Turning a Crisis into Opportunity – A One Year Review of Asian Turtle Rescue Operation

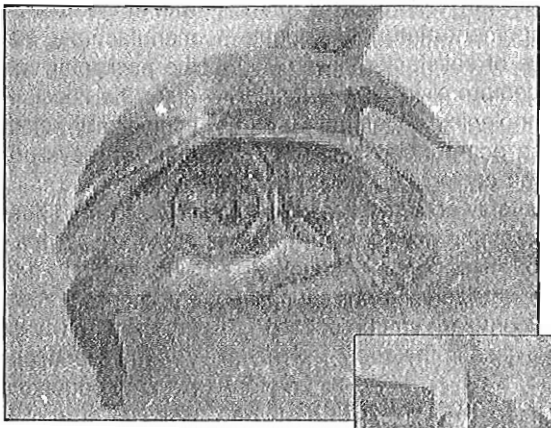
Idy Wong*

On 16 January 2003, the eve of the first anniversary of the Asian Turtle Rescue Operation, Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden (KFBG) announced at the *One Year On – Forum on the Asian Turtle Crisis* the good news regarding the successful hatching of a total of 52 endangered Asian turtles from eggs laid in Hong Kong and USA. During the *Forum*, KFBG also urged the community "NOT to buy wild turtles", and a supporting poster campaign in Hong Kong's underground rail system reflected this message.

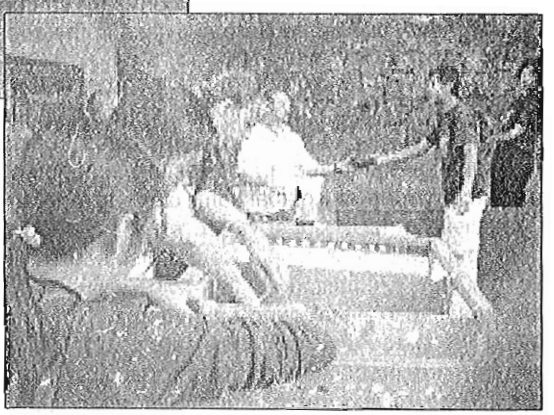
On 11 December 2001, the Hong Kong government seized a shipment of around 10,000 Asian turtles heading for food markets. The shipment contained 12 species of Asian turtles, many of them classified as threatened or endangered by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). KFBG assisted the Hong Kong Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department in identifying species and then temporarily holding all live animals. With significant input from IUCN's Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) and the offer of long-term solutions for the turtles, KFBG shipped altogether 4198 turtles from Hong Kong to internationally recognized conservation facilities in USA and seven European countries by 17 January 2002!

It was considered to be the largest turtle rescue operation ever attempted and the tough mission was made possible by the active involvement of a wide pool of local supporters. Journalists were the first group drawn to assist KFBG in asking for assistance and there were over 50 news reports covered by different media within a month. The positive response generated in the community included volunteer force that assisted daily husbandry and packing of turtles later for shipment, donations in kind such as air cargo space and packing materials were also received.

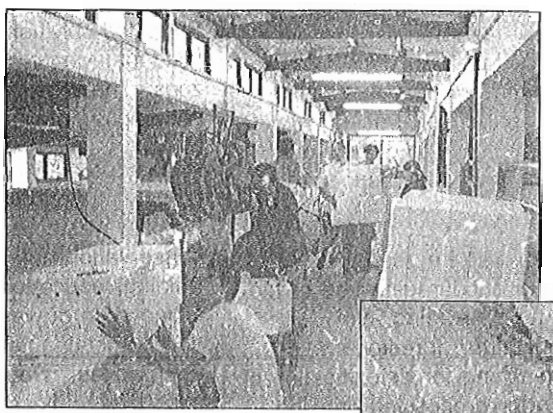
Though not a planned educational project, the active involvement of local supporters in frontline rescue work gave participants a unique first-hand learning experience. One of the key objectives of this One Year On – Forum on the Asian Turtle Crisis was to revitalize this valuable volunteer base to further positive action for long-term conservation work.



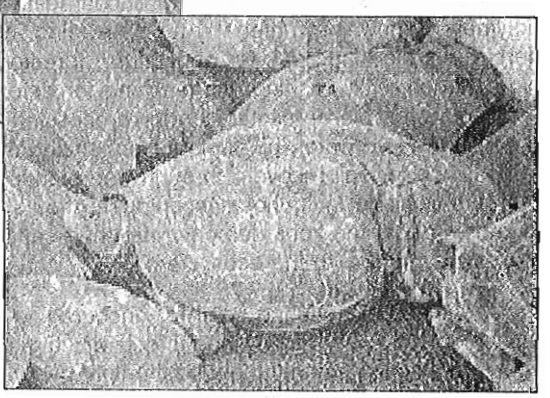
River Terrapin *Batagur baskar*, a Critically Endangered species. © Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden



Volunteers offered great help to the Asian Turtle Rescue Mission. © Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden



Packing of turtles for the third shipment to USA. © Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden



Most confiscated turtles suffered severe physical injury. © Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden

For more information, please visit KFBG website at www.kfbg.org, or contact KFBG at info@kfbg.org.

* Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden, Hong Kong