

# Vietnam rescue effort for revered turtle

March 8 2011, by Tran Thi Minh Ha

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Hundreds of residents and tourists watch rescuers using boats and nets as they begin efforts to capture and treat a legendary but ailing giant turtle described as the "spirit of the nation" at Hoan Kiem lake in the very heart of Hanoi on March 8, 2011.

Hundreds of onlookers gathered at a Hanoi lake on Tuesday as rescuers began efforts to capture and treat an ailing giant turtle revered as a symbol of Vietnam's centuries-old independence struggle.

Crowds jostled for position on the shores of polluted Hoan Kiem [Lake](#) to watch divers and experts in small boats slowly try to move the turtle, using a large net, to a nearby islet for treatment.

But the feisty old animal apparently broke free of the net after a few hours. An AFP reporter saw the turtle's head periodically breaking the surface as it swam across the lake, watched by the spectators.

Local media reported that the turtle, which weighs about 200 kilograms (440 pounds), has been injured by fish hooks and small red-eared [turtles](#) which have appeared in the lake in recent years.

"It is very precious for Vietnamese," said Dang Giao Huan, 66, a retired soldier who saw wounds on the animal when it surfaced a few days ago.

"The turtle is the holy spirit of the nation... I think it's necessary to give it some treatment."

Official media say the turtle is one of only four of its kind in the world.



A giant turtle, considered a sacred symbol of Vietnam, surfaces at Hoan Kiem lake in the heart of Hanoi on March 7, 2011.

But the animal's status in Vietnam stems from its history and its home in Hoan Kiem Lake (Lake of the Returned Sword), rather than its rarity.

In a story that is taught to all Vietnamese school children, the 15th century rebel leader Le Loi used a magical sword to drive out Chinese invaders and founded the dynasty named after him.

Le Loi later became emperor and one day went boating on the lake. A turtle appeared, took his sacred sword and dived to the bottom, keeping the weapon safe for the next time Vietnam may have to defend its freedom, the story says.

Official media said the turtle could be up to 300 years old and is possibly the last of its kind in the lake.

Sightings of the turtle are deemed auspicious, especially when they coincide with major national events.

The turtle has generally surfaced only rarely, but has been seen more often in recent weeks as concern mounted over its health.

"I heard on the radio that it will take between two months and two years to treat it," said Nguyen Thi Hung, 44, a street vendor.

She referred to the animal using the reverential term favoured by Vietnamese, "great grandfather turtle".

Residents perched on park benches and some even climbed trees to watch the rescue, which sparked a traffic jam. A policeman called over a loudspeaker for motorists to keep moving but officers were later forced to close the road.

The turtle's plight caught the attention of Hanoi's communist city government, which created a "Turtle Treatment Council" of experts led by a senior veterinarian in the agriculture department, Vietnam News Agency said.

Among those supervising the rescue from a dinghy was Ha Dinh Duc, known as the "turtle professor" for his expertise. Reached by mobile phone on the boat, Duc said he was too busy to talk.

After days and nights of preparatory work, rescuers had hoped to gently lead the animal to the islet, which holds a small temple-like structure called "Turtle Tower". It is commonly featured in tourist pictures.

One rescuer said it would take hours to move the captured turtle -- but after its escape the process will have to begin again.

A rectangular enclosure has been set up in the water at one end of the islet to act as a type of hospital for the animal.

Vietnam News Agency reported that in addition to treating the turtle, authorities plan to attack pollution in the lake.

Although it is a popular gathering place for Hanoians, the lake looks like pea soup, is covered by an oily film and is littered with garbage.

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Citation: Vietnam rescue effort for revered turtle (2011, March 8) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-03-vietnam-effort-revered-turtle.html>

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