



Asian Turtle Program

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11th October 2013

Below: The first time the dam has been opened, releasing water at up to 28m³/s. A concern is that the turtle could be attracted to the moving water and become wedged or stuck in the dam gates



Photo by: Pham Van Thong - ATP

Conservation of Hoan Kiem turtle (*Rafetus swinhoei*) in Dong Mo Lake: Close Call as Dam is Opened

Dong Mo lake in Son Tay district Hanoi can be a peaceful contrast to the hustle and bustle of Hanoi, the large lake is also home to Swinhoe's softshell turtle (*Rafetus swinhoei*), at least one of the giant softshells inhabits the lake. In Vietnam the species is better known as the Hoan Kiem turtle as an individual of the species inhabits Hoan Kiem lake in Hanoi to which a 15th century legend attributes magical powers to the animal. With only four individuals of the species known in the world and Dong Mo lake the only confirmed wild habitat where the species survives it is a priority lake for conservation.

Community support of protection of the Dong Mo turtle is growing following seven years of monitoring and awareness by the Asian Turtle Program (ATP) at the lake. The authorities in Vietnam have helped rescue the turtle once already when a dam break in 2008 resulted in a 69kg *Rafetus swinhoei* escaping and being captured downstream. The turtle was fortunate rescued and returned to Dong Mo.



Above: New nets that can be raised above the water surface have been installed at two locations by the ATP through support from CEPF. Photo by ATP



Students eagerly playing the board game "Lucky turtle"
Photo by Nguyen Tai Thang - ATP

But another threat now towers over a section of water, following the 2008 dam break a much larger dam had to be constructed. Four large gates (each 4 meters wide and 10 meters tall) now hold back Dong Mo's water. With the doors opening the bottom to release water the challenge of turtle proofing such a large dam and the risk it poses if the turtle decides to escape again have been highlighted by the ATP since construction started. The lake management authorities have tried to avoid opening the dam and a series of nets had been placed before it by the ATP and local lake owners worried about the loss of their fish stock. But in September 2013 following heavy rain water was flowing over the top of the door and the authorities decided they must release water to avoid structural damage to the dam, a second dam break could have been a catastrophe. The ATP and lake owners were given a 24 hour warning to set additional nets. The plan was to open each gate only 10cm for three days then reduce this to two gates at 15cm for a further nine days.

There was concern that the force of the moving water might be appealing to the turtle, excited by the thought of escape the immensely strong animal could tear through nets to escape. If the animal made it to a gate the force of water would likely suck it in where it could become trapped in the small gap beneath the gate with extreme water pressure and drown. Despite the series of nets placed before the dam the opening posed a very real threat to this critically endangered species.

As the gates were opened at 9:00 am on 7th October 2013 none of us were ready for the shear force of the water escaping the dam, despite being only raised a fraction. The dam ended up remaining open till 14th October 2013.

As the excitement mixed with concern at the dam continued in nearby classrooms awareness programs continued. Between the 7th and 9th of October the Asian Turtle Program (ATP) conducted school programs focus Swinhoe's turtle and Vietnam turtles in two schools around Dong Mo Lake for 313 students from 9th grades.

Since 2009 over 2,460 students have participated in awareness activities for Rafetus swinhoei in Vietnam . thousands more people have been involved in activities supported by the ATP including sporting events, Mid-autumn festival and an art competition linked to conservation of the Hoan Kiem turtle. Fishermen of Dong Mo Lake have signed agreements which regulate harmful fishing methods or hunting the giant turtles.

Without a permanent solution to the threat from the dam and escape of the turtle the risk remains the species could be lost from Dong Mo forever, this would be a sad addition to the lesson plan and one conservationists hope to avoid.

In 30th October 2013 the ATP installed two further nets before the dam, with concrete pillars these are more substantial allow nets to be raised when the dam is to be opened. This is still only a temporary solution though, the hope remains that the authorities in Vietnam will construct a more substantial solution.

Press release by Pham Van Thong and Timothy McCormack – ATP

We would like to thank all of the support for our work and the Rafetus swinhoei Project from The Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF), Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), Columbus zoo, as well as local partners and agencies, Education for Nature Vietnam (ENV), Hanoi Fisheries Department, Son Tay FPD and the Youth Union of Kim Son commune who helped us to organize this successful event.

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ATP staff fix the new net in place.
Photo by Nguyen Tai Thang - ATP