

March 9, 2010

Press Release

NEW CHELONIAN VISITOR CENTER PROMOTES CONSERVATION OF VIETNAM'S TORTOISES AND FRESHWATER TURTLES

Hanoi, March 10, 2010 – Cuc Phuong National Park opened the doors to the region's first visitor interpretation center focused exclusively on the conservation and protection of tortoises and freshwater turtles.

Located on the grounds of the park's Turtle Conservation Center (TCC), the new educational facilities incorporate a range of interpretive displays and exhibits including underwater viewing tanks, a turtle egg incubation and hatchling room, and a mock hunting camp and forest trail.

This new educational component of the park's turtle conservation center was developed to promote efforts to protect turtles amongst the park's approximately 80,000 annual visitors.



“We hope the new Chelonian Interpretation Center will help the public understand more about turtles and the crisis our turtles face as a result of hunting and trade,” says Bui Dang Phong, Vice Director of Wildlife Conservation and Rescue Centers at Cuc Phuong National Park. “Vietnam's turtles are being hunted to the point of extinction. Many species' survival may be contingent upon getting the public to understand the problem and actively becoming involved in their protection.”

ENV also marks the opening of the center with the release of two new important resources intended to support law enforcement agencies in their efforts to reduce the illegal trade of turtles. A short film produced by ENV on the Asian turtle crisis provides forest rangers and park managers with an introduction to turtles and an overview of the threats they face, as well as some basic information on dealing with confiscations.

ENV is also distributing a new electronic identification guide to tortoises and freshwater turtles of Vietnam for law enforcement agencies which includes photos and identification indicators for all 25 native species as well as other important information such as “alerts” prescribing recommended actions for the most critically endangered species if observed or confiscated from the trade.

Vietnam is considered one of the most important hotspots for turtle diversity in Asia with 25 different native species of tortoise and freshwater turtles including five soft-shell species and 20 other hard-shell turtle

species. Vietnam also is home to at least two endemic species of turtles that are found nowhere else in the world, as well as the legendary Hoan Kiem turtle, *Rafetus swinhoei*, one of the most famous and rarest turtles in the world.



All of Vietnam's turtles are threatened by hunting and trade to meet the insatiable demand mainly from consumers in China, where turtles are consumed in special dishes or used to make traditional medicine. Evidence suggests that wild populations of most turtle species in Vietnam have declined significantly over the past 15 years leaving fragmented and degraded populations surviving in the wild.

ENV's Wildlife Crime Unit has documented 434 cases involving illegal hunting, smuggling, or trade of tortoises and freshwater turtles since 2005. These figures include 163 smuggling cases accounting for more than an estimated 25 tons of turtles or up to 30,000 individuals.

Given that only a small fraction of trade is believed to be apprehended, this would suggest that the quantity of turtles being smuggled to China is significantly higher.

"We urge the public to get involved in helping protect our turtles before it is too late," says Nguyen Thi Van Anh of Education for Nature – Vietnam ENV, who manages ENV's efforts to combat wildlife crime. "Without public support, the authorities cannot possibly succeed in preventing some of our turtle species from being lost." Van Anh urges the public to take action in the following ways:

- Do not buy or consume hard-shell turtles or products made from turtles.
- Before ordering soft-shell turtle on the menu, make sure that it is a Chinese soft-shell turtle species, and that it was born and raised on a farm. Make a point of asking the restaurant owner and demanding farm-raised turtles only.
- Help educate others so that your friends and family will understand why it is important to preserve our unique biodiversity and protect turtles and other wildlife.
- Report turtle hunters and traders to local authorities or call us at ENV on our toll free Wildlife Crime Hotline 1-800-1522.

The Chelonian Visitor Interpretation Center was developed by the park in partnership with Education for Nature – Vietnam (ENV). Technical support was provided by the Asian Turtle Conservation Program of the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo.

Financial support was provided by a host of international organizations and institutions including the Auckland Zoo, Taronga Zoo, Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA), Houston Zoo, Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Gardens of Hong Kong, Perth Zoo, Melbourne Zoo, the Humane Society International, and the Dutch Tortoise Society.

About the Turtle Conservation Center (TCC)

The larger Turtle Conservation Center was established in 1999 and currently holds more than 1000 turtles representing 20 native species that were either rescued from the illegal trade or born at the center as part

of several conservation breeding programs that have been established for some of the most endangered species. The TCC also focuses on training young scientists and forest rangers, and research.

About Education for Nature - Vietnam

Education for Nature-Vietnam (ENV) was established in 2000 as Vietnam's first non-governmental organization focused on conservation of nature and the environment. Our mission is to foster greater understanding amongst the Vietnamese public about environmental issues of local, national and global significance, ranging from protection of wildlife and natural ecosystems to climate change. We employ creative and innovative strategies to influence attitudes and behavior, not only highlighting the need to protect Vietnam's rich natural heritage and the living world around us, but also encouraging greater public participation in achieving this important and challenging task.

For more information, please contact:

Mr. Bui Dang Phong

Cuc Phuong National Park

Phone: 030-3848-090

Email: TCCcucphuong@gmail.com

Ms. Tran Phuong Minh

Education for Nature - Vietnam

No. 5 Ngo 192 Thai Thinh

PO Box 222

Dong Da district

Hanoi, Vietnam

Phone/fax: +84 4 3514-8850

E-mail: env@fpt.vn

www.envietnam.org (English)

www.thiennhien.org (Vietnamese)

www.savingvietnamswildlife.org (English wildlife trade website)