

Crocodile Specialist Group Steering Committee Meeting

(Guangzhou, China; 30 August 2001)

Present: H. Messel (Chairman), P. Ross, D. Jelden, G. Webb, J. Thornbjarnarson, A. Larrierra, H. Jenkins. Observers: T. Dacey, C. Manolis, A. Matsuda, S. Platt. The meeting opened at 6.40 p.m. and short agenda of items proposed and accepted.

Finance report. Revenues to 30 June 2001, totaled \$60,486 of which \$20,000 was special project funding received for the global economics trade study. Expenditures in the same period totaled \$52,818 of which \$15,000 was for the trade study. In period 1 July - 30 September an additional \$32,577 of revenues received. This has enabled funds to support the Executive Officer position through June 2002 to be advanced to the University of Florida and sufficient reserves remain to cover anticipated expenses for the forthcoming year. Thus, for the first time, the CSG is able to solicit funds for future years, rather than a short term hand-to-mouth raising and spending of funds. After questions on minor aspects of the report, it was accepted.

Program for the Regional Meeting. A draft program for the meeting August 30 - September 3 was presented and modifications agreed with the Chinese organizing committee earlier in the day explained. The funding of Hefei and Guangzhou workshops from several sources (WCS \$20,000, WWF-China \$10,000, CSG Chinese Alligator Fund \$8,000 and China-Australia Council \$5,000) was reported and the distribution of funding for the two workshops discussed. The requirements for accountability to donors and the need to apply funds directly to Chinese alligator conservation were discussed. Each donor will pursue its own accountability needs directly with the organizers. The need to provide appropriate reports from the two workshops and proceedings of results in both Chinese and English was noted and detailed discussions with the organizers on this point recommended.

A summary report of the Hefei workshop was presented by Dietrich Jelden (see page 51 below) and the overall tremendous advances and success of Chinese efforts for conservation of Chinese alligator noted. The successful strategy of careful encouragement to Chinese authorities, multiple contacts at all levels, was resulting in the development of continuing relationships of trust and cooperation. Of particular importance is the coordination of several provincial efforts under the direction of the central authority within China and the development of successful partnerships of overseas supporters. The framework for preventing extinction of the Chinese alligator in the wild appears firmly established. A draft action plan for Chinese alligator conservation will provide guidelines for provincial and central government actions in the short and medium term.

CSG Task Force on Market Driven Conservation. D. Jelden presented a summary report of accomplishments of this program since its inception in 1998.

- A case study presenting conservation incentives of crocodylian sustainable use was complete and presented to OECD.
- The global economic study of crocodylian skin trade by consultant James McGregor under the direction of Jon Hutton had submitted a first draft report that was undergoing internal review. Completion is expected by December this year.
- A more rigorous examination of CITES report data and infractions had been developed by Don Ashley in conjunction with World Conservation Trade Monitoring Center and included in the current International Alligator and Crocodile Trade Study covering the period up to 1998.
- A draft resolution for CITES on personal exemptions for legally produced crocodylian products had been prepared and discussed. Discussions were presently underway to recruit

CITES parties to sponsor the draft and introduction to the next CITES CoP (November 2002) under multiple sponsorship was anticipated.

Two proposed actions, development of certification of legal products ('Green labeling') and CSG promotion of legal trade had received no action. Dietrich proposed that a final report of the task force would be prepared and submitted at the end of the year after which the task force could be dissolved.

Paraguay yacare harvest. Alejandro Larriera briefed the meeting on recent events and media reports of yacare harvest in the Pilcomayo region of Paraguay. The great complexity and conflicting reports on this situation were presented and discussed. Obdulio Menghi later provided additional detail and reported that following several interventions of the CSG and his organization, the Minister of Environment had requested CSG Steering Committee member Lucy Aquino to visit the Pilcomayo region and evaluate the situation. It was concluded that the invitation of the Paraguay CITES Authority for CSG to conduct a fact-finding mission should be accepted. Alejandro Larriera and an appropriate other CSG representative were proposed to undertake this mission and invite the Paraguay authority to provide necessary funding.

Cambodia. Continued collection of wild crocodiles (*C. siamensis*) to stock farms in Cambodia was reported by J. Thorbjarnarson and S. Platt based on their recent field inspections. The history, background and nature of this trade were summarized. After discussion it was concluded that this trade represents a current threat to the depleted populations of this critically endangered species and constituted a clear violation of the intent and spirit of the CITES farm registration process under which six Cambodian captive breeding facilities operate. It was decided that CSG would alert the Cambodian authorities to our concerns, with copies to CITES Secretariat. John Thorbjarnarson and Perran Ross were asked to draft a letter.

The short agenda of this ad-hoc meeting being complete, the meeting closed at 8.20 p.m.

On Saturday, 1 September, the Steering Committee reconvened in a public session held in conjunction with the CSG Regional Meeting. The same steering committee members and numerous observers were present. The meeting opened at 14.10 p.m. Minutes from the previous session were read and accepted.

Paraguay. Obdulio Menghi advised the meeting that CSG Steering Committee Member Lucy Aquino had been contacted by the Paraguay Minister of Environment and requested to inspect the Pilcomayo region and report on the situation. Lucy is in the field on this mission. We noted that this issue had little conservation consequence, but provides a platform to encourage Paraguay to restore effective implementation of CITES control of caiman skins. CSG will defer action until her report is received.

Cambodia. A draft letter was presented and approved.

Funding. The Executive officer announced that he had received a request from the Chinese meeting hosts for a special grant of \$4,000 to support production and distribution of the meeting Proceedings and this would be forwarded to AZA in USA for consideration.

Steering Committee Meetings. The Chairman announced that after discussion with members, he wished to hold steering committee meetings at least once a year, electronic communication having proved not completely effective for the discussion of complex issues. He stated that "The steering committee must meet in order to steer." A steering committee meeting place and venue in the first half of next year will be announced.

NEW BUSINESS

Philippine crocodile. Updated information on current activities in the Philippines was presented at the regional meeting. While the formation of a national task force, development of a national management plan, and discovery of new populations were encouraging, the species remained critically endangered. Known wild populations are very small, highly fragmented and still subject to constant attrition by people. The long-term commitment of CSG to conserving this species and the cooperative efforts of JICA, CFI and Philippine government were noted.

The excellent efforts of Chris Banks and Melbourne Zoo in developing the Action Plan were congratulated and a letter of thanks will be sent to Chris. However, implementation of the plan was seen to be impeded by internal political and personality problems in the Philippines. The situation is perceived to be at least as grave as the former concern about the Chinese alligator, but in China the government was acting decisively in response to the problem. Detailed discussion followed on possible role of the CSG to promote implementation of the action plan and cooperation and coordination between research groups. CSG's role could be to assist the national recovery team develop specific actions and timetables to implement the plan.

Mr. Takehara of Japan Reptile Association will lead a mission to the Philippines to discuss marketing of *C. porosus* skins produced by licensed growout facilities of hatchling *porosus* provided by CFI (now PWRCC). He agreed to raise the mindorensis problems at that meeting. CSG will send a letter of congratulations to the PAWB and offer its assistance on implementing the plan.

Chinese Alligator. Professor Messel formally and for the record, thanked the Chinese authorities for their efforts in initiating conservation action for the Chinese alligator. He also thanked the organizers and sponsors for making this regional meeting possible. He additionally expressed thanks to Grahame Webb for his great efforts in the issue and to John Thorbjarnarson and WCS for their invaluable support.

Hank Jenkins inquired if the CSG should prepared a press release. Mr. Wang Weisheng responded for the SFA agreeing that communication of current activities to the world community would assist their efforts and attract technical and financial support. The widely distributed article in the New York Times preceding the meeting was noted. John T, Hank and Grahame were asked to prepare a draft and consult with Chinese colleagues to produce a suitable press release that would be disseminated through all available channels.

Wan Ziming of Chinese CITES Authority noted that additional detailed technical advice would be needed to implement the draft action plan and conduct proposed release and conservation activities and hoped that this kind of assistance could be obtained from CSG. Prof. Messel strongly re-iterated the CSG's complete responsiveness to requests of this kind and suggested that they should best be channeled through appropriate CSG members for direct response.

Mr. Xie, Director of the Anhui breeding center, summarized their plans to quickly conduct a pilot restocking experiment on a small scale to establish the suitability of different areas. He requested technical advice on animal marking and monitoring. A discussion of tagging and radio tracking techniques followed. Grahame Webb noted that this experiment could produce a wide variety of most valuable results if it was carefully designed.

Mr. Wang suggested that SFA might establish a volunteer expert advisory committee that could provide rapid response to technical questions. He suggested SFA could establish a liaison officer to coordinate. This proposal will be returned to SFA for consideration. He also advised of the possibility of funding through IUCN based on previous contacts.

Discussion followed on the current need for more habitat surveys, available funding from Chinese sources for local work (thought to be good) and the excellent infrastructure and scientific capacity available in China and applied to the problem.

Mr. Wang and other Chinese observers elaborated on the strategy proposed for pilot re-introduction. The option of detailed study to define and identify the ideal habitat was expensive and time consuming. Instead, noting the huge reserve of captive alligators available in China, it was thought more efficient to test habitats operationally by releasing marked alligators and 'letting the alligator survival be the test of suitable habitat'. This approach was endorsed by the meeting, however, the CSG suggested that such an experiment would require careful design adequate funding and long term follow through. We suggested that China take full advantage of well-known technical and scientific information available in the field.

The current developments for Chinese alligator conservation seem to be well grounded in such careful principles and procedures and effective consultation. Professor Messel expressed his hope that development of commercial captive breeding of other species in China would proceed with similar caution. He noted that there were many examples around the world of unduly rapid development of captive breeding without adequate expert consultation leading to technical inadequacy and great economic loss. This phenomenon is not restricted to crocodylians, e.g. ostrich farms and chinchillas. Expert advice helps avoid this problem. He further noted that in a commercial setting, expert advice must be paid for at commercial rates. However, the cost of adequate expert advice was far less than the great cost of delay or failure of effective commercial production.

Siamese crocodile. Dr. Jenny Daltry of Fauna and Flora International (FFI) outlined the activities and constraints on her program for assisting in conservation of Siamese crocodiles in the Cardamom mountain area. She requested CSG support for habitat protection and recommended that CSG take the lead in crocodile farming and trade issues.

Tomistoma. Prof. Messel advised the meeting of current survey of *Tomistoma* in Sumatra by Mark Bezuijen to evaluate effects of recent devastating forest fires and deforestation on the *Tomistoma* population. The financial support of FFI for this project was gratefully acknowledged. Prof. Messel stated his firm conviction that Kalimantan contained significant populations and needed a survey focussed on key areas where earlier inspection by Jack Cox and Andy Ross indicated the species was present and abundant. Such a survey could also assess Siamese crocodile status. Funding support for a competent and experienced technical team to conduct this survey is being sought.

Jenny Daltry asked if any information was available on reports of *Tomistoma* in Ujan Kulong Park in west Java. No information was available.

John Thorbjarnarson asked if a re-introduction of *Tomistoma* into suitable protected areas in Thailand (where it is thought extirpated) was feasible. Discussion followed on sources of *Tomistoma* in Thailand and institutional and practical constraints on such a plan. Uthen Youngprapakorn advised that he had been successfully breeding *Tomistoma* in his new facility Utairach Farm. He produced 87 hatchlings last year and expected around 100 this year from eggs in incubation. Total current stock was over 300 captive-bred juveniles. He advised that anticipating CSG interest he had examined the possibility, but was concerned that inadequate protection of any potential release sites would make such a reintroduction unsuccessful. He proposed a more actively managed re-introduction into more controlled semi-natural situation. Discussion followed on the importance of addressing the public relations issue and post release follow-up. Crocodylian conservation in Thailand continues to be unnecessarily constrained by internal rivalries and lack of capacity, but the current interest of several groups, and ongoing-introduction program for Siamese

crocodile may provide avenues to overcome these constraints. The possibility of private/commercial sponsorship of protected habitat for crocodile re-introduction was suggested.

After thanking participants and observers for their usual frank, open and vigorous discussion, Professor Messel closed the meeting at 4.30 p.m. — Perran Ross, *rapporteur*.