

Cambodian Journal of Natural History

Northern yellow-cheeked crested gibbons
Impacts on the Tonle Sap flooded forests
Assessment of rodent communities
New elephant and snake records
The future for Cambodian tigers
Green peafowl populations

December 2017



Vol. 2017 No. 2

News

Workshop shines spotlight on rare and endangered wildlife in the Mekong Basin

The Mekong Basin is a hotspot of biodiversity, but wildlife species in the region face serious threats, including habitat destruction and fragmentation, hunting and harvest, and the illegal wildlife trade. As the most vulnerable species become increasingly rare, they also become more challenging to study and conserve. To address such issues, a USAID-supported project Wonders of the Mekong recently convened a workshop titled “Saving species on the edge of extinction: building capacity to find and protect the Mekong’s most imperiled wildlife”. The workshop was hosted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Inland Fisheries Research and Development Institute, and was facilitated by the University of Nevada-Reno and the consulting company FISHBIO in Phnom Penh on 14–15 November 2017.

The workshop brought together over 60 participants from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam to discuss rare species research, conservation management and outreach, and wildlife trafficking. Many early-career researchers presented their work on species such as the giant ibis, Asian giant softshell turtle, pangolin, and Mekong giant catfish. Four panel discussions allowed for dialogue on a range of issues, and attendees also participated in a hands-on communication training to develop messages, give video interviews, and speak with the media. The outcomes of the workshop included increased capacity to advance conservation research, outreach benefits from sharing positive conservation stories, and introduction of new approaches for improved conservation planning and counter-trafficking efforts.

The Wonders of the Mekong project seeks to improve understanding, management capacity, and appreciation of a functional and healthy Mekong River for fish, wildlife, and people, as well as increase the valuation and conservation of the Mekong River’s ecosystem services, habitats, cultural heritage, and biodiversity. These goals will be accomplished through applied, interdisciplinary research, trainings and workshops, and communications products. Project updates can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/MekongWonders>.

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The Cambodian dolphin project

The Irrawaddy dolphin *Orcaella brevirostris* is distributed in coastal waters, rivers, estuaries and lakes throughout Southeast Asia. The species is one of 11 marine mammal species found in Cambodia’s seas, and like other cetaceans, faces a range of threats including mortality due to bycatch, habitat degradation and direct catch for aquaria. These threats are worsened by the proximity of the species to land. The Irrawaddy dolphin currently has a globally declining population and is considered Endangered by the *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*, which makes it imperative to act quickly if the species is to survive in coming decades. While all cetacean species in Cambodia were protected by a Royal Decree in 2006, baseline data are much needed to strengthen implementation of existing laws through the creation of tailored conservation management strategies.

To this end, the Cambodian Dolphin Project was launched in September 2017. The initiative was established by Marine Conservation Cambodia, an NGO based in the Kep Archipelago in southern Cambodia, with help from the DMAD Marine Mammals Research Association, a Turkish NGO. The project is working in close collaboration with the Dolphin Division of the Cambodia’s Fisheries Administration and will operate for 18 months. Its initial aims are to investigate the abundance, distribution and residency patterns of the Irrawaddy dolphin to facilitate identification and delineation of critical habitats for the species within the Kep Archipelago. Data on all marine mammal species encountered during the study will also be recorded.

Data generated by the project will ultimately be used to inform fisheries policy, providing a first step towards effective conservation of cetaceans and their ecosystems in Cambodia. As the project expands in future, it will utilize passive acoustic monitoring techniques, aerial surveys, and create a shared online photo-identification catalogue.

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