

Sea turtles find human friends at Hainan center

Pang Pang, a green sea turtle 71 centimeters long that was washed ashore more than a year ago and sent by fishermen to Haikou, Hainan province, for rehabilitation, will soon leave its human friends behind and return to the sea in sound condition.

“The most exciting thing for us is to see the turtles released into the sea after receiving care at our center,” said Sun Mengli, one of the volunteers at Hainan Normal University’s turtle conservation and research center in Haikou.

People on Hainan, a well-known tropical island resort with abundant natural scenery and wildlife resources, once saw turtles regularly on its beaches, but after years of overhunting, the animals’ numbers have dropped drastically.

The turtles, regarded as living fossils, or flagship sea species, were put under State protection in China in 1989. Measures have been updated since then to crack down on the capture and trade of the turtles and their eggs.

Pang Pang – or “Fatty” in Chinese – a nickname given by the volunteers, was found washed ashore in a mangrove forest in a suburb of Haikou. It was delivered to the center by fishermen last year.

“The turtle was in very poor condition and needed immediate surgery when it arrived. It suffered from severe dehydration and had wounds on its stomach that were festering,” said Sun, a life sciences major at the university. “We found that fresh honey worked well in preventing the turtle from further dehydration.” Honey was spread directly onto the wounds, and rapid improvement was observed.

“Over a month’s time my fellow volunteers gave Pang Pang nutrient injections every day before the turtle could eat by itself,” Sun said. “It is not an easy job. Three volunteers had to work together to do the injection.”

Sun added that she and her classmates have learned a lot about the turtles by caring for them, and now have a stronger sense of responsibility when it comes to protecting ocean ecological systems.

Every two days, the volunteers go to market to buy fresh vegetables, meat and squid for the turtles to provide a balanced diet. On weekends, they refresh the creatures’ seawater.

Pang Pang has gained 8 kilograms since arriving. Before being released, it will be tagged with a serial number and a phone number for scientific tracking in the future.

Thirteen other green sea turtles and one hawksbill turtle are hospitalized at

the center, each occupying a plastic bucket 2.5 meters in diameter.

Over the past three years, more than 50 turtles, most caught by fishermen or found washed ashore by tourists – as well as a few smuggled ones seized by the local police – have returned to sea after receiving lifesaving care at the university center, according to Shi Haitao, professor of turtle research and conservation and vice-president of Hainan Normal University.

Shi said the team of volunteers has attracted about 50 students, teachers and social workers since its establishment in 2014.

Frederick Yeh, a Chinese-American postgraduate student, has been an active volunteer. Yeh found his passion in sea turtle conservation when he returned to his childhood home in Hainan in 2007 and discovered that the turtles were being sold for their meat and shells in local markets. He devoted himself to protecting the threatened animals and established the nonprofit Sea Turtle 911 organization in Hainan in 2008.

“I am gratified that so many volunteers have joined us,” Shi said.

Shi has called for greater public awareness and strict law enforcement against turtle poaching and trading, and has sought financial support for the center’s operation. But the center remains short of funds to buy medicine, medical devices and food for the turtles.

The Hainan Biodiversity Museum, a platform for sea life conservation initiated by Shi at the university, has received more than 700,000 visitors since 2000. His book on turtles has been printed three times to serve as a reference tool for the public and special workers such as customs officers and law enforcers.

Shi and his conservation team are expanding their efforts from Hainan Island to the Xisha Islands in the South China Sea through lectures to fishermen there on turtle protection.

“With more people getting to know the precious value of sea turtles in safeguarding a healthy biological chain and offering them good protection, it won’t be too long before we see the lovely creatures again visiting the beaches in groups in Hainan,” he said.

The Xisha Islands, with their clean, soft, quiet beaches, are thought to be a perfect location for sea turtles to lay eggs. A number of turtle protection stations have been set up on the islands since the establishment of Sansha city in 2012.

In 2014, turtles laid eggs in 52 nests in Sansha; by 2016 the number of nests had grown to 152. A turtle protection center is being set up in Sansha, according to city officials.