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Breeding rescued reptiles

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FOR the last five years, anti-smuggling authorities in East Asia had seized container after container of illegal freshwater turtle and tortoise consignments destined for the thriving south China food and traditional medicine markets.

Despite the huge volume uncovered, experts reckon it is just the tip of the iceberg. Trade volume has been estimated at 10 million reptiles per year since the early 1990s.

Tonnes of turtles are collected from the wild, bundled in inhumane conditions and shipped from countries in South-East Asia, usually via Hong Kong, in a trade that has been described as the greatest wildlife catastrophe of modern times.

Dubbed the Asian Turtle Crisis, the wholesale harvest of these reptiles is a matter of concern to conservationists.

More than half of the 90 Asian species are endangered or critically endangered, according to the Red List of Threatened Species of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). The future looks bleak for these reptiles.

However, the community is not going to stand by and watch them slip into extinction. The first significant step was taken in December 2001. When the Hong Kong authorities seized about 6,000 half-dead turtles - worth US\$3.2mil (RM12mil) - among 10,000 turtles packed in four shipping containers, the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) saw a conservation opportunity and rescued them.

Representing a unique partnership between zoological parks, academic institutions and private captive-care specialists, the TSA serves as an international outlet for confiscated turtles which would otherwise have been destroyed due to fear of disease and their ambiguous country of origin.

TSA's aim is to maintain a global network of tortoise and freshwater turtle colonies to help in the recovery of wild populations.

Out of the 12 Asian species seized in Hong Kong, 10 were in the critically endangered to vulnerable categories.

The animals were flown to TSA facilities in the United States and Europe where they form the back-up colony for these species in the event of extinction in the wild.

TSA's Asian Turtle Conservation coordinator Doug Hendrie says the strategy is to ensure that living specimens of the most endangered species are genetically preserved. Genetic diversity is crucial to the viability of captive populations.

Since 2001, TSA has extended its network in 11 countries in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia, and established captive populations in zoos, academic institutions, government facilities, and among private and commercial breeders.

In implementing its species recovery plan, TSA identified existing collection facilities to be used in ex situ conservation management programmes, and encouraged field conservation in the range countries.

Since his appointment last October, Hendrie has been compiling a database of East and South-East Asian institutions, agencies and individuals involved in turtle work to create a network to enhance conservation efforts in the region.

Captive colonies can be found at the Kanchanabury facility in Thailand, the Cuc Phuong Turtle Conservation Centre in Vietnam and the Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Gardens in Hong Kong. In Malaysia, the TSA has identified the Bota Kanan centre in Perak and the University College of Science and Technology Malaysia's (Kustem) Sg Setiu project in Terengganu as having the two most promising conservation programmes for river terrapins in the country.

"Kustem's Sg Setiu project will break new ground in Malaysia, combining research of the species with measures to protect wild populations identified through threat assessments carried out on river systems where populations remain," says Hendrie, adding that Peninsular Malaysia may well offer the last hope for surviving wild populations of river terrapin in the region.

The global initiative has set up the Turtle Conservation Fund which aims to raise US\$5.6mil (RM21mil) under its five-year Global Action Plan (2002-2007) to save the world's top 25 most endangered tortoises and freshwater turtles from the brink of extinction.