

Repatriated Philippine Forest Turtles turned over to Katala Foundation

Philippines, 28th April 2012—They travelled from the Philippines to Hong Kong stuffed in a smuggler's bag with over 60 other reptiles, but on Friday, 18 Philippine Forest Turtles were returned safely home and are doing well in the care of the Katala Foundation.

The critically endangered turtles, found only in Palawan, were part of a consignment discovered by Hong Kong authorities in February. The smuggler's loot also included 16 Southeast Asian Box Turtles, 24 lizards, 16 pythons, one gliding snake, two Mangrove Snakes and a Common Mock Viper.

Two of the original 20 Philippine Forest Turtles and a pair of the Southeast Asian Box Turtles died before they reached the rescue centre in Hong Kong and another Southeast Asian Box Turtle died at the rescue centre.

The smuggler was convicted under the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants Ordinance and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animal Ordinance and was fined HK\$8,000 (USD1,031).

If the turtles had reached pet markets in US, Europe, Japan or China, they would have fetched well over the fine imposed.

The Philippine Forest Turtle *Siebenrockiella leytensis* and the Southeast Asian Box Turtles *Cuora amboinensis* were turned over to Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden in Hong Kong for temporary custody.

Kadoorie, together with the Hong Kong and Philippine CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) Authorities decided to repatriate the turtles to the Philippines.

The Southeast Asian Box Turtles, for which the collection point was not known, were turned over to the Government Rescue Center of DENR-PAWB. The Philippine Forest Turtles were turned over to the Katala Foundation Incorporated in Palawan, which spearheads research and conservation efforts for this species in-situ and holds the only ex-situ assurance colony of the Philippine Forest Turtle.

This turtle is the flagship species of the Philippine Freshwater Turtle Conservation Program (PFTCP) of the Palawan-based NGO Katala Foundation Incorporated (KFI) in collaboration with Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau (PAWB) of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources of the Philippines.

Poached largely for the exotic pet trade, this turtle is also threatened by demand for exotic meat and medicine.

"The repatriation of these turtles is very meaningful. Not only does it raise public awareness about the status of the species and illegal collection and trade, it is also a sterling example of improving law enforcement. Hopefully, the knowledge that they have such a special species, will instill pride among the people of Palawan," said Dr Sabine Schoppe, KFI's Director of the Philippine Freshwater Turtle Conservation Program.



One of 18 Philippine Forest Turtles back in Palawan after being seized from a smuggler in Hong Kong, © *Philippine Forest Turtle* photo to Katala Foundation Inc.

"They are just less than a day with us now and so far they doing and eating well."

The turtles will undergo quarantine and health checks and be released into the wild once they are given a clean bill of health. The Katala Foundation is also lobbying for the protection of the turtle's remaining forest habitat in Palawan.

The return of the turtles constituted an historical moment for the Philippines since it was the first ever repatriation of wildlife back to the country.

"This is a great day for these turtles and a proud one for cross-border co-operation in fighting wildlife crime," said Chris R. Shepherd, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia's Deputy Regional Director.

"This is an excellent example of how governments and NGOs should be working together to combat illegal trade and return confiscated animals back to where they belong."

TRAFFIC's own research has recorded a surge in demand for exotic freshwater turtles and tortoises in Southeast Asia. Its survey of pet markets in Jakarta in 2008 found 48 species of freshwater tortoises and turtles for sale, the vast majority illegally obtained.

Last year, a meeting of global experts including those from TRAFFIC, reported that illegal and unsustainable trade was the greatest threat to the survival of this highly threatened group of species and found that laws and conventions in place to protect these animals were simply not being enforced.

News article courtesy of **Traffic**, the wildlife trade monitoring network.