

Threatened Species of Fauna of Thailand

by

DR. BOONSONG LEKAGUL

*Secretary General, The Association for the Conservation of Wildlife,
Bangkok, Thailand*

SUMMARY

The author describes the rich wildlife resources of Thailand and gives the reasons for their steadily dwindling numbers. He lists the seriously threatened species and those that should be watched among the mammals, birds, turtles, and other reptiles.

INTRODUCTION

Thailand in the old days was one of the richest countries in wildlife resources. Mr. John Bradly wrote in his book, 'A Narrative of Travel and Sport In Burma, Siam, and the Malay Peninsula', that when he and his friends travelled on foot from Rangoon to Bangkok in 1876 that they often saw rhinoceros on their way. Elephants and buffaloes (possibly gaur and banteng) were numerous and found in herds of varying numbers many times a day. Even before and during the last World War, game animals were still very numerous in every part of the country. In one day's hike, one usually saw a few herds of elephants and banteng, and one or two herds of gaur. The sambar and barking deer were found often. The calls of big game animals were heard very often especially in December and January when most of them were mating.

The rich wildlife resources of this country began to be depleted very seriously after the end of World War II when surplus transport and fire-arms became easily available to the people. Game animals were slaughtered by shooting from jeeps with spotlights using rapid rifles and machine guns. Not only was wildlife destroyed wantonly but the forest habitat was cleared and burned at an alarming rate to expand areas for cultivation. Squatters did not hesitate to move in and settle even in reserved forests.

CONSERVATION EFFORTS

In 1950 a number of people, mostly old hunters, alarmed at this destruction of animal and forest formed 'The Association for the Conservation of Wildlife'. Ten years later (1960) they succeeded in getting the government to pass a game law, but this law is only letters printed with black ink on white paper unless it is properly enforced. Most important are:

1. well trained and dedicated wardens.
2. an adequate budget for proper patrolling,
3. co-operation between various government departments, and
4. public education.

The first three of these are sadly lacking in Thailand, the lack of money for proper patrolling being the most outstanding. Without such patrolling in the near future forest and wildlife resources will be doomed. All countries in South East Asia badly need well trained forest wardens. The best remedy for this would be if some international organization such as the IUCN could provide training facilities such as wildlife experts to teach and train in rotation in countries in this region.

Public education in Thailand is more promising. Conservation education has been introduced into the teaching curriculum of all classes in the schools, and the Association for the Conservation of Wildlife is active in giving lectures and arranging 4 or 5 trips

a year. The Asia Foundation is very co-operative in providing funds and printing bulletins on conservation news. It is hoped that with the coming generation conservation education will have progressed greatly.

MAMMALS – SERIOUSLY THREATENED SPECIES

- 1 and 2. Javan and Sumatran Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus* and *Didermocerus sumatrensis*) were once common in many parts of the country but they have been killed for their horns. It is not too pessimistic to say that they have already been wiped out although a very few may still survive in secluded corners on the Tenasserim Range. Karen hunters have brought horns and parts of their carcasses for sale at Karnchanaburi market each year during the past few years. To make a survey there would disclose their presence to the villagers, especially the Karen hunters, and would send the animals to their doom more quickly.
3. Kouprey (*Novibos sauveli*) were once found in the northeast, north of Dongrak Range in the areas of Burirum, Surin, Srisakes, and Korat. The last herd was seen at Dong Eo-jan Forest southwest of Korat in 1950.
4. Thai Eld's Deer (*Cervus eldi siamensis*) used to be plentiful in the open plains and dry forest in every part of Thailand north of Petchaburi. Because of its curved antlers it could not flee into dense forest so after the end of World War II it was wiped out quickly by hunting in jeeps. There may be a few small herds left.
5. Hog deer (*Hyelaphus porcinus annamiticus*). Its habitat is high grass on open plains. When this is burned the deer is easily shot at night. There may be a few individuals left in remote areas at Chiengrai and the northeast.
6. Wild Water Buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*). At present these have been lost to every part of the country save one area at Ban Rai Forest at Udhai Dhani. They are easy to kill because they habitually return to muddy pools to wallow. Their survival will not be long there because the Karen hunters are moving into this territory from Burma. This area at present is one of the best habitats for the big game animals of the country. Thailand should immediately set this area aside as a reserve with adequate funds for patrolling before it is too late.
7. Dugong (*Dugong dugong*) were once often seen along the coast of the inner gulf of Thailand from Sriracha to Rayong. They are often caught accidentally in fishing nets and drowned; if caught alive they are killed at once for meat. The Game Law Committee has suggested putting this sea mammal on the protected list of the fisheries and it is only hoped that this will be done before it is too late.

MAMMALS – SPECIES THAT SHOULD BE WATCHED CAREFULLY

1. Serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis*) was once found on most of the mountains and many of the islands of Thailand. Nowadays there are only a very few on some steep hills and on a few islands. Although this animal is in the strictly protected category it is much feared that the law cannot protect them unless they are in a national park or reserve because the villagers value their oil and bone marrow for curative properties for arthritis, fractures, and rheumatism, and then kill them wherever they are found.
2. Goral (*Nemorhedus goral*) was occasionally reported from some steep mountains along Mae Ping River. The number has never been estimated.
3. Elephants (*Elephas maximus indicus*). Once abundant in every part of the country the number of elephants has been reduced drastically especially since World War II through the clearing of forests and hunting for ivory and meat by villagers who find them easy prey, in spite of the 'Elephant Preservation Law'. Females and the young are killed first because they are more tender. Elephant meat is often sold as gaur or banteng meat. One elephant can provide meat for a whole village for many weeks.

4. Gaur (*Bos gaurus*) is the most magnificent game animal in the world, once found in abundance in jungles throughout the country. It has been much hunted and its habitats disturbed so it is found now only in small herds in remote forest.
5. Banteng (*Bos banteng*). Before the end of the war the banteng were rather abundant in every part of the country and were found as far as Surat Dhani in the peninsula. At present they are found in small herds in very remote areas. Originally plains-loving, diurnal animals they have changed their habitat to dense forest and become nocturnal in order to survive.
6. Malayan tapir (*Tapirus indicus*) are found now mostly in the south and west of the country. They are decreasing in numbers very rapidly because of trapping for export to zoos and shooting for fun and meat.
7. Leopard and Black Panther (*Panthera pardus*). The skin of this animal (both the black and the spotted forms) is in great demand and a good spotted one sells for 2000 baht (\$100 U.S.). The animals are also sought by animal dealers for the zoo trade.
8. Clouded Leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*). It is usually rather rare in Thailand, but when it is found it is trapped for zoos.
9. Binturong (*Arctictis binturong*) is found widespread in dense forests. It is timid and easily caught alive or killed. It is also wanted by zoos.
10. Gibbons (*Hylobates* spp.). The common gibbons in this country are the common white-handed gibbon (*Hylobates lar entelloides*) found mostly in the west and south of the country and the crowned gibbon (*Hylobates lar pileatus*) found in the east. Gibbons are much in demand for zoos and as pets for both Thai people and foreign visitors. Felling of forests destroys their habitat so nowadays they are found only in deep forests. Because they are difficult to catch the villagers usually shoot the mothers in order to catch the baby and very often both die from the wound, or from falling from high trees, or from malnutrition when in captivity.
11. Monkeys (*Macaca* spp.). Tens of thousands of monkeys have been exported yearly to the United States for making polio vaccine in the last decade (1955-65) and some kinds have already been wiped out from parts of the country. The Thai government has now restricted the export to 700 animals a month which helps a little.

They are also trapped and shot for meat and sometimes sold smoked in the market at 4 or 5 baht (about 25 cents U.S.) a piece.

The easily caught Crab-eating monkeys, which stay in the mangroves near the seashore, have suffered the most, then the Pig-tail and Stump-tailed monkeys in the south: the Rhesus and Hill macaque in the north have fared somewhat better than the others. Since monkeys are still known to raid crops, they have not been put on the protected list to avoid adverse public criticism.
12. Langurs or leaf-eating monkeys (*Presbytis* spp.) are dwindling in numbers very quickly, because the villagers believe that their fresh blood, when mixed with liqueur and taken orally, possesses some property in giving strength to the body and in curing some diseases. Langurs are hunted for their blood and their flesh, smoked and served as food. They are now found only in some remote areas far away from habitation.

BIRDS – SERIOUSLY THREATENED SPECIES

All big birds in the stork family are threatened by:

1. shooting for sport;
2. the draining of marshes; and
3. the lack of natural havens where they can feed and roost peacefully.

The following birds are rarely seen at present and all are seriously threatened species.

1. Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone sharpii*). This beautiful big bird is very rarely seen at present in this country. Six birds were seen in Phu Kadung National Park six years ago, four were shot later on and only two were seen last year. Four birds came to roost at the Open-billed Stork Sanctuary at Wat Phai Lorm, Pathum Dhani in January last year. Two were shot by poachers and the other two had to fly away to save their lives.
- 2 and 3. The Giant Ibis (*Pseudibis gigantea*) and Davison's Black Ibis (*Pseudibis papilosa davisoni*). There may still be a few of these birds in remote areas but they have neither been seen nor reported in the past ten years. Recently Giant Ibis were reported at some deep jungle ponds in northeast Cambodia.
4. The Black-necked Stork (*Renorhynchus asiaticus*) and the White-necked Stork (*Ciconia episcopus*) are now very rarely seen in this country, although they are more common in neighboring Cambodia.
5. The Greater Adjutant Stork (*Leptoptilos dubius*) is also very rare in Thailand nowadays, although the lesser species is still found occasionally in certain areas.

BIRDS – SPECIES THAT SHOULD BE WATCHED CAREFULLY

1. The White Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*). A small flock of six or eight birds are still seen from time to time at the Open-billed Stork Sanctuary at Wat Phai Lorm but they are very rarely seen anywhere else nowadays.
2. The Painted Stork (*Ibis leucocephala*) has become scarcer in the past ten years. However, big flocks may be seen feeding in mud flats and rice fields near the seashore between Tachin and Meklong Rivers at the end of the rainy season.
3. The Spotted-billed Pelican (*Pelecanus philippensis*) has also become scarcer in the last decade. A few dozen are seen at widely scattered lakes, mud flats, and rice fields.
4. Argus Pheasant (*Argusianus argus argus*) is found only in the peninsular provinces. Many of them have been trapped in the past ten years for export to zoos and animal dealers in other countries although the Government has restricted the number of birds to be exported.
5. Burmese Peacock Pheasant (*Polyplectron bicalcaratum*) and Malayan Peacock Pheasant (*Polyplectron malacense*). The former is found north of the Isthmus of Kra and the latter south of that isthmus. The birds are being trapped and exported in large numbers every year for zoos.
6. Green Pea Fowl (*Pavo muticus*). Once it was abundant in every jungle, but now it is very rarely seen. It is hunted intensively by trappers for sale as pets and by villagers for its excellent meat.

TURTLES

There are no seriously threatened species, but species which should be watched carefully as their numbers are dwindling are the river turtles and the sea turtle.

1. River Turtle (*Batagur baska*). This species has dwindled very rapidly because its habitats (river banks) have been occupied by people, and fishermen hunt the turtle and its eggs for meat.
2. *Platysternum megaciphalum*. This species is usually found in mountain streams, three to four thousand feet or higher. It is strange looking and is heavily collected for sale in the pet market.
3. Sea Turtles. Of all four species in the Thai seas, the Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) is the most common one, the Hawksbill Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) comes next. These two are of economic importance to Thailand because the Thai people like to eat their eggs. The Government has given concessions for

egg collecting at different places along the seashore. The concessionaires have to hatch certain numbers of eggs of these two turtles and release their hatchlings back into the sea. According to the regulation of the Fishery Department, 21,350 hatchings of the Green Turtle and 2,525 of the Hawksbill should be released every year. Such an excellent regulation should be quite enough to preserve these two species of sea turtles from being depleted, but it needs some honesty on the part of both official inspectors and concessionaires.

4. The Leathery Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is found, but not in large numbers, on the Indian Ocean side of the Thai peninsula and very few in the Gulf of Thailand. This turtle should also be included in the hatching regulation as the above two are.

OTHER REPTILES

There are no seriously threatened species but the three varieties of crocodiles – false gavial, brackish water, and fresh water – should all be watched carefully as their skins are in great demand by trappers. Fresh water crocodiles are found nowadays in Bung Borapet Lake of the Fishery Department at Nakon Sawan. Brackish water and false gavial crocodiles may be found but only in small numbers at the mouth of rivers in the south of Thailand where they are covered with mangroves. They are no longer found as they were in their old habitats, but they may be saved from extinction by the crocodile farms which raise them for their skins. It is difficult to put crocodiles on the protected list because people are afraid of them.