

Endangered crocodiles hatched in Cambodia

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This May 20, 2010 photo released by Fauna and Flora International shows baby Siamese crocodiles after hatching in a remote part of the Cardamom Mountains in Cambodia. Thirteen baby Siamese crocodiles crawled out of their shells over the weekend following a weeks long vigil by researchers who found them in the jungle. Experts believe as few as 250 Siamese crocodiles are left in the wild, almost all of them in Cambodia but with a few spread between Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia, Vietnam and possibly Thailand. (AP Photo/Fauna and Flora International)

(AP) -- Conservationists in Cambodia are celebrating the hatching of a clutch of eggs from one of the world's most critically endangered animals.

Thirteen baby Siamese [crocodiles](#) crawled out of their shells over the weekend in a remote part of the Cardamom Mountains in southwestern Cambodia, following a weekslong vigil by researchers who found them in the jungle.

Experts believe as few as 250 Siamese crocodiles are left in the wild, almost all of them in Cambodia but with a few spread between Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia, Vietnam and possibly Thailand.

The operation to protect and hatch the eggs was mounted by United Kingdom-based Fauna and Flora International, for whom conservation of this once-abundant species is a key program.

"Every nest counts," program manager Adam Starr told Associated Press Television News. "To be able to find a nest is a very big success story, to be able to hatch eggs properly is an even bigger success story."

The nest, with 22 eggs inside, was discovered in the isolated Areng Valley. Fauna and Flora International volunteers removed 15 of them to a safe site and incubated them in a compost heap to replicate the original nest. They left seven behind because they appeared to be unfertilized.

A round-the-clock guard was mounted to keep away [predators](#) like monitor [lizards](#). Last weekend the crocodiles began calling from inside the shells, a sure sign they were about to hatch.

Within hours 10 emerged - and a further surprise was in store. Three of the eggs left behind at the original nest also hatched. A field coordinator, Sam Han, discovered the squawking baby crocodiles when he went to recover a camera-trap from the site.

"When I first saw the baby crocodiles they stayed and swam together near the nest site. They were looking for their mother," he said. He snapped a few photos of the hatchlings, their noses poking out of the water.

To cap the success, the camera-trap yielded two infrared shots of the mother crocodile returning to the nest.

The reptiles are now being kept in a water-filled pen in a local village in the jungle-covered mountain range. The indigenous Chouerng people who live there revere crocodiles as forest spirits and consider it taboo to harm them. It's likely they'll be looked after for a year before being released into the wild.

But the euphoria is tempered by hard-edged reality. This part of the Areng Valley has been earmarked for a major hydropower project. The conservation group is looking for other areas of similar habitat to release the juveniles when the time comes.

"To put these crocodiles back into the Areng Valley could spell certain doom for them," Starr said.

The Siamese crocodile has suffered a massive decline over the last century, because of a high demand for its soft skin. Commercial breeders also brought them to stock farms where they crossed them with larger types of crocodile, producing hybrids which further reduced numbers of the pure Siamese.

In 1992 it was declared "effectively extinct in the wild" before being rediscovered in the remote Cardamoms in Cambodia eight years later. Siamese crocodiles take 15 years to reach sexual maturity, complicating efforts to revive the population. Only a handful of the 13 new crocs are likely to survive long enough to make a long-term impact on numbers.

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