



for a living planet

WWF International
Avenue du Mont-Blanc
1196 Gland
Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 364 9111
Fax: +41 22 364 8307
www.panda.org

Press Release

Embargoed for 6.00 GMT on 25 September 2009

New species discovered in the Greater Mekong at risk of extinction due to climate change

A bird eating fanged frog, a gecko that looks like it's from another planet and a bird which would rather walk than fly, are among the 163 new species discovered in the Greater Mekong region last year that are now at risk of extinction due to climate change, says a new report launched by WWF ahead of UN climate talks in Bangkok.

During 2008 alone, scientists identified these rare and unique species within the jungles and rivers of the Greater Mekong, including a bird eating fanged frog that lies in streams waiting for prey, one of only four new species of musk shrew to be described in recent times, and a leopard gecko whose "other world" appearance – orange eyes, spindly limbs and technicolour skin – inspired the report's title *Close Encounters*.

Such is the immense biodiversity of this region that some discoveries such as the tiger-striped pitviper were made by accident.

"We were engrossed in trying to catch a new species of gecko when my son pointed out that my hand was on a rock mere inches away from the head of a pitviper! We caught the snake and the gecko and they both proved to be new species," said Dr Lee Grismer of La Sierra University in California.

Close Encounters spotlights species newly identified by science including 100 plants, 28 fish, 18 reptiles, 14 amphibians, 2 mammals and a bird, all discovered in 2008 within the Greater Mekong region of Southeast Asia that spans Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and the south-western Chinese province of Yunnan.

The reluctant flyer, *Nonggang babbler*, was observed walking longer distances than flying. It would only use its wings when frightened.

"After millennia in hiding these species are now finally in the spotlight, and there are clearly more waiting to be discovered," said Stuart Chapman, Director of the WWF Greater Mekong Programme.

But no sooner are these new species discovered than their survival is threatened by the devastating impacts of climate change, the report warns.

Recent studies show the climate of the Greater Mekong region is already changing. Models suggest continued warming, increased variability and more frequent and damaging extreme climate events.

Rising seas and saltwater intrusion will cause major coastal impacts especially in the Mekong River delta, which is one of the three most vulnerable deltas on Earth, according to the most recent International Panel on Climate Change report.



WWF *for a living planet*

“Some species will be able to adapt to climate change, many will not, potentially resulting in massive extinctions,” said Chapman.

“Rare, endangered and endemic species like those newly discovered are especially vulnerable because climate change will further shrink their already restricted habitats,” he said.

Often these newly discovered species are highly dependent on a limited number of species for their survival. If they respond to climate change in a way that disrupts this closely evolved relationship it puts them at greater risk of extinction.

Over the next two weeks, government delegates will meet in Bangkok, Thailand, for the next round of UN climate change talks in the lead up to the Copenhagen Climate Summit this December, where the world is scheduled to agree on a new global climate treaty.

“The treasures of nature are in trouble if governments fail to agree a fair, ambitious and binding treaty that will prevent runaway climate change,” said Kathrin Gutmann, Head of Policy and Advocacy at the WWF Global Climate Initiative.

“Protecting endangered species and vulnerable communities in the Greater Mekong and elsewhere around the world depends on fast progress at the UN talks in Bangkok - a hugely important conference that can lay the groundwork for success at the Copenhagen Climate Summit this December.”

For further information contact:

Nicole Frisina, Communications Officer, Greater Mekong Programme

Email: nicole.frisina@wwfgreatermekong.org

Mobile: +856 207 590 164 and after September 22nd +66807806035

Natalia Reiter, Media Officer, WWF International

Email: nreiter@wwfint.org

Tel: + 41 22 364 9550

Mobile: +41 79 873 8099

Fax: + 41 22 36 45 358

Christian Teriete, Communications Manager, WWF International

Email: cteriete@wwf.org.hk

Mobile: +852-9310-6805



WWF *for a living planet*[®]

Notes to the Editor

- To download high-res pictures:
https://intranet.panda.org/wwf_photos/index.cfm?albumId=3666
- To download footage of new species, landscapes and WWF fieldwork, the *Greater Mekong Close Encounters* report, and new species photos and. Visit here:
<http://www.divshare.com/folder/601590-bb7>
If in Southeast Asia or China go to:
<http://www.divshare.com>
Username: nicole.frisina@wwfgreatermekong.org
Password: newsp
- WWF collaborates with many research institutions working across the region in the compilation of this new species discoveries report.
- The *Close Encounters* report is the second new species report on this region. The initial report *First Contact* was launched in December 2008 and revealed over 1000 new species discoveries in the Greater Mekong between 1997 and 2007.
- WWF is working with governments and industry of the six Greater Mekong nations to conserve and sustainably manage 600,000 km² of transboundary forest and freshwater habitats in this unique and rapidly changing land.
- WWF supports the formulation of Asia's first regional climate change adaptation agreement to provide a legal framework and mechanism for regional cooperation and coordination on climate change.
- The Greater Mekong grouping of countries is committed to increasing cooperation for accelerated economic development as facilitated by the Asian Development Bank. Economic activity and associated investments in infrastructure development is concentrated along three "economic corridors" that crisscross the region and have the potential both to lift the region's rural populations out of poverty but also to exacerbate existing threats, ultimately depleting the natural resource base upon which long-term development of the region depends. WWF believes that Greater Mekong nations hold the key to both economic development and ensuring the integrity of conservation landscapes remains intact.
- Sixteen of WWF's Global 200 ecoregions, critical landscapes of international biological importance, are found in the Greater Mekong. These landscapes are home to rare Asian elephants and Indochinese tigers, and one of only two populations of Javan rhino in the world. In addition to rare populations of Irrawaddy dolphins, the Mekong River basin is estimated to house at least 1,300 species of fish, including the Mekong giant catfish, one of the largest freshwater fish in the world. By length, the Mekong is the richest waterway for biodiversity on the planet, fostering more species per unit area than the Amazon. Many of the species are endemic to the region.