

COUNTRY REPORT ON STATUS OF SEA TURTLE IN CAMBODIA

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INTRODUCTION

Sea turtle were studied earlier by Bourret (1941) and Le Poulain (1941). The results from these study were very litter information concerning the exploitation, trade, consumption and cultural value of sea turtle in Cambodia. Due to the internal conflict in the country, the information and data of sea turtle in Cambodia were blocked for more than two decades and just started again by Groombridge and Luxmoore (1989) and Tana (1997). The information were very briefly because they did not have the project or programme to conduct research by themselves, but collected information by interviewing the local people who living along coastal villages. The results from their study were not enough for the Department of Fisheries to conserve, manage and develop on marine fisheries sector.

Many sources said that, sea turtle in Cambodia have been depleted sine last several decades. The main reason, which affected on sea turtle population were due to lack of control on fishing gears and human activities. Every year around 100 sea turtles of all size were caught by local fishermen. Eggs were also collected for consumption.

POPULATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF SEA TURTLE

There are five species of sea turtle found in Cambodia: Olive ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), Hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*), Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and Leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). Unfortunately, only two species of Green turtles and hawksbills turtle were considered and discussed by Groombridge and Luxmoore (1989). The villager living in Koh Kaptic Island said that green turtle were hunted for meat and hawksbill were not eaten because it poisonous feeling (itching to the eater). To make sure it is poisonous or not, the fishermen test its blood by applying on their skin if it make them feel itching it means that sea turtle is poisonous.

Amount of these turtle, only hawksbill and green turtle have often been found in coastline of Cambodia, especially in Kompong Som Bay around Koh Rong, Koh Rong Salem, Koh Tang and Koh Pring Islands (Tana 1997). The Loggerhead turtle is rarely found in Cambodia. The interview with the fishermen and the old people living on Koh Kaptic in Koh Kong province (1999) that the species population of sea turtle were changing a lot such as hawksbill turtle is the dominion species. Loggerhead turtle is a common species and green turtle is a rare species.

Before 1975, over 100 females of sea turtles came up to lay eggs on the coastline of Cambodia (Koh Kong, Kompong Som, Kep and Kompot). This number had been decreasing every year. In 1998, around 28 females came up to lay eggs in these areas (Fishermen, pers. comm.). The main factors that affect the change of sea turtle population along the coastline in Cambodia are:

- Fishermen and poor people mostly occupy these areas, so they can enter to exploit sea turtle and collect their eggs freely without fear.

- The main fishing gears are trawl, long-line hooks and gill net. The sea turtle and their eggs are exploited heavily by people living in Koh Kong and Sihanoukville because they can earn a lot of money from sale of these products to many countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, etc.

The interview conducted in March 1999 from Mr. Sanna, fishermen in Koh Kong province let us know that before 1975, around 1,000 of sea turtle hatchlings were produced every year but nowadays approximately 100-200 of sea turtle hatchling are produced. The reasons is due to heavy exploitation of sea turtle during spawning season and mature sea turtle for exporting to Thailand, Vietnam and the other countries.

NESTING AREAS AND EGG COLLECTION

The sea turtle nesting areas are concentrated only in Kompong Som and Koh Kong province. The data recorded were not in scientific way because the fishermen have no skill in this field, so why the number of nestings are not separated by species. The number of sea turtle nestings were declined from 100 nests in 1975 to 28 nests in 1998 (the record has been done by the local peoples, without separating by species).

The sea turtle eggs are mostly consumed only in these locals, Phnom Penh and other areas around Phnom Penh. The sea turtle eggs command higher price in tourist areas. The price of sea turtle eggs in the local market is 70 Riel and in Phnom Penh and tourist markets is 100 Riel. Sea turtle is rarely used in Phnom Penh restaurants, but has been used more in local restaurants (not every day).

These problems are alarming for government to consider and help, if no proper prevention and conservation were done, the sea turtle will be disappearing from the coastline of Cambodia and the new generation will complain and will not know sea turtle any more.

CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

Eventhough, the Department of Fisheries has no budget to run the project on research, management and conservation of sea turtle in Cambodia, but the Department of Fisheries tries to find NGOs or international communities to co-operate in this project.

FUTURE RESEARCH PLAN AND CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

The Department of Fisheries will conduct research on sea turtles as the following:

- Long and short term monitoring survey, data collection in order to assess the populations of sea turtles.
- Study on habitats, nesting areas and determine nesting habitats.
- Formulate law and regulations for strict conservation sea turtles.
- Conservation awareness campaigns will be provided to public, in co-operation with tourist officer, NGOs and local authorities.

LAW AND ENFORCEMENT

In recently year, the Department of Fisheries has no law and regulations for protecting and conserving this endangered species of wild fauna. In the near future a fishery act will be annexed to include this species in the conservation.

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