****NEWS FROM WCS CAMBODIA****

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Thirty Royal Turtle Babies Hatch in Captivity in Cambodia

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Koh Kong, Cambodia (20 May 2022) – Thirty Royal Turtle babies hatched in an artificial sand bank at the Koh Kong Reptile Conservation Center (KKRCC) last week. This is the second time that Royal Turtles have laid eggs in captivity in Cambodia.

During the 2022 nesting season Royal Turtles in a captive-breeding group at KKRCC laid 81 eggs in nine clutches and 30 of them hatched. This compares favorably with 2021, when only one of 71 eggs in five clutches successfully hatched.

At the same time, two captive females at the Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodiversity (ACCB), partner of WCS's second breeding colony, laid 16 eggs in two clutches. Unfortunately, only one of in total three fertile eggs successfully hatched and the hatchling has been transferred to KKRCC for head-starting, making a total of 31.

"While breeding in nature is decreasing, we are encouraged by the success of our captive breeding program to ensure the long-term survival of the Royal Turtle." said Som Sitha, WCS Landscape Project Manager. "This year's nesting season none of the nests was found on the beach along the Sre Ambel River System within the Fisheries Management Area in Koh Kong and Preah Sihanouk provinces."

Dr. Steven G. Platt, Associate Conservation Herpetologist for WCS in Southeast Asia said, "This is one of the most exciting and significant developments in Royal Turtle conservation in Cambodia. With this successful hatching of so many baby turtles, the long-term survival prospects for the Royal Turtle suddenly got much better."

Dr Sonja Luz, Deputy CEO at Mandai Nature said, "This is extremely encouraging news. The success of these hatchlings could not have been done without an all-hands approach, involving the team on-ground and support from various partners involved. This active contribution to species recovery plans is also testimony to the important role ex-situ management plays for species protection."

"The hatching of these turtles underscores the importance of building breeding colonies of at-risk species in their country of origin," said Andrew Walde, Chief Operating Officer of Turtle Survival Alliance. "With so few adult Southern River Terrapins successfully nesting in the wild in Cambodia, producing successive generations of this Critically Endangered species in captivity is the best chance we have at not only ensuring their survival in the country, but repopulating terrapins to their native habitat."

“Ex-situ management is increasingly used to prevent species extinction and this year’s breeding result is a promising sign for the future of the captive breeding program for the Royal Turtle and a significant development in the conservation of the species in Cambodia”, said Christel Griffioen, ACCB Country Director.

Mr. Ouk Vibol- Director of Department of Fisheries Conservation said, “We are very proud to get this great result. We strongly encourage and support the continuation of this captive breeding program for restoring this species in the future and we hope this species will survive for our next generation.”

WCS Cambodia has been working with the Fisheries Administration (FiA) of Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) since 2000 to conserve the Critically Endangered Southern River Terrapin (*Batagur affinis)*, also known as Royal Turtle in Cambodia. After rediscovering the species in 2000 in the Sre Ambel River system- currently designated as Fisheries Management Area, Southwest Cambodia, WCS started the nest protection program by recruiting former egg collectors to become the turtle nest protectors. In 2006, a head-starting facility was built in Koh Kong’s Sre Ambel district to accommodate hatchlings collected from the field. Each year all of the hatchlings are transferred to the KKRCC, WCS’s dedicated turtle conservation facility, which was established in 2016. On the ground, critical conservation interventions are also being implemented including education and awareness raising, law enforcement, livelihood development, capacity building of Community Fisheries, post-release monitoring, and fisheries research.

KKRCC currently holds 186 Royal Turtles. 147 young adult Royal Turtles have been released back into the wild since 2015, including the release of 51 turtles in late 2021. Sub-adult and adult turtles at the KKRCC are kept in four breeding ponds, while younger animals are raised in large plastic tanks before transferal to the breeding ponds. The hatchlings produced by the captive-breeding group at KKRCC will be “head-started” for approximately four years to a size less vulnerable to predators and then released into the Sre Ambel River.

Mandai Nature, Alan and Patricia Koval Foundation, Turtle Survival Alliance, Allwetterzoo Münster, WCS Canada, and private donors are key partners providing funding to the breeding program.

Funding for the field activities comes from European Union- Partners against Wildlife Crime, Mandai Nature, Rainforest Trust, US Forest Service, USAID-Feed the Future, and previous donors.

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WCS (Wildlife Conservation Society)

MISSION: WCS saves wildlife and wild places worldwide through science, conservation action, education, and inspiring people to value nature. To achieve our mission, WCS, based at the Bronx Zoo, harnesses the power of its Global Conservation Program in nearly 60 nations and in all the world’s oceans and its five wildlife parks in New York City, visited by 4 million people annually. WCS combines its expertise in the field, zoos, and aquarium to achieve its conservation mission. Visit: newsroom.wcs.org Follow: @WCSNewsroom. For more information: 347-840-1242.

ACCB (Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodiversity) is a species conservation centre of the Allwetterzoo Münster, Germany, located in Phnom Kulen National Park. ACCB focuses on the ex-situ conservation of

threatened wildlife, mainly chelonians and endangered bird species, native to Cambodia through collaboration with government authorities and various national and international organizations. Furthermore, ACCB provides environmental education presenting a learning venue for local communities, national and international visitors and government staff.

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Mandai Nature

Mandai Nature is dedicated to protecting threatened species, nurturing healthy ecosystems and creating vibrant communities where wildlife and people can thrive and co-exist, in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Through collaborations with like-minded partners, Mandai Nature aims to protect threatened species from extinction, especially those endemic to Asia and often overlooked, including addressing issues of wildlife trade and the fragmentation of habitats. In driving nature-based solutions, it focuses on green and blue carbon, while protecting and restoring tropical forests, mangroves and peatlands to help mitigate climate change. It is also working closely with local communities and organisations to create economic opportunities and invest in building skills and conservation capacity on the ground.

Mandai Nature hosts the Asian Species Action Partnership (ASAP) secretariat as well as the Conservation Planning Specialist Group (CPSG) Southeast Asia Resource Centre.

Mandai Nature was jointly established by Temasek and Mandai Wildlife Group.

More information can be found at www.mandainature.org

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Or this link: http://gofile.me/2OPdo/gozczmWQm

(Photo credit: Chris Poyser, KKRCC Manager)