

Project Update: February 2016

Summary

The conservation status of the Critically Endangered slender-snouted crocodile (*Mecistops cataphractus*) remains a critical challenge in Ghana. This report presents preliminary information about the baseline surveys, conservation education and also activities on the potential and existing threats. Until now, we have not identified an individual of the slender-snouted crocodile. However, we have also identified a number of the West African dwarf crocodile (*Osteolemus tetraspis*), which is also under enormous threat according to research on these reptile species. Habitat destruction such as continuous fishing in river bodies, charcoal burning and conversion of swampy areas into farmlands are very rampant.

Activity A: Investigating Baseline information for Current Population Size

1. Diurnal and Nocturnal Surveys

These activities began at 5-9 AM in the early mornings and 10 PM-1 AM in late evenings respectively for diurnal and nocturnal surveys. The team consisted of eight members (two rangers, three undergraduate students and three project team members) with four in each group. During diurnal surveys, suspected activities like foot movement around river bodies, suspected breeding grounds, burrows/holes along rivers were recorded and marked in the Ankasa Conservation Park and other two surrounding communities (Anwiafutu and Sowodadzem) for 14 days. We spotted about 12 West Africa dwarf crocodiles at different positions along two rivers in the Ankasa Conservation Park and other rivers in two other communities.

During the nocturnal surveys, places which had earlier been surveyed during the day were also intensified and re-surveyed. With the aid of head lamps, we were able to identify some of the species as eye shine only. We did not identify any species of the slender-snouted crocodile.

2. Household Surveys and Focus Group Interviews

We have conducted 28 households' interviews in two communities to date with a total of 38 interviewees (including three hunters). In relation to the hunters, none of them have seen the species during the last 5 years. However, they admitted that they have been hunting for the meat, eggs and other vital body parts of the other crocodiles (African dwarf crocodile).

Interviewees were 18-65 years old. Before these interviews were carried out, a reconnaissance survey was conducted with the pre-testing of our questionnaires. This gave us an idea about the understanding of the topic and its relevance to the local communities. Our interviews centred on whether community members have identified the species (slender-snouted crocodile) in their various communities. With the help of community members, we identified hunters and farmers whose activities continuously revolve around crocodiles.

Activity B. Identify Potential and Existing Threats

Although our main target species is yet to be identified, the capture and consumption of the African dwarf crocodile is very prevalent in the communities we have visited so far. Ten out of the 34 people who participated in the interviews so far have admitted to eating crocodile meat in the last 3 months, with the most recent one week prior to the household interviews and focus group discussions. Moreover, we also saw the continuous destruction of wetlands, conversion of swampy areas into farmlands and the felling of trees for charcoal production.

Activity C. Collaboration, Conservation Education and Capacity Building

In collaboration with the Education Unit of the Ankasa Conservation Area, we carried out a community sensitisation and education campaign for two communities and two selected schools.

The Ankasa Conservation Area is surrounded by about 55 communities. In order to extend our educational activities to some of these communities, we used community radio and information services. We sensitised communities about the importance of crocodiles and the need for their conservation. We also affixed photographs of the species on communities' notice boards and other vantage locations in the communities and on school notice boards. Until date, we have also distributed educational materials such as t-shirts, posters, flyers to the general public. Since most of the people do not understand and cannot read English, we had the information translated into the local language of the communities.

We have also conducted video shows about biodiversity conservation with special emphasis on crocodile conservation.

The Near Future

For the next few months, we will embark on our last field survey and community sensitisation in two additional communities. We will repeat and intensify our diurnal and nocturnal surveys and visit places which have been potentially mentioned by local people and other stakeholders as possible habitats for the survival of the slender-snouted crocodile. We will continue to gather more relevant data which would be very useful for scientific publication to the larger scientific community.



Left: A live captured African Dwarf Crocodile (*Osteolemus tetrapis*) by a hunter. Middle: Suspected breeding ground and nest. Right: School outreach campaign.