

## Koh Kong Reptile Conservation Center inauguration ceremony and 20 Royal Turtles released into their natural habitat

**Sre Ambel (July 19, 2024)** – The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the Fisheries Administration (FiA) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), on July 19<sup>th</sup> celebrated the inauguration ceremony presided over by H.E. Dith Tina, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, and H.E. Lok Chum Teav Mithona Phouthong, Governor of Koh Kong province, for the Koh Kong Reptile Conservation Center (KKRCC). This exciting event was to mark the successfully upgrading its facilities located in Toul Korkei commune, Mondul Seima district, Koh Kong province and the release of 20 Critically Endangered Southern River Terrapin (*Batagur affinis*) into the Sre Ambel River system in Kampong Seila district, Preah Sihanouk Province.

KKRCC plays an important role in improving an *ex-situ* conservation effort of the Critically Endangered species – the Southern River Terrapins- locally known as Royal Turtle and Siamese Crocodiles (*Crocodylus siamensis*). Previously, a small head-starting center was first built in Sre Ambel district in 2002 when FiA and WCS found the first nest of the Royal Turtle along the Sre Ambel River. Coupling with the increased number of hatchlings at the small center, FiA and WCS decided to relocate this center to 8.9 ha of land in Mondul Seima district, Koh Kong province in 2016 where the KKRCC is now the official name. Since then, with the strong commitment of generous donors, KKRCC has been upgrading its facilities to accommodate hatchlings and breeding adults. As a result, for the last four consecutive years (2021-2024) of the breeding program in KKRCC, the team at the centre have successfully collected 57 nests consisting of 646 eggs resulting in 185 hatchlings. The breeding program is a sustainable mechanism of *ex-situ* conservation efforts to increase the Royal Turtle population in the wild through repatriation to their natural habitats.

All the 20 Royal Turtles released today were collected from the wild nests along the Sre Ambel River between 2015 and 2020 where they had been reared at KKRCC for at least 10 years.

Mr. Alistair Mould- WCS Country Program Director, said: "All released turtles have been implanted with a distinctive microchip for future identification. Twelve of the 20 turtles were attached with acoustic transmitters at the rear carapace- allowing the project personnel to monitor and track their movements, survivorship, and habitat utilization."

"This reintroduction and post-release monitoring program is a vital component to restoring a viable population of this globally threatened species in the wild. 2024 marks an incredible result in the success of this reintroduction program, where the project team have identified the first ever nest from a reintroduced female. These nests consisted of approx. 28 eggs resulting in twenty-six successful hatchlings (two of these hatchlings were relocated to the KKRCC)", said Alistair Mould. "This release and conservation success is part of a Royal Turtle Conservation project supported by Mandai Nature, Rainforest Trust, Allan and Patricia Koval Foundation, US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, USAID Conserve, and Turtle Survival Alliance, implemented by WCS in partnership with the Fisheries Administration (FiA)."

The continued illegal fishing, overexploitation, and loss of habitat resulting from land grabbing and clearance of riparian flooded forests, are major threats to the survival of this species which remains at great risk of extinction.

Mr. Ouk Vibol, Director of Fisheries Conservation, said: "We highly appreciate the participation of local authorities, communities, and WCS team who have been working together to conserve this Critically Endangered turtle so that they can persist in the natural water bodies". He added: "All stakeholders should continue their efforts to conserve the threatened species, and those who still trade protected species will face legal action."

The Royal Turtle is among the world's 25 most endangered tortoises and freshwater turtles, listed on the IUCN Red List as Critically Endangered. It was designated as Cambodia's National Reptile by a Royal Decree issued in 2005.

The Royal Turtle was believed extinct in Cambodia until 2000, when a small population was rediscovered by the Fisheries Administration (FiA) and WCS in the Sre Ambel River. Since then, WCS and FiA have been working together to protect the species from extinction. Conservation activities include a nest protection

program, head-starting of young turtles, law enforcement, research and monitoring, prevention of illegal trade, and outreach and livelihood support, all supported by several donors.

Dr Sonja Luz, CEO of Mandai Nature, said: "The expansion of KKRCC is testimony to the growth of the conservation breeding program established by the WCS team and the Fisheries Administration. Witnessing another release of the Critically Endangered Royal Turtle back into their natural habitat also signifies the continued success of the collective and committed efforts by local authorities and communities which has played a pivotal role in conservation efforts. Mandai Nature reaffirms its commitment to working with our dedicated partners to achieve a common goal of saving this beautiful species from extinction and ensuring it can thrive in the wild."

As we celebrate the establishment of our new breeding center and yet another successful release of these turtles back into their natural habitat, we reaffirm our commitment to conservation. The efforts of WCS and FiA, with other partners and communities, are a testament to the collaborative work and dedication of our team and partners. Together, we strive not only to protect these species but also to ensure a sustainable future where wildlife thrives alongside us.

This Royal Turtle release is the result of nearly three decades of conservation interventions including nest protection, head-starting of the young turtles, community-based protection, community development, post-release monitoring, and law enforcement. This is the tenth release of Royal Turtles into the Sre Ambel River system since 2015, making a total of 206 turtles returned to the wild.

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**Note to the editor:**

Please find relevant photos and videos for the press release in this [Google folder](#).

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