

Wildlife in Lao PDR: 1999 Status Report compiled by J. W. Duckworth, R. E. Salter and K. Khounboline. IUCN–The World Conservation Union, Wildlife Conservation Society, and Centre for Protected Areas and Watershed Management, Vientiane. Paperback, 275 pp.

Aspects of Forestry Management in the Lao PDR by Tropical Rainforest Programme, Amsterdam. Paperback, 24 pp.

In little more than a decade, Laos has gone from being, in terms of its contemporary fauna, one of the least-known SE Asian countries to one of the better-known, thanks to a far-sighted and systematic exploration and survey of the country which has few parallels elsewhere. No small credit is due to the Lao Department of Forestry, particularly CPAWM, in facilitating, co-leading and actively participating in this programme. In fact, so many highly informative papers and reports have been published over the past eight or nine years that it is an enormous relief to see most of these data finally synthesized into a single tome. This review is amply illustrated with 7 maps and figures, and 18 colour plates.

Following a 32–page introduction covering the geography and biogeography of Laos, human use of wildlife, and wildlife conservation measures by J. W. Duckworth, R. E. Salter and W. G. Robichaud, there are chapters on amphibians and reptiles (B. L. Stuart); birds (J. W. Duckworth, P. Davidson and R. J. Timmins); large mammals (Duckworth, Timmins, K. Khounboline, Salter and Davidson); Insectivora (M. F. Robinson); Chiroptera (C. M. Francis, A. Guilln and M. F. Robinson) and Muridae (C. M. Francis).

The species accounts are extremely well researched and authoritative. I would guess that the listing for reptiles and amphibians is the first ever done for Laos which is based upon actual records rather than on conjecture. Species accounts are properly referenced as to sources. “Key” species of birds are tabulated by protected area, as are larger mammals. Twenty-three bird species previously listed for Laos by other authors have been dropped as unreliable. Conservation and management recommendations are made (usually) at family or genus level.

The huge extent of wildlife use (I prefer the less euphemistic term, persecution) in Laos is immediately apparent from the fairly gruesome array of colour photographs, which show villagers posing with dead wildlife and wildlife parts. These include a shot tiger, a marbled cat, skins of Asiatic black bear, hog badger, leopard cat, golden cat, a headless king cobra, green peafowl and crested argus feathers; the skull and casque of a rufous-necked hornbill; piles of songbird carcasses; squirrel and civet carcasses; various shot and captive primates, ungulate skulls and horns, and many caged and captive birds and mammals. Such sights may be shocking to some, but are commonplace to anyone who has carried out fieldwork in SE Asia.

Now that the detailed outlines of the fauna are there, the way ahead, focusing on key areas and on conservation priorities, is becoming clear. This is now being attempted across the Indochinese region through so-called “eco-regional conservation planning” led by WWF and IUCN, a workshop for which was recently held in Cambodia.

It is tempting to compare the progress made in Laos in a scant few years with that here in Thailand. The impetus generated in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the beginnings of a legal framework for nature conservation in Thailand were set up through Royal Forest Department, with collaboration of IUCN, have since been squandered by a large, inefficient,

and largely uninterested government bureaucracy. Thailand has over 100 national parks, 30-plus wildlife sanctuaries, many no-hunting areas and other smaller reserves. Yet there has never been a program of systematic survey of these areas. There has scarcely been any attempt to assess the contributions of these areas to biodiversity conservation; nor to identify where the loopholes lie. After nearly forty years of involvement in conservation in Thailand, not only does RFD lack the knowledge and capability to produce a review of similar scope or of a comparable level of scholarship to that which now exists for Laos, it is doubtful whether any senior RFD official would even concede the need for one!

Will the groundwork laid down by Laos in the past decade be similarly squandered? The signs are not good. Many of the key figures so important in the early days of CPAWM have been sidelined. The initial interest in environmental conservation shown by the Lao government appears to have faded and been replaced by a more heavily development-oriented approach. Presumably the oligarchy has calculated that it can best hope to maintain its power and minimise social unrest through the trickle down of funds from mega-projects—roads, dams and other construction projects; conventional export-oriented agricultural development, and the like.

Shortly after *Wildlife In Lao PDR* arrived on my desk, I received the euphemistically titled *Aspects of Forestry Management in Lao PDR*. This is a scathing indictment of logging policy in Laos, which is effectively dictated by the prime minister's office and the military, which set the log quotas and determine which areas are to be logged. The Division of Inventory and Planning of the Department of Forestry in Laos is completely marginalised in this process: there is scarcely even a pretence at sustainability. The massive investment in timber processing capacity over the past few years leads to the inescapable conclusion that it is Laos' system of National Biodiversity Conservation Areas which will shortly go under the axe and the chainsaw.

Philip Round

Center for Conservation Biology
Faculty of Science
Mahidol University
Rama 6 Road
Bangkok 10400