

November 23, 2008

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE ENV WILDLIFE CRIME UNIT

Welcome to the ENV Wildlife Crime Unit! These are the dedicated young professionals on the telephones every day working to save their country's wildlife.

A typical day in ENV's Wildlife Crime Unit begins with a review of the day's cases. Each case officer may handle up to 200 cases ranging from restaurants offering wildlife on their menu to live tigers being kept in someone's backyard.

This morning, Tam contacts wildlife protection officers in a coastal province to see if there are any results from an inspection of a restaurant that was reportedly keeping live civets and other animals in the kitchen. The call came in on the ENV Wildlife Crime Hotline the previous day from a local resident that wanted to get involved after hearing about the hotline on the Voice of Vietnam radio.



From left to right (top row), Nga, Van Anh, Chi Hang, and Thang. On the bottom row, Tam, Thao, and Em Hang

Thao has fewer cases than the other case officers. This is because she is responsible for managing and motivating more than 700 volunteers nationally that are tasked with monitoring business establishments throughout the country. Her monitoring task list for the week consists of 26 locations in 12 provinces that she needs checked. She has been on the phone all morning trying to track down someone in Ho Chi Minh city to check on a tourist shop in the central market area where 18 stuffed hawksbill turtles were reported for sale in November 2007. The Fisheries Department had acted on the case, but it is time for the shop to be checked again to ensure that they have not returned to selling marine turtles.

At the same time, Nga is discussing on the phone with the owner of a shop in Da Nang city who is advertising fresh bear bile on a signboard in front of their shop. The owner tells Nga that she was not aware that selling bear bile was illegal and promises to remove the sign immediately. Nga has heard promises like this before and asks Thao to organize a volunteer to check the shop in a few days and see if the sign is removed. The shop will also be put on the national monitoring list and receive regular visits over the course of the next few months to ensure that the owner does not put the sign back up.

Em Hang is on the phone with police tracking a case involving the seizure of 314kg of pangolins in Ha Tinh province. The animals were reportedly smuggled over the border from Laos and were headed for the Chinese border when Ha Tinh police intercepted the shipment. Hang is collecting information about

the specifics of the case to put on the Wildlife Crime Database. She wants to know what happened to the pangolins after they were confiscated, and more importantly, what punishment was administered to the smugglers.

Much of the phone traffic on the hotline this morning has been wrong numbers with an occasional crank phone call. Just after lunch, the hotline phone rings again. However this time the man on the other end provides Thang with detailed information about a shipment of wildlife being transported to Hanoi from central Vietnam. The caller, who does not want to give his name, provides Thang with the registration number of the truck and indicates that it will arrive at a guest house located at a specific address sometime in the early evening. Thang passes the information on to Van Anh, who contacts the National Forest Protection Department's Forest Crime Task Force.

Meanwhile Chi Hang is a bit frustrated with Environmental Police in a northern province over a case that came in a week ago involving a leopard cat being kept by a business. Chi Hang had called the Environmental Police in to confiscate the cat. However, the Environmental Police were slow to act, and reported back to Hang only yesterday that the leopard cat was no longer present at the establishment. However, Thao sent a volunteer to check the business earlier in the morning, and the volunteer just called to say that the leopard cat was still present in the establishment. Disappointed with the performance of the Environmental Police, Hang now must contact an alternate government agency to try to deal with the case.

Van Anh, who once was the only case officer in the Wildlife Crime Unit when it started in January 2005, now deals only with high profile cases. She has seven tiger cases pending and has been working for months to try to convince the government to confiscate 80 illegal bears in Quang Ninh province. This morning, she calls National Assembly members to discuss the case, and prepares for an undercover investigation and surveillance in Quang Ninh province at major bear farms in cooperation with National Environmental Police.

A huge smile breaks across Tam's face as she gets off the phone with the chief of a mobile protection team in the coastal province where she was tracking the hotline case involving live civets at a restaurant. Rangers had inspected the restaurant and confiscated five civets and fined the owner for violating wildlife protection laws. Tam calls back the hotline caller to tell him the good news.

The day ends with an exhausted Mobile Awareness Team returning from Dien Bien Phu where they have been carrying out awareness activities, and working with volunteers to survey business establishments in Dien Bien city. The team, headed by Thuan, turns over 14 cases, most of which are minor violations. The business owners have already been issued warnings and Dien Bien rangers have confiscated live animals from at least one location. Thao and her army of volunteers must now check all of the establishments over the next few weeks and evaluate the level of compliance after this first initial stage of the campaign.



A loriso is turned over to chi Hang of the crime unit by a resident in Hanoi. Positive outcomes in cases like this one really help motivate the team. The loriso was later turned over to the Endangered Primate Rescue Center.

Its after 6 P.M. in the Wildlife Crime department of ENV. Thao and Tam are finishing reports on closed cases and Chi Hang is still on the phone trying to ensure that the trade shipment reported earlier on the hotline will be intercepted. Nga has left to attend evening classes. Em Hang is working on some final changes to a new database system that will streamline case management.

Van Anh looks in on the two Hangs, Tam, and Thao and urges everyone to go home for the day. Thao wants to set up her “call backs” and pull her cases for the next morning before leaving. Everyone looks tired. They hope that tomorrow will bring a better day for Vietnam’s wildlife.

Making a difference is never easy. But these young and energetic people are changing the world around them, mobilizing the public in a desperate battle to save Vietnam’s wildlife, assisting the authorities with information and help on specific cases, and achieving genuine results that are sending a clear and profound message to people engaged in the illegal wildlife trade, “Stop trading wildlife or face the consequences.”

“Never in my eleven years of service to Vietnam have I witnessed such an amazing group of young people committed to achieving something good in their own country, and willing to fight a very difficult fight against seemingly impossible odds to succeed.” Douglas Hendrie, Senior Technical Advisor, Education for Nature – Vietnam (ENV)

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<http://www.savingvietnamswildlife.org/>

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