

Rare soft-shell turtle, nesting ground found in Cambodia

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One of the world's largest and least studied freshwater turtles has been found in Cambodia's Mekong River, raising hopes that the threatened species can be saved from extinction.

Scientists from Conservation International (CI), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the Cambodian Fisheries Administration, and the Cambodian Turtle Conservation Team captured and released an 11-kilogram (24.2-pound) female Cantor's giant softshell turtle (*Pelochelys cantorii*) during a survey in March.

"This incredible discovery means that a unique turtle can be saved from disappearing from our planet," said David Emmett, a CI wildlife

biologist. “We thought it might be almost gone, but found it in abundance in this one pristine stretch of the Mekong, making the area the world’s most important site for saving this particular species.”

Instead of an exterior shell commonly associated with turtles, the Cantor’s giant softshell turtle has a rubbery skin with ribs fused together to form a protective layer over the internal organs. To protect itself from predators, the turtle spends 95 percent of its life hidden in sand or mud with only its eyes and nose showing. It possesses long claws and can extend its neck with lightning speed to bite with jaws powerful enough to crush bone.

“It has the fastest strike of any animal I’ve ever seen, including cobras,” Emmett said.

The researchers also found a nesting ground for the species and brought back eggs that have since hatched. The hatchlings were released into the wild on May 8, together with another adult turtle and additional hatchlings captured by fishermen and handed over to the conservation team.

Last observed by scientists in the wild in Cambodia in 2003, Cantor’s giant softshell turtles can grow up to 2 meters (6 feet) in length and weigh more than 50 kilograms (110 pounds). Only a few records of the species exist for Laos, and it appears to have disappeared across much of its former range in Vietnam and Thailand.

It is currently classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the same status as tigers and pandas. Threats to its existence include over-harvesting by hunters due to its size and edibility, as well as habitat destruction from dams, irrigation and dredging.

The stretch of Mekong River where the turtle lives is an area closed for

many years to scientific exploration because it was one the last strongholds of the former Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. The survey was the first detailed study of the area since security restrictions were relaxed in the late 1990s.

“Our survey work to date has documented some of the highest freshwater biodiversity values in the entire Lower Mekong Basin,” said Mark Bezuijen of WWF’s Living Mekong Program, who led the team. “We discovered an entirely new plant species, *Amorphophallus* Sp., along with surviving populations of such threatened species as terns, fish eagles, green peafowl, otters and silvered leaf-monkeys. More than 180 fish species were recorded, including a new record for Cambodia”

Bezuijen described the area where the turtle was discovered as “a near pristine region of tall riverine forest, waterways and island archipelagos where further exciting biological discoveries will almost certainly be made.” He said a further survey of the area by an international team of flora and fauna experts was planned for July 2007.

The turtle survey team consisted of Cambodian Fisheries Administration staff and the Cambodian Turtle Conservation Team, a group of early career conservationists who have received long-term mentoring from CI along with funding from the British energy company BP. During the survey, they worked closely with WWF staff and local fishing communities and explained the rarity of the turtle species and its importance for conservation.

For the future protection of the species, CI, WWF and the Cambodian Turtle Conservation Team plan to employ local community members to protect nesting beaches for the turtles and to conduct patrols during the dry season to prevent illegal fishing of the species prized as an expensive delicacy in neighboring Vietnam. The organizations will also provide the communities with financial incentives to offset the potential loss of

revenue from illegal trade in the turtles.

Source: Conservation International

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