

**Compiled Notes on the Wildlife Trade in Vietnam**  
**November – December 1999**

**Report to TRAFFIC Vietnam**  
**Cuc Phuong Conservation Project**  
**Douglas B. Hendrie**  
**December 31, 1999**

**About the observation reports below:**

This report is derived from accumulated observations within the wildlife trade during the period indicated above. The purpose for documenting such trade observations is to provide professionals within the conservation field, protected areas management, and enforcement agencies with further insight about the mechanism and patterns of trade in Vietnam, particularly as these relate to Chelonians.

The report is produced in English and Vietnamese by the Cuc Phuong Conservation Project and may be reproduced and distributed as deemed appropriate.

The addresses and contact details of traders interviewed during the course of fieldwork have been removed from this document.

**Ninh Binh Provincial FPD (November 12, 1999)**

Ninh Binh rangers stopped a public bus bound for Hanoi from Quang Binh-Ha Tinh Province after receiving a tip from an informant that the bus contained an illegal shipment of wildlife. T 0800 hrs, the bus was stopped and rangers found an assortment of turtles and snakes, as well as water monitors and two pigmy lorises. The bus driver claimed that animals belonged to two traders on the bus, however none of the passengers admitted to owning the animals. The Cuc Phuong Conservation Project was contacted by Ninh Binh authorities and sent project staff members Le Trong Dat and Le Thien Duc to inspect the shipment. The cargo contained:

- 14 *Heosemys grandis* (20 kg)
- 1 *Hieremys annandalii* (5.5 kg)
- 1 *Cyclemys tcheponensis* (1.2 kg)
- Ptyas korros* (8 kg)
- Ptyas mucosus* (8 kg)
- 3 *Ophiophagus hannah* (4.5 kg)
- Bungarus fasciatus* (20 kg)
- Elaphe radiata* (25 kg)
- Unidentified snakes (16 kg)
- 5 *Varanus salvator* (8 kg)
- 2 Pigmy loris (1.2 kg)

The presence of *Heosemys grandis* and *Hieremys annandalii* in the shipment would suggest that the turtles originated from regions far further south than Quang Binh Province, possibly having come across the border from Laos before reaching a collection point in Quang Binh.

The loris' were received by the project and transferred to the Endangered Primate Rescue Center at Cuc Phuong. The park received all three cobras and released them on the same day in the forest. The Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project received the *Cyclemys tcheponensis*, two *Heosemys grandis*, and the *Hieremys annandalii*.

### **Ninh Binh FPD (December 5, 1999)**

Ninh Binh Forest Protection Rangers received information on a private car traveling from Nam Can in Nghe An Province with a cargo of wildlife. Rangers staked out Highway 1 and succeeded in identifying and stopping the car at 1000 hrs on December 5<sup>th</sup>. The rangers seized an estimated 115 (69 kg) big-headed turtles (*Platysternon megacephalum*) and four pangolins (*Manis pentadactyla*).

The traders said that the turtles had been collected in Laos before being transported up Highway 8 into Nghe An Province. If so, the shipment probably came across the border at the Keo Nua Pass, crossing through the northwestern region of Ha Tinh Province and up into Vinh (Nghe An Province). The destination of the shipment was said to be the "northern frontier" with China.

Approximately 20 of the *Platysternon megacephalum* were dead, most likely on account of cold weather and harsh transport conditions.

Five live *Platysternon* were released to the Cuc Phuong Turtle Conservation and Ecology Project. The remainder of the animals was probably returned to traders, though staff of the project departed prior to a decision being made.

### **Ho Chi Minh City and Surroundings (December 7, 1999)**

Market observations in HCMC and the Mekong Region by Kate Blazeby included three *Cyclemys tcheponensis*, more than 40 *Malayemys subtrijuga*, one *Cuora amboinensis*, and five adult *Siebenrockiella crassicollis*. The *Siebenrockiella* represent an interesting find since this species has not been frequently observed in Vietnamese markets in recent years. It is possible that these were shipped in from Cambodia. The observation of *Cyclemys tcheponensis* in HCMC also suggests either that they came from Cambodia or were shipped south from mountainous regions further north. This is in contrast to the widely held assumption that most turtles are shipped north in Vietnam to the closest collection point. *Cyclemys tcheponensis* has not yet been reported for Cambodia (?).

### **Dong Xuan Market (December 18, 1999)**

Observations at Hanoi's Dong Xuan market included:

3 *Cyclemys tcheponensis* (2 juveniles and one large adult)

2 *Cuora galbinifrons* (juveniles)

8 *Trachemys scripta* (hatchlings and yearlings)

Most important was the presence of hatchling *Trachemys scripta* in the market, marking the first such observation of the dime-store-sized *Trachemys* in Hanoi markets over the past two years. Larger specimens have been observed in the market on occasion (frequency = 7%), but not hatchlings. Additionally, the *Trachemys* were being sold in the aquarium and fish section of the market, not the adjacent area dedicated to larger pets, turtles, snakes, and other wildlife. The woman who worked at the shop stated that the *Trachemys* had come from Thailand. The turtles were selling for 20,000-25,000 VND each (\$1.40-1.75) depending on size.

### **Tam Dao National Park (December 20, 1999)**

An investigation of the wildlife trade market in Tam Dao proved disappointing after cold weather set in bringing evening temperatures down to the low teens (C). The weather had reduced market activity to a single stall manned by an old woman in an otherwise empty marketplace. The woman was offering a collection of turtles that she claimed were from Tam Dao, including six adult *Geoemyda spengleri* and two adult *Pyxidea mouhotii*. The *Geoemyda*, which were being sold for 80,000 VND each (~\$5.75), were covered with a thin crust of mud. The woman said that she stored them in mud to protect them from the cold. She also noted that finding turtles during the cool dry season was somewhat more difficult than at other times of the year.

Tam Dao is a popular tourist destination, especially during the warmer months of the year. Located just 60 km north of Hanoi, the park is also famed for its wildlife market, most active during the early morning hours when hunters have just returned from the forest with various wildlife to sell.

Most of the turtle trade in Tam Dao is probably directed towards visitors, rather than domestic consumption. *G. spengleri* that have been observed in Hanoi's Dong Xuan market were reported to come from Tam Dao. Observations within the Hanoi market since March 1998 limit *G. spengleri*'s availability to the months of April through July and September through October. The presence of *G. spengleri* at Tam Dao market in December can not be explained, since this seems to conflict with this species' lack of availability elsewhere. However, it is possible that the shopkeeper we observed had maintained the turtles in captivity for some time, or that collection from the wild was infrequent enough to warrant trade outside of the immediate area of Tam Dao.

## Snake Village (December 20, 1999)

The Snake Village is located in the northern suburbs of Hanoi. It is named for its restaurants offering snake wine and a variety of wildlife dishes. Patrons of the restaurants include mainly well-to-do Vietnamese and foreign tourists.

During a spring 1999 visit to Vietnam, Peter Paul van Dijk and several other herpetologists visited the Snake Village to meet with Mr. Nguyen, a local man who specialized in treating snakebite victims. Apparently, snake bites amongst local owners and staff of the village's dozen or more restaurants are not uncommon. Mr. Nguyen treats victims with some apparent success using a powder that he has developed.

During Peter Paul's visit, he reported observing a large number of turtles being maintained at Mr. Nguyen's house, including *Mauremys mutica* and *Cuora galbinifrons*, this information later being passed on to our project.

After some effort finding Mr. Nguyen's home, we were invited into a small courtyard with a fenced concrete enclosure occupying a 3 x 3 meter area outside the house. Within the enclosure were a handful of tokay geckos and about 300 *Mauremys mutica* (200 kg) and a small number of *Cuora galbinifrons*. Mr. Nguyen claimed that he had three species of turtles, but locating the turtles within the enclosure proved difficult as the facility was subdivided and contained many brick slots within which the turtles could hide. According to Mr. Nguyen, his wife purchased juvenile turtles from traders and raised them until they reached a sellable size.

His wife then sold the *Mauremys mutica* for about 500,000 VND/kg (\$35.00/kg), a substantial price compared to other turtle species observed in the trade. Her principal buyers were traders from Hanoi that would then ship the turtles north to China. If the price per kilo faltered, the woman said that she would often wait until the price was high again before selling. In contrast, the *Cuora galbinifrons* were sold for only 40,000-50,000 VND/kg (\$2.85-3.50/kg).

Mr. Nguyen's wife said that it required about a three-year investment before *M. mutica* reached a sellable size (0.7 kg), and that the turtles were maintained on a diet of rice, bananas, and meat. Inspection of the turtles indicated that most appeared relatively healthy, with no obvious cases of illness amongst the lot. The woman also noted that none of the turtles ever died in captivity, which may be true, but more likely was meant to demonstrate to us that her care for the turtles was good and her business highly successful.

Many of the turtles appeared to have depressed and flattened carapaces, an irregular form of growth previously observed in pet box turtles (*Terrapene carolina*) that I believe results from dietary deficiencies. It is likely based on this observation that these turtles were captives over a long period of time.

When asked whether she had successfully bred *M. mutica* in captivity, the woman noted that occasionally the turtles laid eggs, but that she did not know how to incubate and hatch the eggs. Subsequently, she said that in most cases the eggs were eaten by her family, Mr. Nguyen adding that turtle eggs were quite delicious as well.

Mr. Nguyen was also asked about the availability of *Cuora trifasciata* in the trade. He said that *C. trifasciata* could be specially ordered. However, he noted that the price (10 million VND/kg or \$714 USD) was so expensive that it was too risky, mainly out of fear that the turtle might die before it could be raised and sold, and his investment lost.

Mr. Nguyen explained his familiarity with the trade based on his previous experience as a trader. However, he has reportedly since retired from this line of work after buying his sons snake restaurants in the village. Mr. Nguyen then suggested that we go to one of his son's restaurants and try some snake wine.

The restaurant was located on the main street of the village. The front room was lined with shelves and large glass bottles with snakes coiled up inside including *Bungarus fasciatus*, *Naja naja*, and *Ophiophagus hannah*, as well as others. Mr. Nguyen's son was somewhat less receptive to our visit and inspection of the kitchen. Along the back wall of the kitchen were crates and cages holding a collection of wildlife, including a single pangolin, a masked palm civet, a dozen or more of what appeared to be bandicoots, five porcupines, a common palm civet, and perhaps 800 kg of snakes of various species. One captive king cobra we observed measured four meters (10 kg), and sold for 600,000 VND/kg (\$43).

Only two turtles were observed at the restaurant, an adult *Sacalia quadriocellata* and another *Mauremys mutica*. Further discussion with Mr. Nguyen revealed that softshell turtles were also on the restaurant's menu and sold for about 350,000 VND/kg (\$25), but were not available at the time of our visit. When asked about domestic consumption of hard-shelled turtles in Vietnam, Mr. Nguyen stated that hard-shell turtles were eaten by Vietnamese as well, but that the meat was very expensive, limiting their consumption to mainly wealthy Vietnamese. As a result, most hard-shell turtles are sold to China.

The snake wine was interesting, but not much better than the conventional rice wine variety. As we sat with Mr. Nguyen sipping wine in the front of his son's restaurant, traders arrived on a motorbike with several more crates of snakes for the restaurant. From our discussions with Mr. Nguyen, and observations within the kitchen—six or seven staff gutting, bleeding, bottling, and processing bags of snakes fresh in from the trade—one could not help get the feeling that Mr. Nguyen's family was involved in a booming and profitable line of work, limited only by the number of snakes and other wildlife that they could get their hands on.

*Trader Information: Contact CPCP for details*

### **Dong Xuan Market, Hanoi (December 23, 1999)**

Observations included only a single sub-adult *Cyclemys tcheponensis*.

## Hue Wildlife Trade (December 27, 1999)

During a visit to the city of Hue in central Vietnam, several wildlife trader's houses were visited to learn a little more about the wildlife trade network in the region.

A local man was asked to take us to visit several traders in the city, leading us at first to a house along the southern side of the Perfume River. The trader, Mr. Minh, welcomed us into his home, showing us to a dark back room where he had built a large cement tank, and had several wooden crates stacked along the wall.

We were shown five turtles including two sub-adult softshells, *Palea steindachneri* and *Pelodiscus sinensis*, a juvenile *Platysternon megacephalum*, and a juvenile and adult *Cyclemys tcheponensis*. The softshells were being kept in the cement tank, filled with about 10 cm of water and a sand substrate allowing the softshells to bury themselves under the sand. The *P. megacephalum* shared the tank with the softshells, while the two *C. tcheponensis* occupied one of the wooden crates.

Mr. Minh claimed that he had sold turtles in the past to traders in Hanoi (five years ago), but that the business was so profitable that he now takes the turtles all the way to China himself. He further noted that he had just returned from trip to China, traveling to the border roughly every five to ten days (presumably meaning 5-10 days in Hue between trips). Mr. Minh explained that he transported wildlife to China, and bought clothes and other goods there and shipped them back into Vietnam on the return trip. He added that his family owns a clothing store near Hue's Dong Ba central market.

Mr. Minh reported that the turtles were collected from the mountainous regions west of Hue, particularly *P. megacephalum*, *P. steindachneri*, and *C. tcheponensis*. *P. steindachneri* and *P. sinensis* were sold for 350,000 VND/kg (\$25) while *P. megacephalum* sold for 500,000 VND/kg (\$36) and *C. tcheponensis* for 400,000 VND/kg (\$28). He claimed that *Cuora trifasciata* was available on order, but noted the risk of investing in this species based on the possibility of losing his investment if the turtle died.

Mr. Minh provided us with the names and telephone numbers of several traders in Hanoi that routinely shipped turtles to China:

*Trader Information: Contact CPCP for details*

The second trader (name unknown) lived in a house across the tracks off Le Duan Street, west of the ancient city citadel. Unfortunately, this trader appeared much more cautious and was less forthcoming with information. When first approached, he claimed not to have any turtles, but after several minutes retreated to an adjoining room and returned with two adult *Mauremys mutica* (male and female), and a huge male *Cuora galbinifrons* (~ 19 cm CL) with a bright orange head.

The man said that his involvement in the turtle trade was very small, and that the people who bought them mostly did so to make medicine. Based upon his apparent nervousness during our brief discussion, it was likely that he may have had other turtles in his possession, as has been the case with other traders we have encountered.

The trader said that *M. mutica* could be found ranging from as far south as Da Nang and extending into the northern regions of Vietnam. This would suggest an overlap in range between *M. mutica* and *M. annamensis*, or possible confusion between the two species.

*Trader Information: Contact CPCP for details*

### **Lao Bao Border (December 29, 1999)**

Investigation of the cross-border turtle trade during a trip west out Route 9 to the Vietnam-Lao border crossing at Lao Bao proved to be more difficult. Route 9 is a major trade route for goods coming into Vietnam (Quang Tri Province) from Laos. Although large quantities of timber were observed being trucked across the border from Lao to Dong Ha, no wildlife was observed.

However, local xe om (motorcycle/bicycle taxi) drivers interviewed at the border reported that three species of turtles have been observed coming in from Lao, including *Platysternon megacephalum*, *Cuora galbinifrons*, and *Cuora trifasciata*. He further volunteered to take us to a trader (Mr. Huy) in the town of Lao Bao, about a kilometer before the security checkpoint.

After locating the trader's home in the back streets of Lao Bao market, it was determined that he was not present, and his family proved unwilling to allow us access to the house despite our determination and the familiar smell of bagged reptiles lurking in the air in front of the house.

The xe om driver guide reported that there were about 30 traders based in Lao Bao. The Vietnamese traders transport wildlife across the border themselves, shipping it to Dong Ha, a small city in Quang Tri Province located at the junction of Highway 1 and Route 9. From Dong Ha, the wildlife is then reportedly shipped to Hanoi, but sometimes south to Hue.

### **Dong Xuan Market (December 31, 1999)**

Observations in Hanoi's Dong Xuan market included one adult *Mauremys mutica* (f), a single juvenile *Pyxidea mouhotii*, and 20-30 hatchling/yearling *Trachemys scripta*. The occurrence of *Mauremys mutica* in the market marks the first observation of this species in Dong Xuan since surveys began in March 1998.

For further information or past reports documenting wildlife trade observations in Vietnam, please contact us at:

**Cuc Phuong Conservation Project**  
**Turtle Conservation and Ecology Center**  
**Cuc Phuong National Park**  
**Ninh Binh Province, Vietnam**  
**Douglas B. Hendrie**  
**[cpcp@fpt.vn](mailto:cpcp@fpt.vn)**