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First turtle out of the transport box - One of 71 Vietnamese pond turtles (*Mauremys annamensis*) arriving at the Turtle Conservation Centre after a long journey from Europe. Photo by: Sarah Wahl



Coming home: Opportunities for conservation of the endemic Vietnamese pond turtle

Press release by Education for Nature Vietnam (ENV)

Ninh Binh, August 19, 2013 – The Turtle Conservation Center (TCC) in Cuc Phuong National Park has today welcomed home 71 endemic Vietnamese pond turtles after a long journey from Europe, where two zoos have been breeding the critically endangered species.

Rotterdam Zoo in the Netherlands and Münster Zoo in Germany have partnered with the TCC and Cuc Phuong National Park to bring the turtles home. This is the first time a large group of turtles from a European breeding program has been returned to Vietnam.

“Today marks an important step in the conservation of this rare species in Vietnam,” said Mr. Bui Dang Phong, Manager of the TCC. “Poaching, farming and habitat loss pose a severe threat to the small number of Vietnamese pond turtles remaining in the wild. It is Vietnam’s duty to actively protect these turtles from illegal hunting and trade to ensure we do not lose another precious endemic species.”

The rare Vietnamese pond turtle (*Mauremys annamensis*) is found only in lowland wetlands, ponds and rivers of a few select provinces in central Vietnam. Wild populations have disappeared rapidly since the late

1980s, mainly as a result of intense hunting, smuggling and illegal wildlife trade to meet demand from consumers in Vietnam and China. More recently, there has been a marked increase in the development in captive farming of the species, despite its protected status.



Above: The rare turtles arrive at Noi Bai airport in Hanoi. All of the 71 turtles are offspring from Vietnamese pond turtles at Rotterdam Zoo in the Netherlands, Muenster Zoo in Germany and from a private breeder in Germany - Photo by ENV

“We are proud to be contributing to the conservation of these rare turtles and returning them to Vietnam,” said Mr. Henk Zwartepoorte, Curator of Reptiles at Rotterdam Zoo. “We can feel optimistic about Vietnamese initiatives such as this and the progress of international efforts to help this species survive in the wild.”

The 71 turtles will join more than 200 of their relatives already being kept at the TCC, all of which have been confiscated from the illegal trade, handed in by volunteers, or bred at the TCC rescue center. The ultimate goal will be to return the turtles to their best remaining habitat – Quang Ngai province in central Vietnam – as part of the *Mauremys Annamensis* Project (MAP) managed by the Asian Turtle Program (ATP).

“The Vietnamese pond turtle is now globally recognized as a priority for conservation. Although these turtles survive in captivity, urgent action is needed to protect this species’ wild habitat to allow it to remain in nature in Vietnam,” said Mr. Timothy McCormack, Program Coordinator of the ATP and MAP.

The TCC gratefully acknowledges Rotterdam Zoo, Münster Zoo, and Mr. Herbert Becker for their generous support in the successful breeding and return of the turtles. The TCC also extends thanks to the ATP and Quang Ngai People’s Committee for their dedication in the conservation of this endemic species. Finally, the TCC would like to recognize Education for Nature – Vietnam for its help in organizing this historic return event.



Above: On Friday, 16th of August 2013, the turtles arrived late at the Turtle Conservation Centre (TCC) where staff, security and FPD officials from Quang Ngai greeted the Vietnamese pond turtles from Europe. A priority for the TCC staff was to take care of the animals, including a health check up after the exhausting journey



Above: On the 19th of August 2013 the TCC held a press conference at Cuc Phuong National Park, marking this important event of an endemic species being returned to Vietnam for future releases to the wild



Above: Mr. Truong Quang Bich, Director of Cuc Phuong National Park and Mr. Bui Dang Phong, manager of the Turtle Conservation Centre, welcome the turtles to Cuc Phuong and explain to the press and media why this turtle species is of special conservation concern and a priority for breeding at the rescue centre in Cuc Phuong - Photo by Tim McCormack

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