

20 endangered Siamese crocodiles hatch in Laos

August 26 2011, By JERRY HARMER , Associated Press



In this Aug. 18 ,2011 photo released by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), a baby Siamese crocodile hatches from an egg at the Lao Zoo outside Vientiane, Laos. Environmentalists say rare Siam Crocodiles have hatched in a zoo in Laos and will be released into the wild once they are old enough to fend for themselves. Chris Hallam with the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society says the 20 baby crocodiles hatched last week from eggs found in a lake in southern Laos. (AP Photo/Wildlife Conservation Society) ONE TIME USE ONLY, NO SALES, NO ARCHIVE

(AP) -- One of the world's rarest crocodile species has moved a little bit further from extinction with the hatching of 20 wild eggs plucked from a nest found in southern Laos.

Experts believe there could be as few as 300 Siamese crocodiles remaining in the world's swamps, forests and rivers, so the discovery of

the nest - the first found in the mountainous, jungle-clad country since 2008 - is a significant step in the rehabilitation of a species that was declared extinct in the wild in 1992.

Since then, tiny populations have been discovered in remote corners of its range, which used to include most of Southeast Asia. Still, the crocs remain critically endangered, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List, the acknowledged authority on the status of global biodiversity.

Under the soft red light of an incubator, the 20 baby crocodiles tapped and cracked their way into the world last week. Their nest was found in the southern province of Savannakhet in June by a team of villagers trained by the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, which is working to save the species in landlocked Laos.

"The feeling was one of elation," Chris Hallam, who coordinates the organization's crocodile project in Laos, told The Associated Press about the hatching.

"When you look at the global population and the population in Laos it represents quite a significant number of individual crocodiles," he said.

The crocs were hatched at the Lao Zoo, just outside Vientiane, where they were moved to protect them from predators such as snakes and monitor lizards.

Hallam said the crocodiles will be raised in captivity for 18 months before being released back into the wild.

And it seems they won't be alone. Villagers recently found another nest in Savannakhet with 20 eggs inside. Because those crocs are so near to hatching, conservationists decided to leave them where they are with

village teams keeping an eye on them.

The Siamese crocodile grows up to 10 feet (3 meters) in length but is generally docile. Their passive nature made them all the easier to hunt. In recent decades thousands were captured and sold to crocodile farms that sprung up across Southeast Asia, feeding a vogue for its renowned soft skin and a taste for its meat.

Several thousand of the crocodiles remain in farms and in zoos, though many have been crossbred with bigger species, reducing still further the numbers of pure Siamese crocodiles.

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Citation: 20 endangered Siamese crocodiles hatch in Laos (2011, August 26) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-08-endangered-siam-crocodiles-hatched-laos.html>

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