cat Tien National Park, and their release was carried out after careful quarantine and health screening of the turtles. Additionally, all sixty four turtles were marked prior to their release allowing Cat Tien National Park to identify the released animals should they be found again in the park.

All 23 of Vietnam's tortoise and freshwater turtles species are threatened by the combined impacts of habitat loss and the wildlife trade. Since the early 1990s, demand from Chinese markets has systematically reduce wild populations in Vietnam to pockets of forest and wetland habitat scattered throughout the country, most of these areas remaining under significant human pressure from people living inside and along their borders. Turtles are valued in China as a specialty food and for medicinal purposes. As the standard of living has risen amongst China's 1.2 billion people, so to has the demand for exotic dishes and medicines that were formerly less affordable.

First to go were China's own wild turtle populations. Chinese markets soon turned their attention to their southern neighbors to meet the insatiable demand for exotic wildlife foods. By the late 1990s, Vietnam had had its day and most wild populations of turtles had been severely depleted. Today, hunters and opportunistic collectors continue to scour the forests and wetlands of Vietnam for stragglers left behind during the heyday of the Vietnam turtle trade, while traders appear to have taken on a more regional role in the trade, transporting animals from neighboring Cambodia and Laos and brokering deals with traders as far away as Malaysia and Thailand to ship turtles and other wildlife through Vietnam to China.

The efforts of Cuc Phuong National Park to release small numbers of turtles back into the wild represents a small step forward amidst the difficult struggle ahead. While the lucky 64 turtles now roaming the forests and wetlands of Cat Tien are not assured a safe existence in the wild, they have been given a second chance in life, and a fair alternative to the soup pots of China where just three years ago these very same turtles were headed.

Background

There are 23 species of tortoises and freshwater turtles native to Vietnam.

The IUCN Red List 2000 lists all 23 species as threatened. Six are listed as critically threatened.

Five species are specifically protected under Vietnam's principal wildlife protection law, Decree 48 (2002). Thirteen species are protected under the Convention on the Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) for which Vietnam became a signatory in 1994 (Decree 11 of 2002 put CITES into force in Vietnam).

The Cuc Phuong Turtle Conservation Center (TCC) was developed as part of a larger conservation project at Cuc Phuong National Park, administered by Fauna and Flora International (FFI). The TCC was transferred to Cuc Phuong National Park management at the end of 2001. Since then, technical support continues to be provided to the program

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