



Delicacy brings turtles back from brink.

A one-man effort to cultivate turtles

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Author: Phonsavanh Vongsay

OVERSEAS businesses are keen to order pa fa (freshwater turtle) to supply their restaurants, but local producers are unable to raise them in sufficient quantities to meet demand.

One South Korean trader wanted 1,000 pa fa on a monthly basis, and other Chinese and Thai dealers wanted as many as possible, said Mr Saithong Keoduangdee, who is the Chief of the Vientiane Education Department, and also raises pa fa in his spare time. He lives in Xangkhou village in Xaythany district of Vientiane.

"The businessmen visited me a few months ago to enquire about the possibility of buying pa fa from me. I told them that I might be able to supply them two years from now and they will come to see me again next year," he said.

He is not able to sell them right away because he does not have the large stocks they need. At present he has only about 800 pa fa. It takes a year to cultivate pa fa to sufficient size and maturity. Before they can be eaten, they must weigh one kilogram and have developed the right flavour.

"At the moment I'm still experimenting and I'm studying their development," Saithong said. "I have not even reported my business to the Government yet."

He said that if he succeeded and managed to expand both the amount of pa fa and the number of ponds, he would register his business with the relevant state sectors, in particular the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

"I will also apply to the Ministry of Commerce to begin local and export sales," Saithong said.

An official from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry said that it was good news that local people were interested in raising pa fa in greater quantities to sell in the domestic market, because they were in danger of extinction.

"If people want to export pa fa, their business must be reported to the ministry," he said during a telephone interview. He said there used to be someone raising paf fa in Phontong village in Chanthabouly district, but he didn't know whether or not he was still in business.

Mr Saithong has been breeding pa fa for more than a year now. He started with seven turtles that he bought in Vang Vieng district of Vientiane province, but now they have increased in number to about 800. "I am very fond of turtle meat myself," he remarked.

He can sell the turtles for a good price. Local restaurants give him 70,000 kip per kg and he has sold about 200 so far. The eggs also fetch a good price. He can get 2,500 kip for one egg, which is more than chicken and duck eggs sell for.

"I sell the turtles because I need money to make more ponds. At present, I have only a few ponds," he explained.

He is also experimenting with breeding turtles from Taiwan, because he wants to produce turtles that are half Chinese and half Lao. He explained that the Lao variety was larger than the Chinese one, but the Chinese turtle produced more eggs.

"They are not difficult to raise, but we have to be very careful during the first three months after they hatch from the eggs, especially during the winter," Saithong explained.

He spends his free time with the turtles, taking care of them in the early morning before he goes to work and in the evening when he gets home. He learned how to raise pa fa by reading about them and also by consulting locals who live near the turtles natural habitat.

"Eating the pa fa that we cultivate is better than eating those caught only from the river. If we continue to do that, they will become extinct," Saithong pointed out.