

Report on Executive Officer's Visit to China

27 June - 3 July 2006



Chinese Alligators at Anhui Breeding and Research Centre for Chinese Alligator, Xuanzhou, Anhui Province. Photograph: T. Dacey

Introduction

The Chinese Alligator (*Alligator sinensis*) is one of the world's most endangered crocodylians, with a wild population of less than 200 individuals. It is estimated that approximately 120 of these individuals are in Anhui Province. In 2002, the State Forestry Administration of the Peoples Republic of China (SFA) issued the "China Action Plan for Conservation and Introduction of Chinese Alligator" in an attempt to ensure that the species does not become extinct in the wild.

Conservation of the Chinese alligator is also the highest international priority issue for the IUCN-SSC Crocodile Specialist Group (CSG). The CSG Chairman (Grahame Webb) considered it important that as the Executive Officer for the CSG, I become more familiar with the problems surrounding its conservation in the wild, the programs initiated by China to overcome the critically endangered status in the wild, and particularly the reintroduction programs planned, particularly in Anhui and Zhejiang Provinces.

In late June/early July, I visited China at the invitation of SFA, at my own expense. The major purpose of the visit was to gain first-hand knowledge of the Chinese Alligator program and China's attempts to reintroduce the species back into the wild, particularly in Anhui Province.

Wild Alligator Sites

Four wild alligator sites in the vicinity of Xuancheng City, Anhui Province, were inspected.

- **Red Star Pond.** A rice farm pond with an island in the centre, containing 9 adult alligators. Two successful nests were recorded in 2005. Hatchlings were predated by birds (such as umbrettes), so the remaining 19 hatchlings were removed to a small netted pond enclosure adjacent to the farm house. The alligators are cared for by the widow, who is engaged by Forestry as the caretaker, while her son and grandson manage the rice farm.



Red Star Pond, showing netted pond. Photograph: T. Dacey

- **Shong Keng Ponds.** A series of 6 ponds adjacent to a rice farming area. Forestry employs the caretaker. There were two nests in 2005, without eggs.
- **Zhong Qiao Reserve Site.** An isolated site with 4 wild alligators. There was one nest in 2005 with 13 eggs; 9 fertile eggs producing 8 hatchlings. A new nest was laid on 23 June 2006, containing 20 eggs, two of which were infertile. The site is proposed as a future release site for re-introductions.
- **Chang Le Reserve Site.** A small rice farm with several small ponds. The main pond has a centre island where the alligators nest. The alligators move through the rice fields to the various ponds. The area contains 4 adult and 2 hatchling alligators that are cared for by the rice farmer.



From left, Shao Ming, Wang Chaolin, Tom Dacey and Xiaoming Wu at wild Chinese Alligator nest at Zhong Qiao Reserve Site. Photograph: Zhu Jialong

Alligator Reintroduction Site

I visited the Gaojing Miao Forest Farm alligator release site, in Anhui Province. SFA, in conjunction with the Anhui Normal University, College of Life Sciences, is developing a major alligator release site on 150 ha of isolated forestry land. Of the planned 41 ponds, 6 have been constructed to date and work has commenced on construction of on-site student facilities. Six alligators fitted with VHF transmitters were released into one pond on 28 April 2006, and students from the university are tracking their movements.

The total cost of development of this site is in the order of \$USD1.2 million and assistance is being sought to attract external funds to help finance this project.

I also visited the Animal Conservation Biology Laboratory, College of Life Sciences at the Anhui Normal University, where Professor Wu Xiaobing is the Director. The laboratory plays a major role in the DNA testing of alligators, establishment of benthos communities at proposed release sites and monitoring of behavior of released alligators.



Postgraduate student Weizhi Meng, at Gaojing Miao. Photograph: T. Dacey.

Alligator Breeding Centers

Two major breeding centers for Chinese Alligators were visited:

- **Anhui Breeding and Research Centre for Chinese Alligator Reproduction**, located in Xuanzhou District, Anhui Province. This facility holds a large captive population of some 10,000 alligators and plays a major role in the maintenance of a healthy population of alligators for eventual reintroduction to the wild, and for breeding research and public education.
- **Changxing Breeding & Research Centre for Chinese Alligator**, located in the Yinjiabian Village, Changxing County, Zhejiang Province. The centre covers 10 ha and contains about 600 alligators, including 40 breeders. Eight nests containing 266 eggs were laid in 2005, of which only 80 were incubated artificially. The rest were left to incubate in the nests. So far in the 2006 nesting season some 5 nests have been laid.

The Research Centre is seeking local Government Council approval for an additional 100 ha of land, consisting of paddy fields, ponds and mudflats, into which it is proposed to gradually release some 100 alligators through a two-stage reintroduction program.

Beijing

Two days were spent in Beijing, during which time discussions were held with senior officials of the Chinese Forestry Academy, State Forestry Administration and the Department of Wildlife Conservation, on the implementation of the China Action Plan for Conservation and Introduction of Chinese Alligator (2002).

Summary

1. Monitoring of existing wild populations of alligators continues. In recent years the Anhui National Nature Reserve for Chinese Alligator has been active in the management and conservation of the wild population, and survey results for 2005 indicate that the wild population has stable in recent years. However, the subpopulations are still small and habitats are separated and dispersed, which cannot support the long-term viability of the wild population.
2. Anhui Province has a large captive population of Chinese Alligators to support reintroductions to the wild, when suitable habitat can be identified and/or constructed.
3. SFA are actively pursuing implementation of the “China Action Plan for Conservation and Introduction of Chinese Alligator”, within the limits of available resources.
4. CSG's willingness to support SFA's approach to other external funding agencies for the resources necessary to ensure the maintenance and expansion of the wild populations of Chinese Alligators may be beneficial

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