

Possible Occurrence of Crocodile on Jomalig Island, Polillos.

Mark Anthony Reyes (markan08@yahoo.com). Isabela State University, Luzon

Abstract

The Philippine crocodile is a critically endangered species whose range has dwindled to the extent that it is known from just a handful of areas. In April 2002 we investigated reports that the species occurs on the island of Jomalig in the Polillo group. Although we found no absolute proof of the animals' occurrence it seems highly likely that it still occurs there based on reports from local hunters, some of whom are actively hunting them.

Introduction

Polillo was once a densely forested paradise with very diverse group of organisms. However, it is not too long ago that migrants discovered the place and decided to reside in the area, the majority coming from Bicol. From the early 1950s to late 1980s the entire islands of Polillo were severely denuded by logging company, slash and burn activity and expansion of agricultural land. These activities account for the rapid decline of wildlife populations.

Two species of crocodile occur in the Philippines, the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) and the Philippine crocodile (*C. mindorensis*). The Philippine crocodile is an endemic species now considered to be one of the most endangered crocodile species in the world. Although numerous projects on crocodile conservation and protection have been conducted in the country, none of these projects were ever held in Polillo

Crocodiles are now absent from the Polillo group with the probable exception of the island of Jomalig. It is known that as recently as the early 1960s, crocodiles existed in this area. They were hunted by residents for food and skin and also out of fear. Jomalig is rather low with numerous big rivers, ponds and marshlands, a suitable habitat for the crocodiles. Rumors that the species still occurs and is hunted on Jomalig prompted us to visit the island in April 2002 to question residents and look for evidence of the animals.

Methods

The team conducted interviews to verify the reports of crocodile occurrence. The majority of the respondents believed that crocodiles still occur in the place. Although none of them were sure of how many individuals remained, they insist that a few of the animals still survive. Most of the respondents were able to describe the animal and differentiate it from other species of reptiles such as pythons. Differences cited included the foot webbing, the size (4-6 ft.) in length, coloration, the head and the somewhat enlarged scale on the dorsal part of the neck of the animal. One of the respondents claimed to have caught crocodiles as recently as five years ago and that he had recently ordered some equipment in Manila (such as hooks and cables) to be used in a crocodile trap. He

previously obtained 1000 pesos per foot of crocodile skin from dealers on Luzon, and claimed the proceeds had allowed him to send his daughter to college. By September he expects to be hunting crocodiles again, although the team told him not to.

Although the residents do not have any idea of what kind of crocodiles is occurring in their area, it is likely that Philippine Crocodile (*C. mindorensis*) exist in the area since most of the sightings are in the ponds and swamps rather than coastal areas and descriptions of the size as well as the appearance of enlarged scales on the back of the neck support this.

If evidence is found that crocodile exist in the area, it will be a new record for the island and an important extension to the know range of this critically endangered animal.

The Philippine crocodile (*Crocodylus mindorensis*) is recognized by IUCN/SSC, crocodile specialist group CSG as the most threatened species of crocodiles in the world and is listed by IUCN as critically endangered (IUCN 1996). Therefore, it needs to be protected. However a current price of 1000 peso per foot makes hunting the animal an attractive proposition to local people, even if it is extremely rare..

Locale of the Study

The team started in barangay Talisoy where sightings of crocodiles were made in 1994. It is placed in the middle of the canal leading to a large adjacent marshland. Birds frequently feed in the area, catfish are abundant too. We were told that there were crocodile burrows in the area, however, due to time constraint and the encroachment of the people, the team was unable to search the area thoroughly. The vegetation of the fringes of the area is quite thick (mostly nipas and swamp trees) further hindering our ability to make direct observations..

The latest reported sitting of crocodile was on February 2002 in the swamp. The swamp has a lot of logs with many *Pandanus species*. In some area are grasses reaching 6 ft. in height, the swamp is adjacent to a large river called morose river. During rainy season were water overflows from the river, some of the water run to the swamp make it deeper and muddier. On the other side of the swamp are residential houses approximately 7 meters away. The houses have domesticated animals and one resident claimed that a crocodile had taken a young pig.

Summary

Crocodiles have been reported from Jomalig Island in recent years, but no firm evidence for their occurrence there exists. A visit to the island investigated these claims by examining habitat and questioning locals. Data collected during interviews seemed reliable because interviewees could differentiate crocodiles from other reptile species and some claimed to still be actively hunting the animals. The overall nature and status of different habitats that the team visited suggests crocodiles could still exist in this area. However, due to scarcity of time and the nature of season, the team failed to search the

area thoroughly. A search for crocodiles on Jomalig should be considered a high priority conservation project.

Recommendations

1. A through search for crocodiles on the island should be conducted between September and February.
2. Habitat assessment should be conducted to identify areas that are suitable for reestablishment of crocodilian population in the area
3. A public awareness program should be conducted in the area to highlight the significance of the species to the local and global community.