

Wildlife Crime: Case Study  
Post seizure care and repatriation costs for a consignment of  
Indonesian Pig-nosed Turtles (*Carettochelys insculpta*)



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## SUMMARY

658 Pig-nosed Turtles were seized at the Hong Kong International Airport in January 2018 by the Customs and Excise Department of the Hong Kong SAR Government. The Indonesian turtles were sent to Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden (KFBG), Wild Animal Rescue Centre for temporary care. After eight months, an effort that involved international collaboration between NGOs and government departments saw the repatriation to Indonesia of 596 turtles. The turtles were released in the Digul River in West Papua, Indonesia. The present document reports the significant costs incurred from the point of rescue to the eventual release. The approximate cost of the eight-month operation, from rescue to repatriation was HK\$196,872 (US\$25,240).

### *The seizure, rescue and temporary care*

In January 2018, 658 Pig-nosed Turtles (*Carettochelys insculpta*) smuggled from Indonesia to Hong Kong with estimated market value of HK\$526,400 (US\$67,500), were seized by Hong Kong Customs officers. The consignment was packed into the smuggler's personal luggage on a flight from Soekarno Hatta International Airport, Jakarta, Indonesia to the Hong Kong International Airport. The turtles were transferred to the KFBG Wild Animal Rescue Centre (WARC) for temporary care. The health condition of the turtles was assessed during triage on admission, fortunately most were alive although several were in poor condition as a result of the cruel transport conditions. All turtles were placed for daily care in a temperature-controlled facility (Plate 3).

### *Repatriation*

The present case represents the third repatriation event by KFBG involving Pig-nosed Turtles returning to Indonesia. In each case KFBG and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) have collaborated closely with the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia and International Animal Rescue (IAR) Indonesia.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2018, following the same protocol and logistics as previous repatriation cases, the turtles were carefully packed in specially prepared perforated plastic boxes containing shallow water, and a substrate for shelter and grip (Plate 4), all boxes were then placed in a wooden transport crate (Plate 5). The transport of live animals by air is governed by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) Live Animal Regulations on member carriers, and care was taken to strictly follow the relevant container and shipping requirements. Accompanied by specialist staff from KFBG, 596 turtles were successfully released in the Digul River adjacent to Bupul Village in Papua, Indonesia (Plate 6).

### *Funding for the repatriation event*

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Agriculture, Fisheries & Conservation Department (AFCD) and KFBG provided funding for the transfer of the turtles. Additionally, KFBG funded the costs of the 8-month post-seizure care and rehabilitation. A cost breakdown is provided in Table 1. A significant amount of resources were allocated for this exercise and future repatriation events for seized endangered species will also have to consider the funding and man-power requirements for similar actions.

## DISCUSSION

Trafficking of live wildlife not only causes a great deal of suffering to the animals involved and incalculable damage to natural ecosystems, but their post-seizure care, rehabilitation and eventual placement requires a significant amount of resources. In the present case, the alternative to the planned repatriation may have seen the forced humane dispatch of the turtle consignment since there was no alternative option for the whole group. The combined effort of Governments and NGOs was therefore critical in seeing a positive outcome for this particular wildlife trafficking case. The considerable expenses would not have been incurred if it was not for the criminal activity of an individual (or syndicate). Presently the legal system in Hong Kong does not appear to appropriately consider the post-seizure events and financial costs which are the result of the criminal action when handing down penalties in cases involving live wildlife.

The Pig-nosed Turtle is listed under Appendix II of CITES which means its trade is regulated by national legislation and any export and subsequent import requires valid permits and health certificates. There are internationally recognised regulations to ensure live animals are being transported in a humane and proper manner. By packing an aquatic species into passenger luggage, the offender had clearly breached all local ordinances and international regulations, including animal welfare considerations. In the present case the offender was fined HK\$20,000 (USD2,564) (AFCD 15<sup>th</sup> January 2018). From the strength of the penalty handed down by the court, the authors believe the full details of the crime were not fully reflected nor understood. The judgement on the case was unlikely to have considered the wider financial costs, the impacts on the global populations or the welfare of the animals during their illegal transit. A summary of the economics involved in this smuggling exercise is given in Table 2 below.

In May 2018, the HKSAR Government amended ‘The Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants Ordinance (Cap. 586)’ and increased the penalty category<sup>1</sup> associated with wildlife crime. The amendment increased the maximum fine and imprisonment terms for illegal possession of endangered species. Also, wildlife crime could be referred to the District Courts, rather than being heard at the Magistrates’ Courts, or even raised to the Court of First Instance of the High Court. The referral of cases to higher court enables increased penalties and custodial terms to be considered during the legal judgements. This legislative change came a bit late for the Pig-nosed Turtle trial however, high-profile contraband cases such as those involving ivory and rhino horn, are making use of the recent legislative changes and it is hoped that prosecutors will become more familiar with the wide range of endangered species in trade and direct further cases to be heard in the District Courts as appropriate. This would allow a more complete presentation of the impacts that wildlife crime is having on a diverse range of species so that penalties handed down will more accurately reflect the seriousness of the crime and send out a strong message as a deterrent.

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<sup>1</sup> Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants (Amendment) Ordinance 2018. URL: <https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/hk/2018/7!en> accessed on 31 October 2018.

Table 1. Costs incurred for eight months post-seizure care and repatriation of the Pig-nosed Turtles

	Description	Cost (US\$)^
Hong Kong	Husbandry for 8 months (feed, utilities)	2,620
	*Staff labour (keepers, veterinary)	7,700
	Shipping crates and packing materials	2,019
	Air freight for animals (Hong Kong to Jakarta)	2,425
	Staff airfare (Hong Kong to Jakarta)	870
Indonesia (repatriation)	Domestic Air freight for animals (Jakarta to Papua)	2,005
	Airfare for staff from Jakarta to Papua	1,780
	Trip expenses (meal, hotel and local transportation)	5,450
	Field equipment	371

\*includes time input for two staff accompanying the turtles for release in West Papua

**Total: US\$ 25,240**  
**HK\$ 196,872**

Table 2. Summary of the Economics of Smuggling

Estimated value of consignment	Cost of care and repatriation	Penalty imposed for the case
HK\$526,400	HK\$ 196,872	HK\$20,000

Plate 1. Repatriation route from Hong Kong SAR to West Papua, Indonesia

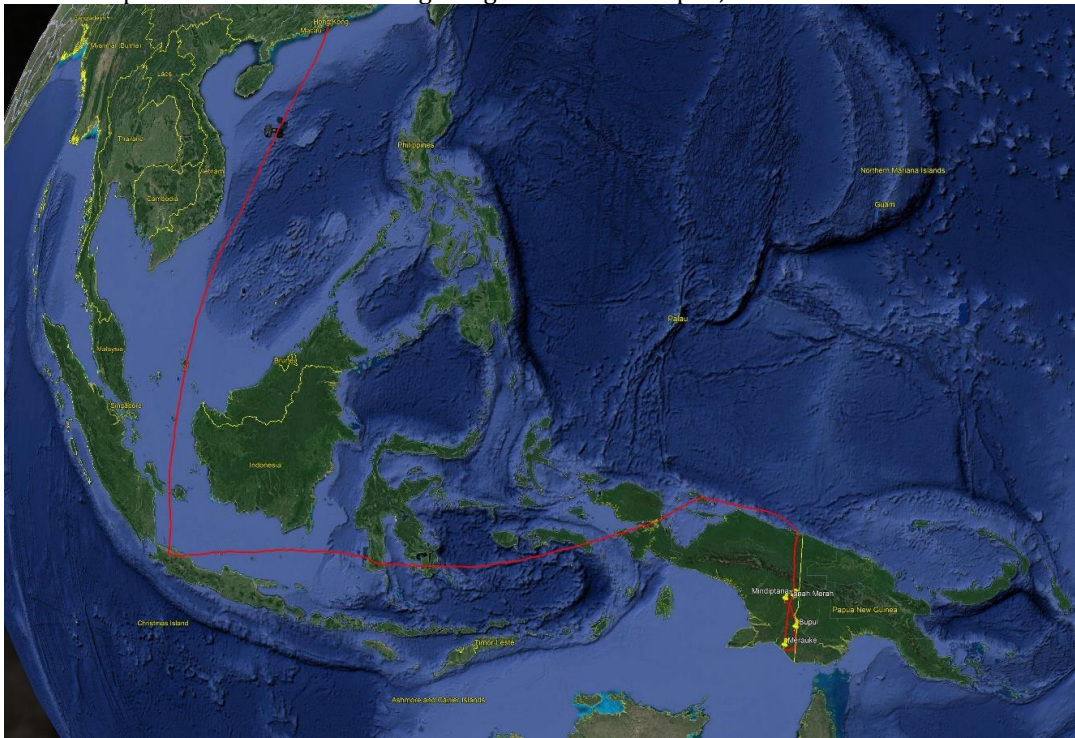


Plate 2. View of the release site at the Digul River in West Papua





Plate 3. A temporary tank setup for the turtles on arrival at KFBG



Plate 4. Preparation for the repatriation journey. Turtles placed in a plastic container with moisture retaining cloth



Plate 5. Plastic containers are secured in a large transport crate. Sixty turtles were placed per crate prior to shipment to Indonesia



Plate 6. The turtles arrive at the Digul River in West Papua and are acclimatized within holding nets on the river bank prior to release

## About KFBG

Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden (KFBG) is situated in the rural New Territories, on the northern slopes of Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's highest mountain. Two steep spurs enclose its deep-set valley. Within KFBG are streams, woodlands, orchards, vegetable gardens, walking trails, live animal exhibits, floral exhibits, sustainable agriculture demonstration plots, art exhibits, a wild animal rescue centre, a native tree nursery, and, other conservation and education facilities.

In the post-war years, Hong Kong was flooded with destitute refugees. Many had traditional knowledge of crop production and livestock farming but no stock, others had land but no experience. They required support to rebuild their lives. The farm site at Pak Ngau Shek was established in 1956 as a base for livestock breeding and distribution, agricultural research, farmers training, public education and recreation. The barren slopes were terraced and planted with orchards and vegetable gardens. The development of the botanic garden began in 1963 and the plant conservation programme from 1972.

On 20th January, 1995, the Legislative Council of Hong Kong passed an Ordinance (Chapter 1156) incorporating KFBG as a non-profit corporation designated as a conservation and education centre. It is a unique public-private partnership, for while the KFBG Corporation is a public organisation, it is privately funded by the Kadoorie Foundation.

Since 1995, KFBG has been conducting a wide range of nature education, nature conservation and sustainable living programmes both on-site, and, throughout Hong Kong and South China.

In this time of severe global crisis KFBG raises awareness, undertakes rigorous science-based species conservation and ecosystem restoration, and offers new ways of thinking and living to respond to the world's problems. Hence, our work brings hope and improvement by focusing on nature conservation, sustainable living and holistic education that re-connects people with nature. By working together with the public, Governments, academia, NGOs and businesses, we can protect our common future.

Our mission is to harmonise our relationship with the environment. Our vision is a world in which people live sustainably with respect for each other and nature.