

BP Project Report- Stoeng Kep river-17th -27th August 2005

Authors: Sitha Som, Koulang Chey, Yoeung Sun

Introduction

The Cambodian Turtle Conservation Project (CTCP) has been funded by the BP Conservation Program (BPCP) for the follow-up project. The project is called "Extending Chelonian Research, Education, and Conservation in Southwest Cambodia." The project is conducted by a group of students from the Royal University of Phnom Penh with cooperation with Conservation International- Cambodia and the Forestry Administration.

Our aim is to do further research on endangered species, educate local student, local people, and rangers, and to make a national working group focusing on turtle issue in Cambodia.

Background to field trip (UTM: 48P 0321145, 1298633)

Stoeng Kep, the two-day walking area located in the East of Thmar Bang is a quite remote area as it is far from local people. It is a big river flowing from the Cardamom Mountains connecting with other small streams before flowing to the sea. The forest around the river is full of bamboo and other trees as some local people said rich in big animals such as sambar, wild pig, bear, gibbon, etc. The area is about 300 to 450 meters altitude. According to the interview with local guides said that because of it is far from the village so a few people go there for fishing just only in dry season and we think that it is true because when we walked there the old track was full of fallen bamboo and we needed to cut along the way to the river.

Our objective for this field trip was to look for the endangered giant softshell turtle (*Pelochelys cantorii*) and Asiatic softshell turtle (*Amyda cartilaginea*).

Method

Trapping: We used two kinds of traps, two big traps and 16 standard traps, to catch turtle in the river. We spent 5 days (21st to 25th Aug 2005) trapping and doing timed searches. We used 18 traps by putting them in the river. Traps were kept partially out of the water to make sure trapped turtles did not drown when they went into the traps. We put bait alternatively between traps of fruits and meats such as chicken and fish together. The baits were good dispersing fruits such as banana, papaya, durian, and jackfruit. We tried fresh and rotten meat (fish and chicken).

Timed search: In this trip we did searches along plateaus and slopes up and down the mountain nearby the river and stream that is rich in bamboo forest. During these searches the team walked in a fixed direction along roughly parallel routes looking for tortoise, turtles, tracks, and feces. Every search was timed using a stopwatch, and searches were conducted both during the morning and in the afternoon. Each team member walked approximately 5-10 metres apart from the next depending on the density of the vegetation. The key was to ensure that the area was thoroughly searched and no tortoises were missed. The numbers of participants in this timed search were 5 people. They were three BP team members, one guide and one local guide. In addition, three local hunting dogs were used - The dogs were allowed to roam between and around the participants, and were used to find concealed animals. In total we spent about 9 hours of doing timed search finding tortoise and turtle in the forest with 5 people and three dogs. So we spent about 45 men-and-dog hours in this trip.

When a tortoise or turtle was found in traps or walk, the date, time, time taken to find it, locality (determined with Garmin-12 or Etrex Venture GPS), habitat, microhabitat, altitude, weather, and

air temperature was recorded. The tortoise or turtle was identified to species using field guides (Cox et al., 2001) and its behaviour was recorded (i.e. resting head in, resting head out, walking, feeding, combat (male-male), mating (male-female), or nesting). In addition, its age was estimated by counting the number of growth rings on the scutes and its sex was determined based on differences in shell morphology (shape) and tail size. The straight - line carapace length was recorded using calipers or measuring tape, and a unique mark was given to each individual by notching the marginal scutes of the carapace, thereby ensuring that recaptures are recognized and recorded. Every tortoise and turtle was photographed above and below to provide confirmatory evidence of species identifications. Empty shells were also photographed and measured, and were collected and retained whenever possible. At least one DNA sample (shell fragment or blood sample) was taken for each tortoise and turtle species, in case there are doubts as to the validity of species identifications.

Results

Trapping: During this trip we spent 5 days of trapping in the Stoeng Kep River using two big traps and 16 small traps in some good habitats of the river where we think good for giant softshell turtle. But we didn't trap any turtles, only fish.

Timed Search: In timed search we still didn't find any tortoise or turtle even though we used a lot of people and dogs spent a lot of times to find.

Discussion

The river is very big and surrounding by good forest that we think should be some species of tortoises and turtles there. Also a lot of people and rangers in Thmar Bang said that not many people went there for hunting- just a few during dry season. We didn't find any other species in the area but we found many footprint of some animal such as endangered wild dogs, sambar, and others. We also didn't see any hunters or poachers in the area but we saw a burnt wild pig along the beginning road to Stoeng Kep but not close to the river. We never saw old tracks in and around the river. But people said before ago there were some fishermen come and hunt softshell by using line hooks. Be aware that this time of the year the river is full of water and some parts of the river is moving very fast and sometime along the edge of the river is also full of water. We think that now there should be no hunting there. Also, on the up stream of this river there are many critically endangered Siamese crocodiles there and people used to see softshell turtle in there so down stream must have this species, too.

Conclusion

We still think that Stoeng Kep should be good habitat for softshell turtle. The reasons are maybe because of hunting in the past or a lot of water in the river that has a lot of food for them for eating. There should be more surveys in the dry season because it is easy for trapping.

According to fisherman mentioned that on the other side of the river is more likely good for turtles and tortoises because it is not easy to get there and quite far and this time of the year we can't across this river without the boat.

We still need to determine if the giant softshell turtle is found in Stoeng Kep, so will do surveys nearer to the sea where the river is larger and deeper.

National Working group

We set up a National Working Group for the project. We held a big meeting with a lot of researcher in Cambodia from international organizations, government staff, and local NGOs such as FFI, CI, WCS, WWF, WildAid, Wildlife Protection Office (WPO), and Department of fisheries (DoF). This people are very happy to have this group of working on turtles in Cambodia. And in September we will have another working group meeting and discuss about the turtle conservation issues.

The working group meeting showed what people wanted to help them with turtle conservation in Cambodia. They wanted:

- 1) A good field guide to give to rangers, to help them to identify turtles and release them in the right habitat,
- 2) Training for rangers,
- 3) More information on where each species is found in Cambodia,

We were told that other groups, the WCS and FFI will help with turtle records of animals they found, so we will get more information on where each species is found.

Turtle Field Guide

Also, our project will collaborate with Conservation International and Wildlife Conservation Society to apply for grant from World Bank to produce a turtle field guide for using in Cambodia. The book will disseminate to students, organizations, government agencies, rangers. If this proposal is a success it will be great for turtle works in Cambodia as it is so useful to the next generation of turtle conservationist.