

The Philippines



Photo: Edo Goverse.

CONSERVING CROCODILES BY EMPOWERING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

A small grant helped to start crocodile conservation activities in the north of the Philippines, the first targeted attempt to save the Philippine crocodile from extinction in the wild. Local communities benefit from the protection of the crocodiles' ecosystem through increased fish catches and improved water quality.

Increasing degradation of the wetlands in the Philippines not only endangers the livelihoods of the local population, but also the habitat of many wild animals. One of the victims is the Philippine crocodile (*Crocodylus mindorensis*). This freshwater animal was once widely distributed throughout the country but is now nearing extinction. It is the most threatened crocodile species in the world. In 1999, a previously unknown population of Philippine crocodiles was discovered in the northern part of the country, offering new hope for in situ conservation of the species. However, several issues threaten wetlands, crocodiles and people in this area, among them the widespread use of illegal, destructive fishery methods, deforestation of watersheds and river banks, and the pollution of creeks, rivers and lakes with farming chemicals. These factors are aggravated by a general lack of awareness of the importance of wetland conservation, and the lack of local capacities and skills to develop, enforce and monitor a sustainable wetland management plan.

ACTIVITIES A conservation project was set up in Northeast Luzon by the Mabuwaya Foundation. An intensive communication, education and public awareness campaign informed local communities about the importance of wetland conservation. Site-specific wetland conservation action plans and local ordinances were prepared during workshops with local officials and community leaders. This process ensured that these local rules and regulations have broad support from the community and that local leaders are actively advocating their implementation. A local protection group was trained and formally deputized by the mayor. The local administration allotted an annual budget for the group, thereby assuring the continuity of protection activities in several municipal crocodile sanctuaries. Furthermore local policemen were educated and trained in environmental law enforcement creating an effective

local body to control environmentally destructive activities. Based on lessons learned in the project, the NGO intends to scale up wetland and Philippine crocodile conservation activities to other municipalities.

IMPACT The crocodile conservation activities in the area started as a single species conservation programme, but later switched to an ecosystem approach. A pilot project using this approach, funded by IUCN NL, showed a clear and positive impact on knowledge and awareness levels of local government officials and led to local wetland conservation action in the Disulap River area.

At the national level hopes of protecting the Philippine crocodiles in the wild had already been abandoned (because 'there would be no societal support') and all efforts and funds have in the past two decades gone to conserving the species in captivity in a crocodile farm. The Mabuwaya project proves this assumption to have been mistaken: it shows that it is possible to protect an 'unpopular' species in the wild by adopting an ecosystem approach, including education and awareness campaigns, and empowerment of local people and officials. Healthy wetlands support both crocodile and livelihoods (increased fish stocks; clean drinking water). The Philippine crocodile is now a symbol for the region: 'something to be proud of', and it is clear that this approach has been very successful. The project has led to the creation of two municipal crocodile and several fish sanctuaries at community level; it has almost halted illegal destructive fishing methods; it increased fish catches, as confirmed by many fishermen; and the crocodile population increased more than twofold and in general, has generated much greater knowledge and appreciation of wetlands and crocodiles amongst the local people.

At this stage, local action has shown itself to be far more effective than the currently failing national government programmes. The decentralisation of power and authority over natural resource management from national government line agencies to local government units provides good opportunities to 'localise' environmental conservation.



Pesticides threaten wetlands that are used by local people. Photo: Merlijn van Weerd.

Grantee: Mabuwaya Foundation

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