

Asian waterbirds stage remarkable comeback

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Spot-billed pelicans have increased by 400 percent since conservation measures have been enacted in Cambodia's Prek Toal. Credit: Eleanor Briggs

According to a report released today by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), several species of rare waterbirds from Cambodia's famed Tonle Sap region have staged remarkable comebacks, thanks to a project involving a single team of park rangers to provide 24-hour protection to breeding colonies. The project pioneered a novel approach: employing former hunters and egg collectors to protect and monitor the colonies, thereby guaranteeing the active involvement of local communities in the initiative.

The report shows that some species, which include varieties of storks, pelicans, and ibises, have rebounded 20-fold since 2001, when WCS and the Ministry of Environment of the Royal Government of Cambodia established the conservation project. Before that time, rampant

harvesting of both eggs and chicks had driven the colonies to the brink of local extinction.

"This is an amazing success story for the people and wildlife of Cambodia," said Colin Poole, Wildlife Conservation Society director for Asia Programs. "It also shows how important local people are in the conservation of wildlife in their own backyards."

Researchers first discovered the colonies in the mid 1990s in Prek Toal, an area within the massive Tonle Sap—a seasonally flooded wetland critical to Cambodia’s people and wildlife. According to WCS researchers, the colonies include the largest, and in some cases, the only breeding populations of seven Globally Threatened large waterbird species in Southeast Asia.

Populations of all seven species have increased from a total of 2,500 breeding pairs in 2001 to 10,000 pairs in 2007. The success of the Prek Toal program has contributed to recent proposals for species status revisions, such as the down-listing of the spot-billed pelican based on the bird’s observed population recoveries.

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

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