

Record number of baby Siamese crocodiles – once thought to be extinct – spotted in the wild

Ten baby Siamese crocodiles have been spotted in the wild in Cambodia, raising hopes that conservation efforts have achieved a genuine breakthrough for a species once believed to be extinct in the wild.

The hatchlings were seen in late January by Fauna & Flora International (FFI) by conservationists at the Veal Veng crocodile sanctuary, a protected part of the Steung Knoung River in Cambodia managed by FFI.

This is only the second time in a decade that baby Siamese crocodiles have been seen in the wild in Cambodia, and is the largest number of hatchlings ever sighted by conservationists in the country.

“This is a really significant moment and it feels like we have reached a turning point for the Siamese crocodile,” says Pablo Sinovas, Flagship Species Manager in Cambodia for FFI. “For a species that for a long time was believed to be extinct in the wild to be breeding and producing hatchlings is extremely exciting. Reproduction of a species in the wild is a key measure of success in terms of population recovery and long-term viability. It shows our conservation efforts are working.”

The Siamese crocodile is classed as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List, with just 250 individuals estimated to be surviving in the rivers of Cambodia.

An FFI-led team of scientists rediscovered the Siamese crocodile during surveys in the Cardamom Mountains in south-west Cambodia in the year 2000. Siamese crocodiles have disappeared from 99% of their original range and until their rediscovery were widely believed to be extinct in the wild. Historically threatened by collection from the wild to place in commercial farms, the primary threats to Siamese crocodiles in Cambodia now are habitat degradation and death due to entanglement in fishing nets.

Fauna & Flora International manages a captive breeding facility outside of Phnom Penh in partnership with the Cambodian Forestry Administration. At this facility, baby crocodiles are reared in captivity for up to three years until they are able to fend for themselves, at which point they are released into strictly protected community crocodile sanctuaries. These sanctuaries are managed in consultation with local communities and are protected by local community wardens.

The most recent release was in December, when ten Siamese crocodiles were released into sanctuary areas along the river. This release brought the number of crocodiles that have been released into the wild by FFI since 2012 up to 111.

In addition to the positive news regarding wild hatchlings, last month also saw the first DNA test of Siamese crocodiles in Cambodia. DNA testing ensures released animals are pure-bred Siamese crocodiles rather than hybrids between Siamese and saltwater crocodiles. The DNA testing was undertaken in collaboration with the Royal University of Phnom Penh with technical support from FFI and the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland.

“If hybrids get into the wild it could contribute to the dilution of the genetic makeup of this species which has been around for millions of years,” says Pablo.

The next stage of the programme will see increased numbers of crocodiles released into the wild, close monitoring of released individuals to better understand how they behave after being released, and expansion to additional suitable sites in the country.

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For further information, (including high resolution images), please contact:

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About Fauna & Flora International (FFI) (www.fauna-flora.org)

FFI protects threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science and that enhance human well-being. Operating in more than 40 countries worldwide, FFI saves species from extinction and habitats from destruction, while improving the livelihoods of local people. Founded in 1903, FFI is the world's longest established international wildlife conservation organisation and a registered charity.