

## AVERTING THE IMMINENT EXTINCTION OF SOUTH-EAST ASIAN VERTEBRATE SPECIES: ASIAN SPECIES ACTION PARTNERSHIP (ASAP)

South-east Asia, including the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore and Viet Nam, as well as Timor Leste, is an important region for wildlife (Schipper *et al.*, 2008; Hilton-Taylor *et al.*, 2009; Sodhi *et al.*, 2010). However, barring marine species, most taxonomic groups studied so far are more threatened in South-east Asia than anywhere else in the world. Compared with Mesoamerica, South America or sub-Saharan Africa, a higher proportion of the vascular plants, reptiles, birds and mammals of South-east Asia are classified as globally threatened species on the IUCN *Red List of Threatened Species* (Sodhi *et al.*, 2010).

The primary threat to vertebrate species in South-east Asia derives from overharvesting to meet the escalating demand caused by an explosion in urban markets for wild meat and medicinal products over the last 30 years. Increased affluence and access to global markets has placed further pressure on the region's wildlife. Illegal and unsustainable trade poses an urgent threat to many of the region's Critically Endangered species and in many cases trade is the primary threat, though this is often not recognized or addressed. Corruption, complacency and lack of general awareness pose some of the greatest obstacles to be overcome in the effort to reduce levels of illegal trade. Inefficient enforcement efforts and low levels of political will further hamper these efforts. Furthermore, dense human populations in the region and neighbouring countries, coupled with one of the highest rates of deforestation globally and poorly managed protected area systems, are exacerbating factors driving the declines and imminent extinctions of vertebrate species.

Acknowledging that many South-east Asian species will become extinct in the near future if current trends continue, a number of concerned individuals and organizations have clearly outlined why the region should

be a priority for averting extinction, with a call to action through the development of a cross-institutional programme to tackle this extremely urgent issue (Duckworth *et al.*, 2012).

The 'Asian Species Action Partnership' (ASAP) is an interagency coalition created to reduce the extinction risk of Critically Endangered non-marine vertebrates of South-east Asia. ASAP is a species-focused response, with recognition that mitigating this crisis situation will require complementary action to influence human behaviour change and the man-made drivers of threat to these species. The partnership seeks to prompt an increase in the resources available for conserving the most threatened species in South-east Asia, and to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of interventions devised to help protect these species and their habitats.

### *Form and function of ASAP*

ASAP has a mandate to "as a matter of urgency, reverse the declines in the wild of Critically Endangered freshwater and terrestrial vertebrates in South-east Asia".



DAVID HULSE / WWF-CANON

◀ **Saola or Vu Quang Ox**  
*Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*,  
Ha Noi, Viet Nam.

<sup>1</sup>The name 'Asian Species Action Partnership' is currently under review.



DENSE HUMAN POPULATIONS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND NEIGHBOURING REGIONS, COUPLED WITH ONE OF THE HIGHEST RATES OF DEFORESTATION GLOBALLY AND POORLY MANAGED PROTECTED AREAS, ARE EXACERBATING FACTORS DRIVING THE DECLINES AND IMMINENT EXTINCTIONS OF VERTEBRATE SPECIES IN THE REGION, SUCH AS THE SUMATRAN ORANG-UTAN.

The objectives of the partnership are:

- to identify and activate urgent actions to reduce immediate threats causing the decline of ASAP species;
- to facilitate the effective conservation of ASAP-eligible species by raising their profile;
- to catalyse a range of recovery activities for ASAP-eligible species by strengthening ongoing conservation action and promoting new initiatives;
- to encourage collection and distribution of information essential for the conservation action for ASAP-eligible species.

ASAP will have a key role in stimulating action to meet species-specific conservation needs to help secure their future. The emphasis will be on increasing support to the conservation community to ensure effective implementation of action, and addressing the shortfalls which may impede such action, like improving access to funding and better species-specific information, and gaining higher-level political leverage to influence policy and shape interventions.

ASAP will also help to identify and prioritize what the conservation needs of species are on the ground, for example, by conducting surveys to find out the specific

threats that need to be mitigated and how—often through one or more of site-specific habitat protection, securing critical sites, capacity building for enforcement and species identification. ASAP also needs to facilitate safeguarding of populations where threat reduction may not now be enough, e.g. through captive-breeding programmes.

In addition to matching conservation needs with suitable opportunities and support, ASAP is well positioned to add a global oversight to conservation action in South-east Asia by encouraging interagency collaboration, to pool resources, efforts and expertise to maximize efficiency.

#### *The eligible species: patterns of threat*

Presently, there are 154 species on the IUCN *Red List of Threatened Species* that meet all of the four ASAP criteria for eligibility: (1) Critically Endangered (2) vertebrates (3) occurring regularly in South-east Asia (4) in land or freshwater habitats. It should be noted, however, that some species included in this list, such as the Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*, which has not been observed in the wild with any certainty since 1949 (BirdLife, 2012), may already be extinct.

The majority of the species listed as being Critically Endangered are freshwater fish, followed by mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, respectively (Fig. 1).

Alarming, the majority of the 154 species are not presently the subject of any directed conservation action, and few have multiple organizations paying serious attention to them. Such species include: Sumatran Rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*, Javan Rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus*, Tamaraw *Bubalus mindorensis*, Philippine Crocodile *Crocodylus mindorensis*, Siamese Crocodile *Crocodylus siamensis*, Mekong Giant Catfish *Pangasianodon gigas*, the three gibbon species *Nomascus concolor*, *N. leucogenys* and *N. nasutus*, Sumatran Orangutan *Pongo abelii*, Delacour's Langur *Trachypithecus delacouri*, Cat Ba Langur *T. poliocephalus*, Saola *Pseudoryx nghetinhensis* (reflecting a recent major surge in activity), and many bird species. The birds represent a special case, because of the existence of BirdLife International. No comparable network and partner-based organization exists for any of the other vertebrate classes. Some species of tortoises and freshwater turtles are also increasingly receiving attention—82% of the world's Critically Endangered tortoise and freshwater turtle species occur in South-east and South Asia, with wild populations of some of these species totalling fewer than one hundred individuals.

As an initial starting point, IUCN/SSC partnered the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) during 2011–2012 on a “Southeast Asia Campaign”, which engaged the zoo community and proved to be very successful in raising the profile of several of the ASAP-eligible species. EAZA has since provided some financial contribution to ASAP and with additional support from WCS, the work of the partnership can now be driven forward. A Steering Committee to provide the direction and oversight of ASAP is now being established, and a Scientific Advisory Committee will provide technical guidance on species status and conservation needs.

## References

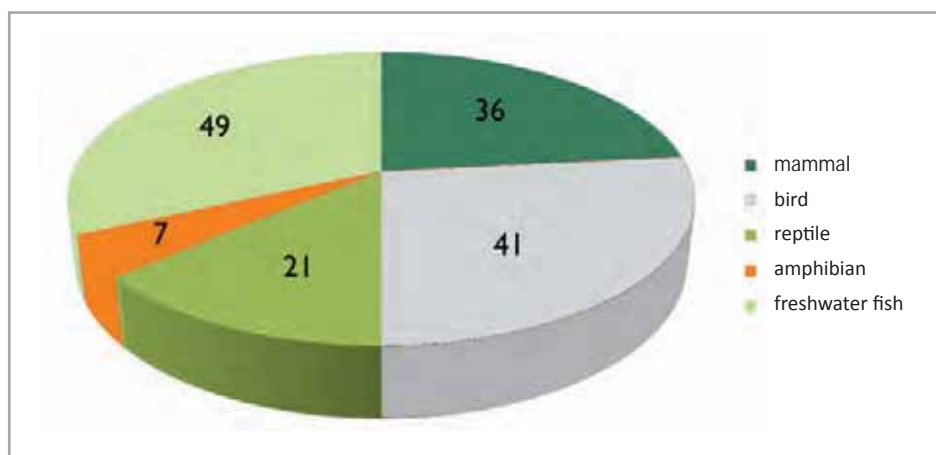
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**Fig. 1. Terrestrial and freshwater species groups listed as Critically Endangered in South-east Asia.** (n=154 at the time of writing)