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Rare pond turtle catch to help conservation

Efforts to find a Vietnamese pond turtle, *Mauremys annamensis*, in the wild recently paid off when a young female was successfully trapped by biologists in the central province of Quảng Nam Province last Sunday.

The capture comes after months of work by the Asian Turtle Programme (ATP), which carried out its fourth major survey in central Việt Nam in April. The survey was aimed at identifying a site where Vietnamese pond turtles might reside.

Researchers focused on Quảng Nam where the first specimen was found in 1939 in the ancient town of Hội An. Biologists believe the turtles primarily reside in the coastal wetlands in and around Quảng Nam.

Wildlife traders were initially interviewed in order to trace the animal back to its natural habitat. As researchers made their way to potential locations, they also made inquiries with fishermen and local hunters.

In the months leading up to the capture, biologists observed seven live pond turtles, many of which were being kept by people as pets, and collected the shell remains of eight others.

Researchers even found a turtle in a temple pond

where it has lived for many years.

After months of groundwork, researchers eventually narrowed their list of possible locations, and finally chose a commune to focus its efforts in capturing a live specimen in the wild.

They set themselves an October deadline, which passed with no avail.

Eventually a field team, led by Tim McCormack and Nguyễn Xuân Thuận, revisited the commune late last month to conduct a quick feasibility study in preparation for an onsite based project planned by the ATP.

The project includes conservation measures aimed at protecting multiple turtle species, and a breeding and release programme, which will use newborns from the Cúc Phương Turtle Conservation Centre.

During the feasibility study, several traps were set in a local lake to see if specimens could be captured safely.

After three days, a single Vietnamese pond turtle was recovered. Though hunters and traders are still able to find the turtles in the wild, the female was the first documented *mauremys annamensis* specimen to have been captured since 1941, according to the field team's research.



Hard to come by: A Vietnamese pond turtle caught in Quảng Nam Province. — Photo courtesy of the Asian Turtle Programme

ATP biologists are pushing conservation efforts because of threats to pond turtles' natural habitat and continued hunting.

The turtles' apparent preference for ponds and streams in lowland areas has brought them in direct competition with humans as more land is used for agriculture, aquaculture and development.

Although specimens have been observed while

in the possession of traders and pet owners, such occurrences have become less frequent in recent years, a possible indication that the pond turtle population is declining.

At the same time, the turtles continue to be hunted and traded, and are often smuggled to China for food or medicinal purposes.

As fears of a dwindling turtle population rise, the

Government has added *mauremys annamensis* to the list of protected species.

The ATP has carried out four surveys spanning three provinces in the hopes of finding more wild populations of Vietnamese pond turtles.

Once a potential site is found, the ATP will introduce conservation measures, and will attempt to create greater community aware-

ness and participation.

The group has also obtained vital information on other species and the wildlife trade in Quảng Nam Province.

Conservation efforts are conducted by the ATP, the Quảng Nam Forest Protection Department and World Wildlife Foundation's MOSAIC project with funding from the German Ministry of Environment and the Allwetter Muenster Zoo. — VNS