

## **The heat is on – And that’s great news for rare Siamese crocodiles**

### ***Successful hatching of three clutches of eggs is a pivotal moment for one of the world’s rarest reptiles***

As temperatures soar to record levels across much of the world, many people are complaining that it’s hot enough to fry an egg outdoors. Thirty-degree heat may be too much for some, but for others it’s just the ticket. Crocodile conservationists in Cambodia have been assiduously checking their own thermometers for the past few weeks, to ensure that it’s hot enough to hatch an egg indoors – several clutches of eggs, to be precise. And their devotion as surrogate parents has just reaped spectacular rewards in the shape of 65 Siamese crocodile hatchlings.

The birth of these crocodiles – at a captive-breeding facility in Phnom Penh<sup>1</sup> managed by Fauna & Flora International (FFI) in partnership with the Cambodian Forestry Administration – is a momentous event for one of the world’s rarest reptiles. Given that the wild population is estimated at a mere 250 mature individuals, this represents a dramatic increase in numbers, and offers a vital lifeline for a species that is classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List<sup>2</sup>.

Siamese crocodiles have disappeared from 99% of their original range<sup>3</sup> and the species was widely believed to be extinct in the wild until its rediscovery during FFI-led surveys in the Cardamom Mountains. This remote area of Cambodia is the reptile’s main stronghold, harbouring the majority of the global population, but even here there is very little breeding activity in the wild, not least because the populations are so small and fragmented. At best, surveys have recorded only one or two nests each year. The single wild nest discovered last year by Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) staff was the first since 2013.

In view of the constraints facing wild Siamese crocodiles, FFI launched a captive-breeding programme to catalyse the recovery of the species. The first individual to hatch successfully – from a 2012 clutch – was released into the wild in 2015; another clutch produced seven hatchlings in 2016. Since then, the programme has gone from strength to strength, and generous financial and technical support from a number of donors<sup>4</sup> and collaborators – notably Lonnie McCaskill of WCS – has resulted in significant improvements in facilities and husbandry.

This year, the efforts of FFI and our partners have been amply rewarded; every single crocodile from two of the three clutches of eggs has hatched in the past few weeks, and the third clutch achieved a 90% success rate. All 65 of these baby crocs will be reared in

captivity for up to three years until they attain one metre in length, at which point they will be big enough to fend for themselves and ready for release into strictly protected community crocodile sanctuaries.

Just as encouragingly, this year has also been the best in recent memory in terms of wild nests recorded, with a total of five already discovered. Significantly, four of these nests were found downstream from one of the sites where FFI has released a total of 38 pure-bred crocodiles as part of a national reintroduction programme launched in 2012. The last time any wild nests were found in this river system, prior to the one discovered last year by WCS, was 2004.

According to Dr Jackson Frechette, Flagship Species Programme Manager, “This is the culmination of 18 years of hard work by FFI and our partners to protect and restore Siamese crocodiles in this part of Cambodia. We’ve really built on that solid foundation and it feels as though we’ve turned a corner in our efforts to bring this species back from the brink. It’s a perfect illustration of the fact that species recovery – more often than not – depends on long-term investment and vision on the part of conservationists, communities and donors alike.”

This captive-breeding success is just the latest milestone in an ambitious long-term plan hatched by FFI. We are aiming to double the wild population of Siamese crocodiles by the year 2020.

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**About Fauna & Flora International (FFI) ([www.fauna-flora.org](http://www.fauna-flora.org))**

FFI protects threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science and take account of human needs. Operating in more than 50 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 conservation body and a registered charity.

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**Notes to editors:**

<sup>1</sup> Phnom Tamao Zoological Park and Wildlife Rescue Centre was opened in 1995 by the Cambodian Forestry Administration. The park is supported by Wildlife Alliance, Free the Bears and Fauna & Flora International (FFI). It acts as a rehabilitation centre to around 90 species rescued from the illegal

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wildlife trade. There are also breeding and release programmes for many species, including the Siamese crocodile. The park doubles as a zoo that is open to the public, with animals that cannot be released given a permanent home at the centre in a natural forest setting.

<sup>2</sup> The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species provides a comprehensive, official inventory of each species' global conservation status in the wild, which ranges from Least Concern to Critically Endangered.

<sup>3</sup> The decline of the Siamese crocodile began with competition from rice farmers for its wetland habitat, but it was the explosion in commercial hunting and large-scale farming in the 1950s – to supply the international skin trade – that drove the species to the brink of extinction. Siamese crocodiles produce fine, soft leather and are easy to breed in captivity. Most of the estimated one million 'Siamese' crocodiles in captivity are actually hybrids and mongrels. Almost all wild-caught individuals have subsequently been hybridised with other crocodile species, compromising the genetic purity of the vast majority of captive stock as well as severely depleting the wild population.

<sup>4</sup> Current donors: Czech Association for Breeding and Conservation of Crocodylians, The Darwin Initiative, People's Trust for Endangered Species, Species Fund. Previous donors: Association of Zoos & Aquariums, Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, CrocFest, Crocodile Advisory Group, Disney Conservation Fund, John Meers, The Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, Ocean Park Conservation Foundation Hong Kong, Oklahoma Zoo, SOS – Save Our Species, Oren Taylor, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.