

Nature and the Environment in the News

Source: Vietnam News

Issue:

Date: 12 Nov, 2003

Tortoise breeders gamble on slow, steady path to prosperity

HẢI DƯƠNG — Huge demand for tortoise meat in cities to make traditional dishes is fetching tortoise-breeders in the northern province of Hải Dương handsome profits.

But this has not always been the case. It took hard work and initial heavy losses on the part of the region's pioneers before tortoise-breeding became a lucrative industry.

Trần Văn Nước is one such pioneer. A farmer in the province's Thái Thịnh Commune, he now breeds the reptiles in a 1,000sq.m pond and earns a whopping VNĐ60-70 million profit each year. But his first foray into the business, in 1992, was a disaster.

He had invested VNĐ6 million to buy 100 hatchlings, but his lack of experience saw him lose all of them.

"Every day, I would go to the pond, pick up dead turtles and bury them because I couldn't bear to see my wife's disappointment," he remembers with a sigh.

Learning the ropes

Not willing to throw in the towel, he then visited a suc-

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TRẦN VĂN NƯỚC, TORTOISE FARMER

cessful farm in nearby Yên Thành Commune to learn what went wrong and how it was really done. He discovered his faults laid in both choosing the hatchlings and nurturing them.

"I learnt to select and to feed the creatures. Besides, I found out that for their growth, a clean water source is the key factor," Nước says.

In his second attempt, the tortoise bred well and for Nước there was no turning back after that.

Since, he has invested VNĐ30 million each for the pond and to buy hatchlings.

"Tortoise breeding needs large investment but it also fetches huge profits," he says. Tortoise - shell and all - sell for as high as VNĐ250,000 a kilogram, Nước reveals.

With new farms mushrooming across his district, Kinh Môn, and willing to pay VNĐ18,000-20,000 for

a good breed, Nước plans to breed hatchlings for sale.

The industry low-down

There are 10 species of tortoises commonly bred, some imported from Thailand and Taiwan, but domestic varieties remain the most popular because they suit the climate and terrain.

Despite his initial problems, Nước says, "breeding tortoises does not take up so much time as fish because there is no need to change the water regularly."

"Yet, profits are 4-5 times higher. The most important thing is to select good breeds and a clean pond," he said.

Nguyễn Văn Miên, chairman of the Thái Thịnh Co-operative says about 120 households, 15 per cent of the commune's households, are breeding tortoises. Each has at least 100 and the largest have 4,500 animals.

Phạm Bá Trung is a big breeder in the commune, with 4,500 tortoises.

He says the commune's farmers sell three categories of tortoises based on weight: 1.5kg, 1kg and under 1kg.

"During harvest, we only have to make phone calls to seafood agencies in Hải Dương, Hải Phòng and Quảng Ninh.

"Their lorries will come to take away tortoises," Trung says.

Local breeders agree feeding the tortoises pose the greatest difficulty. Their food includes minced snail, rat, worms and small fish.

The lucrative nature of these farms means banks are keen to lend to their owners.

Nguyễn Văn Trung, head of the Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development's branch in Kinh Môn District says 60 per cent of the commune's breeders borrow from his bank and they all repay on time.

If there is one thing the farmers are worried about, it is a lack of veterinary or medical help. Nước says: "We will be devastated if there is an epidemic." — VNS