Tomistoma (Tomistoma schlegelii)

Like the Gharial, the most obvious character of Tomistoma (formerly known as False Gharial) is its long, slender snout. The species is found in the Malaysian-Indonesian region, with the main strongholds in Sarawak (Malaysia) and Kalimantan (Indonesia), on Borneo. Fragmented remnant populations are also found throughout Sumatra and recently, the species was rediscovered on Java. Possible occurrences on Sulawesi and Vietnam still require confirmation. The species is extirpated in southern Thailand and the Malayan Peninsula.

Although surveys are difficult the wild Tomistoma population is estimated to consist of less than 2500 individuals. Thus, Tomistoma schlegelii is listed as “Endangered” on the IUCN Red List. Within the CSG, a specific working group, the Tomistoma Task Force, was established to focus on this species.

Until recently, little was known of the biology and ecology of Tomistoma. This was mainly due to its shy and seclusive nature. Animals are reported to reach sizes of 7 m, with most animals ranging between 3 and 5 m. In the wild, Tomistoma were observed digging holes or using existing cavities where they may spend drier parts of the year. Adults are predominantly fish-eaters, although other larger prey (mammals, birds) may also be taken.

Females mature at around 2.5-3.0 m (20 years of age), and are mound-nesters. Between 20 and 60 eggs are laid in the dry season, and hatchlings appear after 72-90 days, at the beginning of the wet season. Lizards and wild pigs are the main predators on the eggs, which are the largest among the crocodilian species.

There are large numbers of Tomistoma in captivity, but they have rarely bred in captivity, which is unusual - most crocodilians breed well once they settle into captive situations. One farm in Thailand is now consistently producing hatchlings and one farm in Sarawak has produced some hatchlings, but overall there are still many individuals that simply do not breed.

Tomistoma was originally described by Müller as Crocodilus (Gavialis) schlegelii in 1838, but soon after was assigned with his own genus Tomistoma. The most appropriate taxonomic affiliation of the species has attracted considerable attention. Molecular studies have suggested that Tomistoma is closely related to Gavialis. However, on the basis of morphology, Tomistoma is in its own subfamily (Tomistominae; long slender snout like Gharials but true crocodilian-like skull bones) with the “true” crocodiles, and this is the currently recognised taxonomic relationship.