

Endangered Siamese crocodiles in Song Hinh District need protecting



Footprint of the crocodile in Song Hinh district.

Scientists have recently called for the protection of the recently discovered wild Siamese crocodiles in Song Hinh district, Phu Yen province, where the Lower Ba River Dam will operate.

In December 2004 sightings of wild freshwater crocodiles were reported by local villagers and fishermen in the Song Hinh area. These reports were investigated and confirmed in June 2005 during a joint survey of the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP), the Institute of Tropical Biology (ITB), Fauna and Flora International (FFI), Cambodia and local government authorities.

“Survey findings, including one fresh track of an about 100 kilogramme individual found on a steep swamp bank during the daytime and another observation of an adult individual was made during a night-time spotlighting, reconfirmed that there are a small group of crocodiles living in the wild in the survey areas”, said by Dr Vu Ngoc Long, researcher from ITB, a member of the survey team.

Doctor Long said, during the survey, he saw the crocodile coming to the surface twice from a distance of about 40 metres; the first time was at about 11.23pm and the other time was at about 1.50am. However, Mr Long said it was a pity that he could not manage to take a photo of the crocodile because he had to use a headlamp and the crocodile dived immediately.

During a conference in Hanoi in late March, scientists, managers and donors

contributed to the proposed action plan for wild crocodile conservation. The urgent actions include awareness raising activities for local communities to protect the species, in conjunction with rules to forbid electrical fishing methods in the areas.

Participants at the conference suggested that, the Vietnam Environment Protection Agency should work closely with scientists and MWBP in developing a comprehensive proposal to further assess the solutions for rescuing the wild species, and conducting further surveys on crocodiles in potential areas of the southern and central region and the Central Highlands of Vietnam, especially in Krong H'Nang and Ba rivers of Gia Lai and Phu Yen provinces.

“Although historically abundant, intentional killings, habitat loss and accidental capture have probably led to the decline in the number of the Siamese Crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*) in the wild. These findings are an important discovery for Vietnam as the species was thought to be extinct in the wild”, said by Alvin Lopez, Wetland Ecologist, MWBP. The Siamese Crocodile is ranked *critically endangered* by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and has been selected as one of the flagship species of the MWBP.

In another effort to rescue the wild and highly endangered species, the participants said a request would be sent to the Environmental Impact Assessment and Appraisal Department of the Ministry of Nature Resource and Environment to ask investors of the Hydro-Power Ba River dam to further conduct an impact assessment on biodiversity for the EIA report, which as yet had not addressed the wild Siamese Crocodiles in its current review.

The site of the crocodiles will soon become a reservoir in conjunction with the Lower Ba River hydro-power dam. Construction of the dam is soon to be to complete, and when the dam is operational, the current crocodile habitat will be flooded causing a loss of the habitat and breeding areas of the crocodiles. The previous environmental impact assessment of the Lower Ba River Dam did not address the existence of this species in the area.



Dung of the crocodile in Song Hinh district.

"Crocodiles are vitally important for maintaining healthy waterways and fish stocks. The people of Vietnam can be reassured that Siamese Crocodiles are shy and have never been known to attack or hurt humans in their natural habitat. This species of crocodile mainly eat snakes and other small animals", said Dr Jenny Daltry, Fauna & Flora International who is also the Co-Chairman of the East and Southeast Asia Region, Crocodile Specialist Group.

Despite a high numbers in commercial farms in the region, Siamese Crocodiles are almost extinct from the wild with Cambodia possibly having the largest remaining wild population of not more than 300 individuals.

The workshop, held on 30 March 2006 in Hanoi, is one important step towards saving the last of the wild crocodiles in Vietnam. The meeting brought together scientists and managers in open dialogue to discuss how to raise awareness about the significance of and the need for conservation of wild crocodiles and their habitats; and formulate solutions for protecting the current Song Hinh crocodiles.

The workshop was hosted by Vietnam Environment Protection Agency and Institute of Tropical Biology and supported by the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP).

By **Huy Cuong**

The Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) is a joint programme of the four member governments of the Lower Mekong Basin – Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam – managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC), in collaboration with other key stakeholders. With funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), UNDP, the Royal Netherlands Government, MRCS, the Water and Nature Initiative (WANI) and other donors, the programme addresses the most critical issues for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in the Mekong wetlands. MWBP aims to strengthen the capacity of organisations and people to develop sustainable livelihoods and manage wetland biodiversity resources wisely. It is a five-year (2004-2009) intervention at three levels – regional, national and local – with demonstration wetland areas in each of the four countries: in the Songkhram river basin, Thailand; in Attapeu province in southern Lao PDR; in Stung Treng, Cambodia; and in the Plain of Reeds in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.