Dong Mo Lake is a large expanse of water to the west of Hanoi, Vietnam. Beneath the quiet surface a secretive but hugely important animal lurks. The lake is the only known wild habitat where the world’s rarest turtle survives, Swinhoe’s Softshell Turtle (*Rafetus swinhoei*) in better known in Vietnam as the Hoan Kiem Turtle, a single ancient animal survives in Hanoi’s Hoan Kiem Lake to which a 15th century legend gives it a god-like and magical status.

Unfortunately these giant turtles, which can attain weights of almost 150kg, have been heavily impacted in recent decades through a combination of hunting and habitat loss throughout their range in northern Vietnam and southern China. Historically many fishermen on Dong Mo Lake believed that they had a competitive relationship with the turtles, blaming the animals for breaking their fishing nets or stealing fish. According to reports from local residents as recently as the 1980’s and 1990’s large turtles, some weighing over 100kg, were still being caught from the lake to be sold and often consumed locally. In these recent decades the population of these giant turtles dropped from some hundreds of animals to one or two animals now.

The Asian Turtle Program (ATP) of Indo-Myanmar Conservation (IMC) has taken the cultural importance of the giant turtle species to promote conservation of the species at the site. Rowing traditional boats on Dong Mo Lake is an almost daily activity for most of the 50 fishermen working the lake, as well as for local residents who are used to life so close to the water. Much of the community depends on the lake for their economic survival. In the past boat racing was never a consideration within the local community.

Second boat race organized to support the world’s rarest turtle

Dong Mo Boat Race 2015 logo
But through organising a boat race event which combines a traditional culture festival after the lunar New Year holiday, Tet and the legend of the turtle in Hanoi we have been able to rouse enthusiasm in the community. On the 7th of March 2015 in Nghia Son communes, Son Tay district, Hanoi the ATP, Kim Son People Committee and Nghia Son village farmers society collaborated to organise the second boat race in Dong Mo lake. There were 42 men and 13 women registered to race. Four competitors per heat with racers rowing with their feet to the target bouy which must be circled before returning to the starting line. With a distance of 900 meters for each race it provided a real challenge to the racers. After more than 10 heats the four fastest men and four women were chosen for the final races. The winner of the men’s final with a time of 6’54 was Mr Phan Van Dzung, a fisherman from Dong Mo. The women’s final was a tough race with all four finalists showing great skill, Mrs. Nguyen Thi Oanh became the winner with a time of 8’18 minutes.

“ We are happy to join the boat race this year. It makes the annual festival become more special. So funny. I missed the victory this year but I will try next year”. Mr Nguyen Van Hanh a racers shared his voice.

Despite rain during the event over 500 spectators came from local communities to watch and support the racers. Presentations and announcements throughout the event reinforced the importance of the turtles in the lake and the need for community support for their protection with the conservation massage “Race to save the legendary turtle of Vietnam”.

Press release by Pham Van Thong & Timothy McCormack - ATP
Date: 13th March 2015

We would like to thank all of the support for our work and the Rafetus swinhoei Project from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), IUCN and Cleveland Metroparks Zoo. Also thank you for the supporting from Mr. Nguyen Van Mong vice chairman of Kim Son commune, Son Tay district, Hanoi and Mr Do Van Minh chief of Nghia Son Farmers Society, Kim Son commune, Son Tay district, Hanoi who helped us to organize this successful event.

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