



Asian Turtle Program & Turtle Conservation Centre

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Participants of the ninth Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Field Skill Training Course with ATP staff and turtle detection dogs during a field practicum in Cuc Phuong forest.
Photo: Tran Van Dai

Detection dog finds wild Keeled box turtle during student training

Turtle detection dogs from the Asian Turtle Program (ATP) achieved another success this week when they found an endangered Keeled box turtle (*Cuora mouhotii*) during this year's annual Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Field Skill Training Course in Cuc Phuong National Park.

The weeklong course provides young biologists, conservationists and wildlife protection officials from Asia with practical skills and experience relating to research and conservation of turtles. Through a combination of classroom instruction and field exercises participants acquire the knowledge and skills such as turtle identification, measuring and mapping, interview methodology and the importance of conservation in research. This year, 10 participants from nine universities attended the training, including four lecturers, one PhD student and the first student from Laos to participate in the course from the 30th of March to the 6th of April 2013.

During a field survey practicum in the forest on the 5th of April 2013, students searched in line transects for the Cuc Phuong native *Cuora mouhotii* with three turtle dogs were brought along for additional support. For one dogs, 1 year old Momo whose parents also work as ATP turtle detection dogs, it was the first time searching for turtles in the forest and she visibly struggled dealing with the distractions of ants, leaches and the strange environment and scents of the forest. After an hour of luckless time search, the students were packing their things and ready to move onto the aquatic trapping exercise back at the park's headquarters.

Sarah Wahl, an ATP dog handler based in Cuc Phuong, was particularly disappointed with the dogs' performance in the forest, especially with Momo, who was trained at the Turtle Conservation Centre (TCC) and seemed to be a promising addition to ATP's dog team. She decided to give it one last try in a former radio telemetry area of the park known to have many *Cuo-*

ra mouhotii when the dog suddenly leapt into thick undergrowth following a scent she'd picked up. Under a fallen tree log the young dog began barking frantically and indicated that she had found a turtle. The adult male Cuora mouhotii was just what the team had been looking for and was a new individual not found during previous surveys in the area.

“It was an unbelievable feeling of happiness and achievement picking up this wild Keeled box turtle, I quickly called the team over to show them. Last summer I came out to this location many times with another dog but found nothing. I was getting really discouraged, so it is amazing that Momo found a turtle on her first day in the forest. I hope the students realise the strength of well trained dogs as research tools”, said Sarah Wahl, “admittedly I'd just threatened the dog that she'd have no dinner that night if she didn't find anything”.

In 2010, the Asian Turtle Program started training and using turtle detection dogs as a research tool for field surveys in Vietnam. With all turtle populations declining drastically since the 1980's and 1990's as the Asian Turtle Crisis was just emerging it is now very challenging for researchers to find and confirm turtle species in the wild. Time search and walking transect lines have proven to be successful but they require extensive man-hours and can be exhausting and demoralizing if no turtles are found. The inclusion of detection dogs in the team should increase the chance of success in the field.

With Momo's find during the training course, the dogs have proven again that they are valuable assets in field surveys and, like training the next generation of turtle conservationists by carrying out activities like the student training, ATP will continue to train the next generation of 'turtle sniffers' for conservation activities in Vietnam and Asia.

Press release by ATP
6th April 2013

Acknowledgements:

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Sit Phetmivanh, the first student from Laos, studies and explains key characteristics of the Black-breasted leaf turtle (*Geoemyda spengleri*) to the other students during a turtle identification practical - Photo by: Pham Van Thong - ATP



Hoang Van Thai from the Turtle Conservation Centre (TCC) gives the students a tour through the Visitor Interpretation Centre of the rescue centre and explains key threats to Asian turtles and other wildlife. Photo by: Pham Van Thong - ATP



Students learn how to read and navigate on maps during the mapping lecture. Photo by: Tim McCormack - ATP

For further information please contact:

Asian Turtle Program - Indo-Myanmar Conesevation

Room 1806, C14 Bac Ha Building, To Huu road, Nam Tu
Liem Dist., Hanoi, Vietnam
PO Box 46
Tel: +84 (0) 4 7302 8389
Email: info@asianturtleprogram.org
Website: www.asianturtleprogram.org
Facebook: www.facebook.com/AsianTurtleProgram

Turtle Conservation Centre (TCC) - Cuc Phuong National Park

Nho Quan Dist., Ninh Binh Prov., Vietnam
Tel: +84 (0) 3 0384 8090
Email: haodt.turtleconservation@gmail.com
Website: www.asianturtleprogram.org/tcc-home-page.html
Facebook: www.facebook.com/TurtleConservationCenter

Photo below: Tim McCormack, ATP coordinator, explains students how to use a compass during a mapping lecture
Photo by: Pham Van Thong - ATP



Photo below: Nguyen Phu Quy learns how to handle turtles at the TCC. Photo by: Pham Van Thong - ATP



ATP turtle detection dog, Momo, with her handler, Sarah Wahl, finding a wild Keeled box turtle (*Cuora mouhotii*), an endangered species native to Cuc Phuong National Park.

Photo: Pham Van Thong - ATP

Pham Van Thong - Asian Turtle Program ©



Cap Kim Cuong learn to set aquatic traps at the Turtle Conservation Centre as part of the research methods module during the weeklong course. Photo by: Pham Van Thong - ATP

Pham Van Thong - Asian Turtle Program ©



Photo below: Bui Thi Nguyen Nu and Nguyen Chi Thanh practice their newly acquired mapping and navigating skills during a practicum in the forest, measurements and bearings. Photo: Tim McCormack - ATP



Tim McCormack - Asian Turtle Program ©



Above right: Course participants with their certificates at the end of the course. Photo by: Tim McCormack - ATP



Tim McCormack - Asian Turtle Program ©

