

Hatchlings raise hope for Cambodia's endangered 'Royal Turtle'

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The freshwater turtle, also known as the southern river terrapin, was thought to be extinct in Cambodia until 2000

The birth of nine Cambodian royal turtle hatchlings has sparked hope for the future of a species on the brink of extinction, conservationists said Wednesday.

The baby [turtles](#) hatched this week, three months after a villager discovered a 14-egg [nest](#) in sand along a river in southwestern Koh Kong Province—the only place where the reptile is still found in Cambodia.

The [freshwater turtle](#), also known as the southern river terrapin, was thought to be extinct in Cambodia until 2000, when a small population was re-discovered in the Sre Ambel river.

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WSC) and Cambodian government have been desperately trying to protect the species ever since with a program that hires former egg collectors to search for and protect nests, instead of harvesting the eggs.

"I am proud of the result, especially to be part of conserving Cambodia's royal turtles from extinction," villager Long Sman, who helped guard the nest of the latest hatchlings, was quoted as saying by the WSC.

The turtle species acquired its name because only Cambodia's royal family was historically allowed to consume its eggs.

The nine new hatchlings will join around 200 others in a nearby conservation centre "for feeding, raising and possibly breeding in the future," the WSC said in a statement.



Royal turtle hatchlings in a nest at the Kaong River in Cambodia's Koh Kong province

The group warned that sand dredging, illegal logging and fishing remain critical threats to the small number of royal turtles in the wild.

Only one nest was found this year compared to two nests found in 2016 and three nests in 2015, said WSC's technical advisor Som Sitha.

"This is a big concern for royal turtle conservation," he added.

Deforestation and poaching have devastated many [species](#) in Cambodia, one of Asia's poorest and most corrupt nations.



Conservationists sit next to a container holding nine Cambodian royal turtle hatchlings at the Kaong River in Koh Kong province, on May 9, 2017

Last year tigers were declared "functionally extinct" in the country, with the last big cat seen on a camera trap in 2007.

In its haste to develop, the government has been criticised for allowing firms to clear hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest land—including in protected zones—for everything from rubber and

sugar cane plantations to hydropower dams.

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