

Thousands cheer capture of revered Vietnam turtle

April 3 2011, by Tran Thi Minh Ha



A giant soft-shell turtle (*Rafetus swinhoei*) which is considered a sacred symbol of Vietnamese independence is guided into a cage for a health check by handlers at Hoan Kiem lake in the heart of Hanoi. Thousands of onlookers cheered in central Hanoi when rescuers captured for treatment the ailing and ancient giant turtle.

Thousands of onlookers cheered in central Hanoi on Sunday when rescuers captured for treatment an endangered and ailing giant turtle revered as a symbol of Vietnam's centuries-old independence struggle.

On the first attempt to snare it in polluted Hoan Kiem Lake one month ago the feisty old animal broke free from a net.

This time about 50 rescuers took about two hours --- and three nets of varying sizes -- to finally bring the turtle under control.

Some of the workers swam with the netted reptile, leading it into a cage which was escorted by two boats to an islet where its condition is to be assessed.

"This is one of the most [endangered animals](#) in the world and there's very little known about it," said Tim McCormack of the Asian Turtle Programme, a Hanoi-based conservation and research group.

Local media reported that the critically endangered soft-shell turtle, which weighs about 200 kilograms (440 pounds), had been injured by fish hooks and small red-eared turtles which have appeared in the lake in recent years.

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.

"It's very important culturally here," said McCormack.

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.

The turtle has generally surfaced only rarely -- its sightings deemed auspicious -- but has been seen more often in recent months as concern mounted over its health.

Its plight caught the attention of Hanoi's city government, which created a "Turtle Treatment Council" of experts led by a senior veterinarian in

the agriculture department, Vietnam News Agency said.

McCormack said the animal, which is likely more than 100 years old, is one of only four *Rafetus swinhoei* [turtles](#) known to be in existence. Two are in China and one lives in another Hanoi-area lake, he said.

Vietnamese refer to Hoan Kiem's legendary resident as "great grandfather turtle", but its sex is unknown.

The islet where it was to be examined holds a small temple-like structure called "Turtle Tower" that is commonly featured in tourist pictures. It will be held in a special tank with filtered water instead of soupy-green contaminated lake water.

"A lot of people have been saying the pollution in the lake has been a serious factor in the animal's health," said McCormack, whose organisation was among the experts advising authorities on how to help the creature.

Spectators hoped the treatment will succeed.

Nguyen Le Hoai, 31, said she spent all day lakeside waiting for the turtle's capture because it "is the symbol of the country, and the symbol of this [lake](#)".

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