

The Asian Turtle Crisis *Bulletin*

News from around the Region

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The Asian Turtle Crisis Bulletin includes a brief summary of activities involving turtle conservation and research in the region reported through the Asian Turtle Conservation Network (ATCN). This bulletin is produced periodically by the ATCN and distributed electronically to individuals with interest in developments involving turtles in the Asia region.

Region

Sundarbans Surveys Indicate *Batagur baska* Considered Rare in Bangladesh

Source: AHM Ali Reza and his survey team

Preliminary findings from a survey to determine the status of *Batagur baska* in the Bangladesh Sundarbans that was carried out in January-March 2005 by AHM Ali Reza and students from Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka suggested that *Batagur baska* is uncommon in the area. The two weeks surveys examined potential nesting sites and interviewed local fishermen, turtle hunters and villagers in and around the Sundarbans mangrove forest. Markets were also inspected where freshwater turtles were observed for sale, as well as live Olive Ridley marine turtles selling for \$10 USD each. Thirteen dead Ridelys were also recorded from the sandy beaches of the Sundarbans which were mostly incidental deaths during commercial fishing, as the local fishermen do not use Turtle Excluder Devices (TED) in their fishing nets. However, no *Batagur baska* were observed in local markets.

The initial survey was intended to gather information on the current population status and nesting sites of Bangladesh populations of the species prior to efforts by the *Batagur baska* working group, comprised of scientists, conservationists, and government partners to develop a draft regional action plan for conservation of *Batagur baska*. The field survey was supported by an Asian Turtle Action Grant from WCS. The Action Grant Program is jointly administered by WCS, the TSA, and the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo.

Cambodia

Sre Ambel *Batagur baska* Project

Source: Heng Sovannara, Department of Fisheries and WCS *Batagur baska* Project Teamleader

Two clutches totaling 45 eggs have been deposited on Kaong River beaches so far this year, reports Heng Sovannara of the Cambodian Fisheries Department. Nestings occurred in early January, one of these involving a previously unrecorded female nesting on a beach that has not been used over the past few years. Sovannara is hopeful that additional females will still nest, as other females have been spotted near and on the nesting beaches. During the first week of February, fisherman caught and turned over a 15kg adult male *Batagur baska* to the river patrol team. A yearling was also recently caught.

The Cambodia Turtle Conservation Project (Cardamom Mountains)

Source: Sitha Som, Koulang Chey, and Yoeun Sun, Royal University of Phnom Penh

In December, students from the Royal University of Phnom Penh carried out surveys in the Sre Prang area of Veal Veng district (Central Cardamom Mountains) using traps and timed searches. During the ten-day survey, 11 turtles were caught in traps including seven Asian leaf turtles (*Cyclemys sp.*), two Asian box turtles (*Cuora amboinensis*), and two giant Asian pond turtles

(*Heosemys grandis*). Timed searches, which focused on a variety of different habitats and totaled more than 100 man-hours, succeeded in finding only a single *Cuora amboinensis*.

The survey area was selected based upon interviews with local people suggesting that many turtles could be found in the area. However, despite the trapping success, the survey team concluded that hunting (using dogs) and electro-fishing represent serious threats to the Sre Prang turtles. Local people readily exploit turtles as a source of food, for medicine, and to sell into the trade. The survey team noted that during their visit, they found numerous shells in local villages and forest rangers recently confiscated a sack of shells belonging to 35 *Cyclemys sp.*, one *Heosemys grandis*, and two impressed tortoises (*Manouria impressa*). It is not uncommon for the turtles to be eaten locally and their shells sold to traders where they eventually find their way into the medicinal (export market) trade.

The survey was carried out as part of a series of surveys by students from the Royal University of Phnom Penh focusing on turtles in the Central Cardamom Mountains, and is supported by a BP Conservation Award with technical inputs and training provided by Conservation International.

Hong Kong

TSA Europe Helps Find Homes for Confiscated Turtles

Source: KFBG

The Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden (KFBG) transferred 55 turtles to TSA Europe in December including one *Orlitia bonreensis*, 20 *Notochelys platynota*, 10 *Siebenrockiella crassicollis*, and 24 *Cyclemys sp.* The turtles were part of a shipment confiscated by Hong Kong authorities earlier in the year.

Indonesia

The Indonesian Turtle Working Group

Source: Rodrigo Ibarrando Vazquez (Bonggi)

In December, the Indonesian Turtle Working Group was established at the Forestry University in Bogor, West Java. The first meeting attracted 25 university students with interest in herpetology. According to Bonggi, the working group will become a base of operations for turtle work in Indonesia, and provide a means for students to become involved in turtle-related research and conservation activities.

Bonggi, a young Spaniard who became interested in turtles during a stint volunteering at the Cikananga Wildlife Rescue Center in Sukabumi, Java, lists major priorities for 2005 as including establishment of an Indonesian Turtle Conservation Center within the Samboya Lestari Conservation Complex in Balikpapan, Borneo, implementing measures to conserve the Rote Island snake-neck turtle (*Chelodina mccordi*), and further development of the Indonesian Turtle Working Group.

Bonggi noted that members of the group were presently involved in a study looking at the farming of freshwater turtles in Indonesia to evaluate the success of farming methods, including the species currently breeding for commercial purposes, volumes produced, and the extent to which laundering is involved in sustaining these operations.

Efforts to Conserve the Rote Island Snake-neck Turtle

Source: Rodrigo Ibarrando Vazquez (Bonggi)

Recent surveys by Bonggi of Rote Island suggest that wild populations of the endemic Rote Island snake-necked turtle (*Chelodina mccordi*) remain under continued intense pressure from hunting, mainly to meet the demand of international pet markets where the species can be sold for as much as \$1500 USD per an individual. According to a recent report by Bonggi, only 21

individuals were caught last year (2004). Trappers are presently concentrating on a lake in the northern part of the island. Locals have also suggested that the species can be found on the island of Timor, though no confirmation of this report has been made.

Three different areas of Rote Island have been selected to initiate a project focused on reducing chemical inputs on agricultural land. The project is targeting sites that closely correspond to areas inhabited by the last remaining populations of *Chelodina mccordi*. In addition to hunting and trade, the Rote Island snake-necked turtle is also threatened by loss of habitat resulting from agricultural conversion and pollution from agricultural lands surrounding wetlands and lakes where the species remains.

A follow-up survey was carried out February 19 through March 5 by Bonggi and Chris Shepherd of TRAFFIC SEA looking at current levels of hunting and trade of the species. Bonggi noted that one very positive recent development was the hiring of "Joseph", a former hunter of 30 years on the island, as a field assistant for the Rote Island project.

Efforts to conserve the last remaining wild populations of Rote Island snake-necked turtles is supported by the Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF) and Chelonian Research Foundation (CRF), in collaboration with TRAFFIC SEA, the Indonesian Animal Rescue Center Network, and Forestry Department of Indonesia.

Laos

No turtle conservation efforts currently underway in Laos

Myanmar

Second *Kachuga trivittata* Survey on the Chindwin River Looks at Threats

Source: WCS Myanmar Turtle Program Team

In February, WCS Turtle Program staff carried out a second survey of the upper Chindwin River in the vicinity of Htamandhi Wildlife Sanctuary focused on the Burmese roofed terrapin (*Kachuga trivittata*). The upper stretch of river in the area of the wildlife sanctuary is the only site where nesting is known to occur according to Gerald Kuchling, who led the first survey in early 2004. Students from Mandalay University have since identified a number of nesting beaches, and efforts are currently underway to develop a project focused on protection of those sites, as well as turtles along the river.

The February survey focused on examining potential threats to the species. During 10 days in the field, WCS turtle team members Win Ko Ko and Khin Myo Myo interviewed fishermen and local villagers along the river between Htamandhi WS and Khamti Town, as well as inspecting reported nesting beaches, and observed the tracks of a female on one of the beaches. The carapace of a male *Kachuga trivittata* was also recovered, as well as a live juvenile *Chitra vandijki*.

In March, a third survey is planned focusing on the Hukaung Valley region of the upper Chindwin River. The results of the two surveys will help wildlife protection authorities to develop a comprehensive program to conserve the species along the Chindwin River.

Malaysia

Research on Freshwater Turtle Ecology at Logan Bunut National Park, Sarawak, Malaysia

Source: Kitty Jensen, UNIMAS

The British Chelonian Group (BCG) will help support research efforts by Kitty Jensen, a PhD student at the Sarawak University of Malaysia (UNIMAS) in Kuching. Jensen is looking at the ecology of *Amyda cartilaginea* and *Cyclemys dentata*, and surveying freshwater turtle communities at Loagan Bunut National Park. BCG has agreed to help support the costs of a desperately needed computer.

Jensen is also the recipient of a Linnaeus Fund award from the Chelonian Research Foundation (CRF), which will support some of her field research during the coming year.

KUSTEM Receives Expert Advice on Determining the Sex of Hatchling *Batagur baska*

Source: Professor EH Chan, KUSTEM University (University College of Science and Technology) and TSA
In December 2004, the Setiu River *Batagur Baska* Conservation Project received expert assistance from visiting conservation biologist Gerald Kuchling in helping determine the sex of hatchlings and juvenile turtles at several head-starting facilities in Malaysia. Using an endoscope that he developed, Kuchling demonstrated how to check for ovaries or testes on juvenile turtles by inserting the small telescope through an incision in the skin. As most of Malaysia's conservation efforts for the species have focused on breeding and head-start programs, determining the sex of juveniles and adjusting nest temperatures to produce a desired ratio of males and females is essential for conservation.

The Setiu River Conservation Project was developed in 2003 by KUSTEM University, and involves a conservation breeding and in situ research component. One of the immediate priorities of the research component is to determine the temperature ranges for production of males and females. The endoscopy training was supported in part by a grant from the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA), while on-going TSD research is supported in part by the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo and Cleveland Zoological Society's Small Grants Program.

Notes of Interest: *Batagur* juvenile Caught on Dungun River

Source: Professor EH Chan, KUSTEM University (University College of Science and Technology)
KUSTEM University researcher Soh Long Leng has extended sampling to include the Dungun River, about 100k south of Kuala Terengganu. Although the governments head-start program has not worked on the river for several years, in early March a juvenile (possibly a yearling) was caught by seine net indicating that some nests survive human predation.

Thailand

No Reports from Thailand

Vietnam

Hoan Kiem Turtle Activity Period Study

Source: ATCN Staff report

In February, Mr. Le Than Long began work in the capacity of field research officer on the *Rafetus swinhoei* Project. A graduate of Hanoi National University, Mr. Long will serve as the principal field research assistant on efforts to determine the presence or absence of *Rafetus swinhoei* at two sites where previous surveys suggest that the species may still survive in the wild. Long participated in the recent field training skills course at Cuc Phuong National Park (see story below) and spent an additional two weeks working with Tim McCormack (Vietnam Turtle Program research coordinator) on the *Pyxidea mouhotii* radio telemetry study at the park.

Initial efforts by Long focused on *Rafetus* have centered on Hoan Kiem Lake where Vietnam's only known living example of the species can be found. Long is to carry out ten days of

monitoring to determine activity periods of the Hoan Kiem turtle, as well as to interview people working around the lake to assess seasonality, and other factors relevant to the wild study. Following this initial collection of data, Long will begin work in the field on one of the two potential *Rafetus* sites. The *Rafetus swinhoei* project is carried out in cooperation with Hanoi National University, and supported by a grant from the Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF) and Melbourne Zoo.

Practical Field Skills Development Training Course

Source: ATCN Staff report

The Asian Turtle Conservation Network (ATCN) hosted its first major training course for university students focusing on Vietnam's endangered tortoises and freshwater turtles. Six students from Hanoi National University and Vinh University participated in the seven-day intensive training program held at Cuc Phuong National Park's Turtle Conservation Center (TCC). The students, selected based upon their interest and past experience working with turtles, participated in hands-on instruction focused on building practical field skills. For example, training included modules on developing the students' field identification skills, learning basic mapping and navigation (use of compasses and GPS), interview-based survey techniques, use of radio telemetry to monitor turtles in their habitat, and methods of trapping and carrying out timed searches to survey turtles in the field.

During the course, students also carried out small focused research projects involving captive turtles at the TCC, experimented with trapping in a local wetland, interviewed hunters in local villages, and practiced completing field records and processing turtles for a number of simulated situations that are commonly experienced in the field.

The course was instructed by Bui Dang Phong, Manager of the Turtle Conservation Center at Cuc Phuong National Park, Tim McCormack, research coordinator for the WCS/CMZ Vietnam Turtle Program, David Emmett of Conservation International (CI) Indo-Burma Program, Vu Thi Quyen of Education for Nature – Vietnam, and Douglas Hendrie, Wildlife Conservation Society and Cleveland Metroparks Zoo Asia Regional Turtle Conservation Coordinator. The next planned field skills training course is planned for later this year and will be hosted by Conservation International and held in the Central Cardamom Mountains.

Asian Turtle Crisis Media Workshop

Source: ATCN Staff report

On March 4, the Vietnam Forum of Environmental Journalists (VFEJ) hosted a workshop on the Asian turtle crisis for journalists aboard a hired boat on the Red River. The workshop was focused on enhancing the knowledge of national journalists about threats to turtles resulting from hunting and trade. Eighteen representatives of national newspapers and television attended the half-day session, which included a series of presentations on the Asian turtle crisis, an introduction to the ecology of turtles, and a brief overview of research needs and current activities.

During the workshop, the journalists also engaged in lively discussions on hot issues such as the trend towards the farming of wildlife in Vietnam, the role of farms in the laundering of wild-caught animals, economic limitations in hard-shell turtle farming, and attitudes towards farmed versus wild-caught wildlife in terms of perceived taste and health benefits. The journalists also discussed the difficult topic of what to do with confiscated wildlife, and were introduced to IUCN Guidelines for dealing with confiscated wildlife and debated current practices used by provincial wildlife protection authorities including selling animals back to traders and releasing animals without consideration for health, habitat, range, and potential impacts on existing populations of the species.

The workshop was part of efforts by the Vietnam Turtle Program to build knowledge and awareness amongst national journalists about the crisis facing Vietnam's turtles, and encourage quality and factual reporting to raise public awareness about the issue.

The workshop was supported by the Vietnam Forum of Environmental Journalists, the WCS Vietnam Turtle Program, and Education for Nature- Vietnam. Presenters included: Bui Dang Phong, Cuc Phuong Turtle Conservation Center, Tim McCormack, Vietnam program research coordinator, Douglas Hendrie, Asian Turtle Coordinator. Program coordination, assistance, and translation was by Education for Nature – Vietnam (ENV).

Community Surveys Look at Hunting of Turtles at Cuc Phuong National Park

Source: Tim McCormack, WCS/CMZ Vietnam research coordinator

In February, the keeled box turtle (*Pyxidea mouhotii*) Research Project initiated surveys in local communities to learn more about hunting impacts upon the species and to discover what local hunters might know about the ecology of the species. More than 70 interviews were carried out within villages bordering the park. Some of the more interesting information from these surveys includes:

The greatest threat to wild populations of *Pyxidea mouhotii* in the park is opportunistic collection of turtles by people hunting for snails and collecting firewood. There are far fewer turtle hunters today than there were more than a decade ago, when traders arrived in local communities offering to buy turtles, triggering massive collection and the rapid reduction of turtles observed in the wild.

According to local people, *Pyxidea mouhotii* is active from April to October, and remains dormant over the winter months when they hide in caves (rock crevices). Turtles are best collected in April and May, though September is a good time to find turtles congregating beneath a particular kind of fruit tree native to the park.

Local people also reported several other species of turtles found in the western river valley and buffer zone of the park. Of interest were reports of a giant soft-shell that used to occur in the Buoï River in previous years (possibly *Rafetus swinhoei* or *Pelochelys cantori*). Other species of local origin in areas bordering the park include *Pelodiscus sinensis*, *Cyclemys* sp., *Ocadia sinensis*, *Indotestudo elongata*, and possibly *Sacalia quadriocellata*.

Note of interest: Over the past few months, local people voluntarily turned over five live turtles to Cuc Phuong National Park after learning about the park's efforts to conserve the species.

The *Pyxidea mouhotii* Conservation Project is jointly administered by WCS and Cuc Phuong National Park with support from grants by the Rufford Foundation and the Humane Society International (HSI). Tim McCormack is leading the study as part of his Masters' research at the University of East Anglia.

TCC Receives Turtles from Nghe An Trade Seizure

Source: ATCN Staff report

In December, the Turtle Conservation Center (TCC) received 122 turtles representing five different species from Nghe An provincial wildlife protection officers. The turtles were being kept at the Pu Mat National Park Wildlife Rescue Center since September, when the 277 kilos of turtles were confiscated by police from a bus heading for Vinh City. The shipment originally including nine species, but Pu Mat National Park released many of the turtles that were native to the region in the park following a period of quarantine at the rescue center. Species of southern origin were turned over to Cuc Phuong National Park pending identification of potential release sites in the south. These included 25 yellow-headed temple turtles (*Hieremys annandalii*), 9 giant Asian pond turtles (*Heosemys grandis*), 7 Malaysian box turtles (*Cuora amboinensis*), 46 snail-eating turtles (*Malayemys subtrijuga*), and 35 black marsh turtles (*Siebenrockiella crassicolis*).

New Quarantine Cage at the TCC

Source: ATCN Staff report

In February, contractors began work on the TCC's new quarantine cage. Supported with funds provided through the a CEF grant administered by the Wildlife Conservation Society for veterinary training and improvements, the new cage will allow the TCC to separate turtles that are quarantined for health reasons from those quarantined following receipt from the trade, but otherwise appearing healthy. The TCC has a small vet station that was established in 2001 which includes a treatment and recovery room, and large outdoor holding cage with enclosures. Since the development of the quarantine facilities at the TCC, the risk of disease transmissions between sick turtles and healthy turtles within the general population has been greatly reduced, and overall health has improved.

Turtle Training for Wildlife Protection Officers from the North

Source: ATCN Staff report

In December, Fauna and Flora International (FFI) co-hosted a turtle training workshop for wildlife protection officers and forest rangers representing four northern provinces and Hoang Lien Son National Park. The training focused on providing frontline enforcement officers with a basic knowledge of the ecology, values, and threats to Vietnam's turtles. The training was the 12th such turtle training workshop held for wildlife protection officers in Vietnam since 2001. Wildlife protection officers from 26 provinces and five 10 protected areas, border guards, customs police, and representatives from both China and Vietnam's CITES offices have undergone similar training courses. FFI carried out the December workshop in cooperation with Cuc Phuong National Park's Turtle Conservation Center and the WCS/Cleveland Metroparks Zoo Vietnam Turtle Conservation Program.

In April 2005, the Asia Regional Turtle Program will host a training of trainers workshop to help representatives from Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Cambodia develop similar local language training courses of turtle identification, ecology, and trade for wildlife protection officers.

Trade Seizures Reported

Mondulkiri Trader Busted (Cambodia)

Source: WCS Program, Cambodia

Mondulkiri, Cambodia (January 2005): Wildlife Protection authorities busted another turtle trader in the Mondulkiri region netting 13 *Heosemys grandis* and a single *Amyda cartilaginea*.

Cardamom Mountains (Cambodia)

Source: David Emmett, Conservation International

Forest rangers in the Cardamom Mountains confiscated a shipment of 13 Asiatic soft-shell turtles (*Amyda cartilaginea*). The soft-shells were released in a pagoda pond in Pursat.

Ninh Binh Trade seizure (Vietnam)

Source: ATCN Staff report

Ninh Binh Police seized seven tons of wildlife from two buses traveling north on Highway One. The shipment included more than six tons of snakes, 217 kg of pangolins, and 36 kg of turtles representing three species; *Pyxidea mouhotii*, *Cuora galbinifrons*, and *Platysternon megacephalum*. The animals were reportedly shipped from central Vietnam and destined for Quang Ninh Province and the Chinese border. Ninh Binh provincial authorities turned over a small number of animals to Soc Son Rescue Center in Hanoi, and auctioned off the remainder, that were reportedly in poor health, to traders.

Myanmar Forestry Department Confiscates Turtles

Source: Myanmar Nature and Wildlife Conservation Division

In December, Wildlife Protection officers from the Nature and Wildlife Conservation Division of the Forestry Department confiscated 42 Asian soft-shell turtles (*Amyda cartilaginea*) from a trader on

the famous Burma Road constructed during World War II to ship supplies between India and China. All of the confiscated soft-shell turtles were released December 24 in a local river.

News Note: Holes Help Hunters Secure Turtles at Camp?

Source: Doug Hendrie, WCS/CMZ

A shipment of Malayan snail-eating turtles (*Malayemys subtrijuga*) received in December by the Turtle Conservation Center (TCC) at Cuc Phuong National Park had a number of individuals with holes drilled in the margin of their carapace. This is the first observation of this type of amongst trade specimens of *Malayemys subtrijuga* in Vietnam. Similar holes have frequently been observed on elongated tortoises (*Indotestudo elongata*) confiscated in the trade. It is believed that hunters drill the holes in order string wire and secure captured tortoises for extended durations of time while the hunters remain in the forest.

New Photo Gallery on Website

The Asian Turtle Conservation Network has finally put its photo gallery up on-line on the website. Featured are photos from a range of sources working in the region with Asian turtles. Check it out at www.asianturtlenetwork.org

For reports and other news-worthy notes of interest, visit the ATCN website library at www.asianturtlenetwork.org

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