Swinhoe’s Softshell Turtle (*Rafetus swinhoei*), better known in Vietnam as the Hoan Kiem Turtle due to a 15th century legend linked to the large turtle that survives in Hanoi’s Hoan Kiem Lake. The species is large, reaching up to 150kg at maturity. They are historically distributed in major river systems of Vietnam including the Da River, Ma River, Lo River and Red River and their tributaries that flow from Laos and southern China. The species is also reported for the Yangtze River of South China.

Hunting and disappearance of their preferred swamp wetland habitat have almost wiped the species out and it is now considered critically endangered. Currently scientists can only confirm four living individuals left in the world. Two are captive in Suzhou zoo, in Jiangsu Province of China, and the other two are in Vietnam, of which one lives in Hoan Kiem Lake, Hanoi, and the other was discovered in Dong Mo Lake, Son Tay district, Hanoi in 2007.

Another potential site for *Rafetus swinhoei* identified in Vietnam

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Efforts continue to search for more animals in the wild. On the 10th of May 2015 the Forest Protection Department (FPD) of a northern province in Vietnam contacted the Asian Turtle Program (ATP) of Indo-Myanmar Conservation (IMC) in Hanoi to report having discovered a giant Softshell turtle in a large lake. A rapid survey between the 19th and 22nd of May 2015 by the ATP corroborate this information. During 20 interviews with locals 11 people reported having seen a huge Softshell turtle in the past, most sightings being around a decade ago. But two interviewees, a boat captain and a member of FPD, claimed to have seen a large animal over 100kg in size since 2013. Descriptions of observations and behaviour of the animal that give a strong indication that it could be a Swinhoe’s Softshell Turtle. A local counterpart has been hired at the site to gather additional information and monitor the site and the ATP plans to undertake full time monitoring at the site during the summer.
This is the first *Rafetus swinhoei* site that has been reported to the ATP through the wildlife protection authorities in Vietnam and shows the increased vigilance and focus on this species by the authorities. A multi-agency strategy for the conservation of the species is currently being developed in Hanoi with the support of the ATP.

The identification of this site has added to the potential locations for this, the world’s most endangered turtle species. The ATP has local counterparts now at 6 sites for which interviews have reported large softshell turtles believed to be *Rafetus swinhoei*, two of these sites were identified in 2015. Local counterparts are only employed at locations for which the best and most recent information gives a strong indication for the species. In total 19 sites have been identified where the species historically occurred for which ATP will re-survey while interviews will continue to look for new sites for the species. In 2015 large aquatic traps have been brought to Vietnam and permissions are being sought to start trapping at some of these sites to confirm the species. If any *Rafetus swinhoei* are caught a plan has been recommended to bring them together at a single location to allow breeding of the species.

Press release by: Nguyen Tai Thang & Timothy McCormack – ATP 
Date: 25th June 2015

We would like to thank Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, the Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF), the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) and IUCN for supporting *Rafetus swinhoei* research and conservation in Vietnam. We would also like to thank the Forest Protection Department (FPD) for reporting this potential site.

Above: In 2008 the *Rafetus swinhoei* from Dong Mo lake escaped and was lucky to be rescued and returned to the lake. Although a number of potential sites have been identified for the species Dong Mo remains the only confirmed wild location. Photo by: Hoang Van Ha - ATP

Above: During 2014 the ATP team photographed the only known wild *Rafetus swinhoei* on numerous occasions in Dong Mo Lake near Hanoi, in this photo from the 3rd of April 2014 the head is clearly visible. If more animals can be found bringing them together for breeding is the only logical solution for survival of the species. Photo by: Nguyen Tai Thang - ATP

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