CEPF Final Project Completion Report

Organization Legal Name	Wildlife Conservation Society						
Project Title	Emergency funding for the recovery of a globally significant population of critically endangered Siamese Crocodile (<i>Crocodylus siamensis</i>) in Lao PDR						
CEPF GEM No.	77636-000						
Date of Report	31 December 2015						
Report Author	Alex McWilliam						
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CEPF Region: Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot

Strategic Direction: 1: Safeguard priority globally threatened species by mitigating major

threats.

Grant Amount: USD 19,956

Project Dates: 1 May 2014 to 30 November 2015

1. Implementation Partners for this Project (list each partner and explain how they were involved in the project)

Wildlife Conservation Society Lao PDR Program (WCS)

WCS was responsible for overall project management, technical support, and coordination with partners such as the Lao Zoo.

Village Crocodile Conservation Committee (VCCC)

The VCC at Than Soum village was jointly responsible for implementation of actions with local the local community. The VCCC at Than Soum is one of nine community-based committees that were established around the XC wetlands under previous phases of the program. Each committee consists of between 5-7 elected representatives from a given village. The committee took a leading role in project consultations, coordinated village engagement and directly participated in all project activities. They also represent each village in all meetings associated with the project.

Provincial and District Offices of Natural Resources and Environment (DoNRE/PoNRE)

In the respective districts, and at the provincial government level, these agencies were responsible for coordination of implementation with local government authorities. District officers currently assigned to the project were involved in all actions undertaken with communities.

Conservation Impacts

2. Describe how your project has contributed to the implementation of the CEPF ecosystem profile

The Siamese crocodile (Crocodylus siamensis) is listed in the CEPF Ecosystem Profile as and Priority Species for CEPF Investment in the Indo-Burma Hotspot. Previously widespread in the Mekong, Chao Praya and Mae Klong Basins this species is now classified as critically endangered and is restricted to a few small populations in widely scattered localities. This significant reduction in the species' population is due to widespread habitat destruction, over collection to stock crocodile farms, and illegal hunting for skins and meat. Because the populations of this species are at such critically low levels, additional impacts from climate change, such as increased temperatures and longer periods of drought, make the species even more vulnerable to extinction.

The Xe Champhone (XC) wetlands (16°23'N, 105°13'E), located in eastern Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR (Figure 1). This extensive wetland is recognized in the CEPF ecosystem profile as Key Biodiversity Area LAO40. The XC wetlands are a large floodplain area, part of one of the key river basins connected to the Mekong River, the Xe Banghieng River basin. It is one of only two Ramsar sites in Lao PDR designated by the government in September 2010, and the highest priority site in the country for Siamese crocodiles. On the basis of observations in the last 10 years by local people acknowledged as the most familiar with crocodile occurrence in the XC wetlands, a minimum of 75 crocodiles was estimated to persist at the site.

The WCS Lao PDR Program has been working with the government of Lao PDR and local communities in the XC wetlands since 2008 to implement the Community-based Crocodile Resource Management Program (CCRMP). This CEPF supported project contributed to the completion of one component of this multi faceted program.

The project most closely aligned with CEPF Strategic Direction 1: Safeguard priority globally threatened species by mitigating major threats, and specifically Investment Priority 1.2: Develop best practice approaches for conservation of highly threatened and endemic freshwater species. However the project does integrate CEPF Strategic Direction 4: Empower local communities to engage in conservation and management of priority KBA's.

This CEPF supported project primarily addressed the threats to Siamese crocodiles, and contributed to the implementation of the CEPF ecosystem profile, by reversing Siamese crocodile population declines at the site. During the project period we continued to rear and successfully released a total of 45 Siamese crocodiles into the XC wetlands, an estimated 60% increase in the local population, previously estimated to be 75 individuals. The projects also contributed to the implementation of the CEPF Ecosystem Profile by engendering community support for crocodile conservation.

The WCS program had already established community level crocodile conservation committees. These committees are intimately involved in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of activities in this project and the wider program. As such these communities are informed and empowered to effectively improve the management of the wetlands and species that are culturally and spiritually important to them, including the Siamese crocodile.

3. Summarize the overall results/impact of your project

Planned Goal (as stated in the approved proposal)

List the project Goal from the proposal

The overall goal of the Community based Crocodile Resource Management Program (CCRMP), as stated in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the government of Lao PDR, was the recovery of the local crocodile population and restoration of associated wetlands, linked with socio-economic incentives that substantially improve local livelihoods.

The specific goal of the CEPF funded project was the recovery of Siamese crocodile populations in the Xe Champhone (XC) wetland in Lao PDR.

4. Actual progress toward Goal at completion

This CEPF Small Grant Project contributed to this goal by significantly contributing to the recovery of the global population of Siamese crocodiles. The project also reinforced the role of communities in biodiversity conservation and wetland management. The increased number of crocodiles at the site has also resulted in increased interest in wildlife tourism opportunities and the community has, with the assistance of other donors, already started a small community based wildlife tourism product at the site. This, along with other program activities such as improved wetland management, has contributed to the securing of local food security and diversification of economic opportunities.

Planned Objectives (as stated in the approved proposal)

List each Objective from the proposal

The summary objectives of the CCRMP are characterized below.

- a. *Livelihood improvement*. Improvement of local livelihoods linked to enhanced water and wetland resource management.
- b. Wetlands conservation. Strengthen the management of crocodile habitat areas by increasing the knowledge and awareness of local communities, improving wetland zoning and regulations, and instituting community organizations to lead local management.
- c. *Crocodile species recovery.* Increase the population of Siamese crocodiles in the XCP wetlands.

The objectives of the CEPF funded project were as follows;

- i. Forty six juvenile Siamese crocodiles released to the XC wetland complex.
- ii. Community support for crocodile conservation engendered.

5. Actual progress toward Objectives at completion

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species suggests that the global wild population of Siamese crocodiles is between 500-1000 individuals. Most experts agree that the actual population is likely to be towards the lower end of this range. Thus if we assume the population is 500 individuals across the entire range of the species, and 75 of these were present in the XC wetlands, then this project has made a significant contribution to the number of individuals in the wild. During the entire period of the CCRMP a total of 64 Siamese crocodiles have been reared and released into the XC wetlands, of which 45 were completed with direct support from CEPF. This reintroduction of 64 individuals is a 13% increase in the global wild population and an 85% increase in the population at the XC wetland Ramsar site.

Community and local government support for crocodile conservation was engendered through the hosting of two release ceremonies in conjunction with the release of crocodiles implemented in August 2014 and November 2015. At each ceremony local government and community members participated in technical presentations highlighting the status of Siamese crocodiles in the wild, and how communities can contribute to reducing and mitigating threats to the species through better management of wetland areas. Further to this local community members facilitated spiritual and cultural rituals. These ceremonies reinforced the goal of the project and strengthened community support for species conservation.

6. Describe the success or challenges of the project toward achieving its goal and objectives

We successfully achieved the project's short-term objectives, as described above and below. Achieving the overall goal will take significantly more time. The greatest challenge towards achieving the successful recovery of Siamese crocodiles at the site will be maintaining the continued implementation of wetland management practices and species protection and monitoring. With the support of this project, and from other organizations like the IUCN and local government, communities are well placed to continue management and monitoring practices already established. However, with increasing human populations pressures and growing demand for wild species products (such as crocodile skins) there will be challenges in the future that will require some continued support. Though not requiring a lot of funding, communities will require some material support for protection of wetland resources, through patrolling, and ongoing monitoring of crocodile presence at the site, by way of surveys or community network monitoring.

7. Were there any unexpected impacts (positive or negative)?

As mentioned above one unexpected outcome was the increased interest from the local community and government in wildlife tourism. The Than Soum village community has already started a small tourism initiative with the support of other donors to encourage both local and

international tourists to visit the area to view crocodiles and learn about local livelihoods and culture.

To rear the crocodiles at the local community WCS provided assistance to construct two enclosures, each with six pens. Following the completion of the rearing and release of crocodiles to the wetland area, the community is now using these pens to farm fish, frogs, and pigs for local consumption and sale to market.

As the area becomes better known for the presence of Siamese crocodiles it may also become a target for those seeking to hunt crocodiles for the skin trade and consumption, as well as a source of stock (eggs) for farms. These activities have the potential to negatively impact both the crocodile population and local community. However, the establishment of local groups to patrol wetland areas and local committees to mitigate conflict, both of which were implemented by the CCRMP, should mitigate these risks and potential impacts.

Project Activities and Deliverables

Objective 1: Forty six juvenile Siamese crocodiles successfully released to the XC wetland

complex

Activity 1.1: Continue to rear crocodiles currently in the head-starting program

Deliverable: 46 healthy crocodiles reared to an appropriate weight/size/age for release

Activity 1.2: Continue to provide technical inputs and monitoring support Deliverables: Two site visits by WCS and local government staff per month.

One site visit by WCS technical staff and local government staff every three

months.

Activity 1.3: Construct a rearing enclosure to house the crocodiles as their size increases

Deliverable: Enclosure built

Activity 1.4: Construct two soft release pens

Deliverables: First soft release pen built

Second soft release pen built

Objective 2: Community support for crocodile conservation engendered

Activity 2.1: Organize and hold two release ceremonies with local community and

government participation.

Deliverables: First release ceremony held

Second release ceremony held

8. Describe the deliverables met under Objective 1

Objective 1: Forty-six juvenile Siamese crocodiles successfully released to the XC wetland complex

Prior to the commencement of the CEPF small grant project the CCRMP had already successfully reared and released 19 juvenile crocodiles to the XC wetlands under the 'head-starting' component of the program (Figure 1). At the commencement of the CEPF project a further 46 individuals, from clutches of eggs hatched in 2012 (21 individuals) and 2013 (25 individuals),

were being reared by the program. Of these 46 crocodiles, 17 were housed at facilities at the Than Soum village nearby the XC Ramsar wetland site (Figure 2), and 29 at the Lao Zoo, a long time partner of the CCRMP. At both locations these eggs were collected, hatched and juveniles reared according to protocols established by WCS who also provided several trainings prior to the commencement of the CEPF small grant project.



Figure 1. Than Soum village VCCC members and Lao Zoo staff rear and release Siamese crocodiles as part of the species recovery component of the CCRMP during 2013.

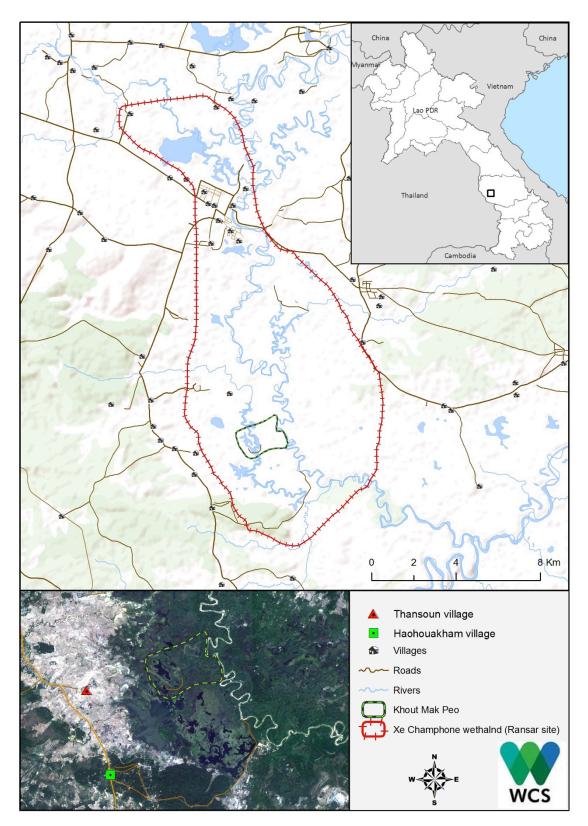


Figure 2. Location of Than Soum village, Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR.

Throughout the CEPF small grant project period WCS conducted several site visits to both Than Soum village and the Lao Zoo to conduct monitoring, data collection, and provide on-site support and technical advice (Figure 3). Participating in these site visits from WCS were the Program Coordinator and/or the Program Officer. These staff conducted site visits to the Lao Zoo a total of 10 times, and visited Than Soum village a total of 5 times over the 19 month period. Further to this the WCS veterinarian based in Lao PDR also conducted missions to each site location (1 to Savannakhet and 2 to the Lao Zoo) to inspect the condition of the facilities and health of the crocodiles reared at each location, providing corrective recommendations when needed. Most issues identified were related to feeding times and amounts, regulating exposure to sunlight, and rearranging the individuals so they are grouped according to equivalent size and weight.



Figure 2. VCCC members at Than Soum village and Lao Zoo staff participate with WCS in the monitoring of crocodiles being reared at each location.

During 2012-13 the CCRMP team had already reared and release 19 juvenile crocodiles (https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/02/130221141106.htm). As such the program already had facilities and an enclosure with six rearing pens to raise crocodiles situated at the Than Soum village. The Lao Zoo also had existing infrastructure to house crocodiles. However, an additional enclosure was required at Than Soum village to accommodate the crocodiles in the existing enclosure as they began to increase in size and also to house those that would be translocated from the Lao Zoo prior to release in the XC wetlands. A new enclosure with six new pens was constructed at the village during May and June 2014 according to a design provided by WCS (Figure 4). The enclosure was constructed by the local community and coordinated by members of the Than Soum Village Crocodile Conservation Committee (VCCC).



Figure 3. VCCC members constructing the second enclosure with six holding pens at Than Soum village.

For the release of crocodiles that took place during 2013 WCS and the VCCC at Than Soum village implemented a 'soft release' protocol. This protocol involved constructing a temporary enclosure in the shallow waters at the periphery of the wetland area where the crocodiles were to be released (Figure 5). Two months prior to the actual release date the juvenile crocodiles were transported to the enclosure and housed there for the remaining time in captivity. This 'soft release' protocol is thought to allow the animals to acclimatize and 'imprint' to their future habitat and also practice hunting and feeding of live prey in readiness for complete release.



Figure 5. Soft release pen constructed for crocodiles released in March 2013 at Khout Mak Peo, Than Soum Village, XC wetlands, Savannakhet Province.

For the two releases planned during the CEPF small grant project we had planned to implement this 'soft release' method, however, following consultations with local government, the VCCC at Than Soum village, and WCS's regional herpetologist Dr. Steve Platt, it was decided that no soft release pen would be built for these releases. Whist the construction of the soft release pen is relatively easily facilitated, the guarding and feeding of crocodiles at the enclosure that is a significant distance from the village residential area places significant burden on the VCCC members. The VCCC members must spend significant time to collect food for the increasingly larger crocodiles and deliver that food to the location. Also at least two members of the VCCC must stay on guard at the enclosure 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for a period of up to 2 months whilst the crocodiles are in the soft release pen. This is to avoid any animals being taken by poachers.

The alternative strategy was to keep the crocodiles at the enclosures in Than Soum village until they were of appropriate size for release and then conduct what is termed a 'hard' release. Whilst the crocodiles remained in the enclosures located on the village grounds it is far more efficient to feed and guard them. Further to this there is no scientific evidence that we know of indicating that a hard release strategy of directly placing individuals into the release habitat is detrimental to their survival.

9. Describe the deliverables met under Objective 2

At the commencement of the CEPF small grant project 46 juvenile Siamese crocodiles were already being by the CCRMP partners. Of these 46 crocodiles, 17 were housed at facilities at the Than Soum village nearby the XC Ramsar wetland site, and 29 at the Lao Zoo.

During the CEPF small grant project two ceremonies were completed and a total of 45 Siamese crocodiles were released. Once determined to be of sufficient size and good health the juvenile crocodiles were released into the Khout Mak Peo area of the Ramsar listed XC wetlands in Savannakhet Province.

On 27 August 2014 the first of the two ceremonies was implemented (Figure 6). The 17 crocodiles situated at facilities in Than Soum village were released. These one-to-two-year-old crocodiles ranged in size between between 50-100 cm (20-39 inches) in length. The release in 2014 received wide media coverage both locally and in the international press (e.g.,https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/08/140828110122.htm).



Figure 6. Buddhist monks and village elders perform ceremonies prior to the release of 17 crocodiles in August 2014.

Following this release all crocodiles from the remaining 29 crocodiles at the Lao Zoo were then transported to the facilities at Than Soum village where the local VCCC continued to rear and monitor them until the next release was to be completed. Two translocations from the Lao Zoo to Than Soum village were completed, one in October 2014 (22 individuals) and one in October 2015 (6 individuals). Unfortunately, during the October 2014 translocation one individual died due to unknown causes. As a precaution WCS modified our shipping methods for future translocations by ensuring that each crocodile was housed in a separate crate during transport.

On 27 November 2015 the second ceremony was conducted and all remaining 28 crocodiles in the head-starting program were released into the XC wetlands (Figure 7). The average size of these individuals was 97 cm in length and 2,831g in weight.

During both releases in 2014 and 2015 representative from local communities around the Ramsar site, the VCCC at Than Soum village, district and provincial government authorities, and WCS attended the events. Following speeches by government representatives ceremonies observing cultural traditions were conducted. Local communities have traditional beliefs about Siamese crocodiles, and events on the day included welcoming the crocodiles to the village area and wishing both them and community residents good luck in the future. The crocodiles were then transported to total protection zones established in the Khout Mak Peo wetlands that were established by the CCRMP previously. These protection zones are managed by the local communities in the areas and are managed to provide habitat and resources for the crocodiles in the future.



Figure 7. Project participants attend ceremonies and the ultimate release of 28 crocodiles in November 2015.

10. If you did not complete any activity or deliverable, how did this affect the overall impact of the project?

One activity and deliverable that was not completed during the project was the construction and use of 'soft release' pens during the 2014 and 2015 releases. This did not affect the overall implementation of the project and is justified under a description of activities under Objective 1, section 8 of this report.

11. Please describe and submit any tools, products, or methodologies that resulted from this project or contributed to the results

No tools, products, or methodologies to submit.

CEPF Global Monitoring Data

Respond to the questions and complete the tables below. If a question is not relevant to your project, please make an entry of 0 (zero) or n/a (not applicable).

12. Did your organization complete the CEPF Civil Society Tracking Tool (CSTT) at the beginning and end of your project? Yes/No

Our organization did not complete the CEPF Civil Society Tracking Tool.

13. List any vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered species conserved due to your project

Siamese crocodile (Crocodylus siamensis)

Hectares Under Improved Management

Project Results	Hectares*	Comments
14. Did your project strengthen the management of an existing protected area?	n/a	List the name of each protected area
15. Did your project create a new protected area or expand an existing protected area?	n/a	List the name of each protected area, the date of proclamation, and the type of proclamation (e.g., legal declaration, community agreement, stewardship agreement)
16. Did your project strengthen the management of a key biodiversity area named in the CEPF Ecosystem Profile (hectares may be the same as questions above)	n/a	List the name of each key biodiversity area
17. Did your project improve the management of a production landscape for biodiversity	n/a	List the name or describe the location of the production landscape

conservation			
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^{*} Include total hectares from project inception to completion

18. In relation to the two questions above on protected areas, did your project complete a Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT), or facilitate the completion of a METT by protected area authorities? If so, complete the table below. (Note that there will often be more than one METT for an individual protected area.)

Protected area	Date of METT	Composite METT Score	. I Date of MIFTED . I Date of MIFT		Date of METT	Composite METT Score
n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

19. List the name of any corridor (named in the Ecosystem Profile) in which you worked and how you contributed to its improved management, if applicable.

n/a

Direct Beneficiaries: Training and Education

Direct Beneficiaries. Training and Education								
Did your project provide training or education for	Male	Female	Total	Brief Description				
20. Adults for community leadership or resource management positions	n/a	n/a	n/a	All training and education was completed prior to the beginning of the CEPF Small Grant Project				
21. Adults for livelihoods or increased income	n/a	n/a	n/a	All training and education was completed prior to the beginning of the CEPF Small Grant Project				
22. School-aged children	n/a	n/a	n/a	All education activities were completed prior to the beginning of the CEPF Small Grant Project				
23. Other				-				

24. List the name and approximate population size of any "community" that benefited from the project.

Than Soum village, Champhone district, Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR

25. Socioeconomic Benefits to Target Communities

Based on the list of communities above, write the name of the communities in the left column below. In the subsequent columns under Community Characteristics and Nature of Socioeconomic Benefit, place an X in all relevant boxes.

	Comm	unity C	haracte	ristics					Nature of Socioeconomic E				lature of Socioeconomic Benefit									
									Increased in		Increased income due to:		pple		e to	des,		ion,	ntal	ned		
Community Name	Small landowners	Subsistence economy	Indigenous/ ethnic peoples	Pastoralists / nomadic peoples	Recent migrants	Urban communities	Communities falling below the poverty line	Other	Adoption of sustainable natural resources management practices	Ecotourism revenues	Park management activities	Payment for environmental services	Increased food security due to the adoption of sustainable fishing, hunting, or agricultural practices	More secure access to water resources	Improved tenure in land or other natural resource due titling, reduction of colonization, etc.	Reduced risk of natural disasters (fires, landslides, flooding, etc)	More secure sources of energy	Increased access to public services, such as education, health, or credit	Improved use of traditional knowledge for environmental management	More participatory decision-making due to strengthened civil society and governance	Other	
Than Soum	Х	Χ	Χ		Χ		Χ						Х	Χ					Χ	Х		

If you marked "Other", please provide detail on the nature of the Community Characteristic and Socioeconomic Benefit:

Lessons Learned

26. Describe any lessons learned during the design and implementation of the project, as well as any related to organizational development and capacity building. Consider lessons that would inform projects designed or implemented by your organization or others, as well as lessons that might be considered by the global conservation community

27. Project Design Process (aspects of the project design that contributed to its success/shortcomings)

During the project design process of the CCRMP a critical lesson learned was to have a good understanding of both the species (e.g. crocodile population), ecological (e.g. crocodile wetland habitat) and social characteristics of the target area and communities. Establishing this understanding provided the framework within which the project was designed and also developed relationships with the local government and communities.

28. Project Implementation (aspects of the project execution that contributed to its success/shortcomings)

A critical component of the success of this project was the direct involvement of local community members in the project activities. This 'bottom up' approach allowed communities to increase their knowledge and understanding of project objectives and activities. It also allowed them to take ownership of project activities and lead their implementation at the ground level.

29. Describe any other lessons learned relevant to the conservation community

n/a

Sustainability / Replication

30. Summarize the success or challenges in ensuring the project will be sustained or replicated

The project components of the CCRMP will be a foundation upon which future natural resource management investments in the XC wetland site can build. The activities also provide a model for integrated community action that can be replicated in the broader and other efforts to restore Siamese crocodile populations in Lao PDR and the region. Currently there is little active management of wetlands in Lao PDR and given their critical importance for species and the ecosystem services they provide it is important to develop best practice management actions that can be adopted by government and communities at other sites.

WCS has learned that several other large projects are in the planning stages for implementation of activities in the XC wetland area. Interventions include strengthening governance, livelihood improvement, infrastructure development, and climate change adaptation. The Food and Agriculture Organization and the government of Lao PDR, with financing from the GEF, are preparing a 5 year project in the two Lao PDR Ramsar sites focusing on understanding climate change (CC) impacts and risks, implementation of CC adaptation measures, and integrating CC adaptation into planning processes. We anticipate that these programs will build on the already successful foundation of management established by the CCRMP.

31. Summarize any unplanned activities that are likely to result in increased sustainability or replicability

No unplanned activities

Safeguards

32. If not listed as a separate Project Component and described above, summarize the implementation of any required action related to social, environmental, or pest management safeguards

WCS was advised that the construction of soft release pens, outlined in the project proposal, triggered the CEPF Safeguard Policy on Environmental Assessment and therefore an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was required. This EIA was drafted and submitted to CEPF prior to the commencement of the project.

During the implementation of the project and following consultations with local government, the VCCC at Than Soum village, and WCS's regional herpetologist Dr. Steve Platt, it was decided that no soft release pen would be required for the releases. Whist the construction of the soft release pen is relatively easily facilitated, the guarding and feeding of crocodiles at the enclosure that is a significant distance from the village residential area places significant burden on the VCCC member. The VCCC members must spend significant time to collect food for the increasingly larger crocodiles and deliver that food to the location. Also at least two members of the VCCC must stay on guard at the enclosure 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for a period of up to 2 months whilst the crocodiles are in the soft release pen. This is to avoid any animals being taken by poachers.

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Additional Comments/Recommendations

33. Use this space to provide any further comments or recommendations in relation to your project or CEPF

No further comments or recommendations.

Additional Funding

34. Provide details of any additional funding that supported this project and any funding secured for the project, organization, or the region, as a result of CEPF investment

Donor	Type of Funding*	Amount	Notes
WCS	Α	USD 15,481	Our organization contributed
			funding to support project
			personnel salaries, construct
			additional rearing facilities,
			provide incentive payments to
			communities for c time spent
			collecting fresh food to
			crocodiles housed at Than
			Soum village, and to support
			project indirect costs.

^{*} Categorize the type of funding as:

- A Project Co-Financing (other donors or your organization contribute to the direct costs of this project)
- B Grantee and Partner Leveraging (other donors contribute to your organization or a partner organization as a direct result of successes with this CEPF funded project)
- C Regional/Portfolio Leveraging (other donors make large investments in a region because of CEPF investment or successes related to this project)

Information Sharing and CEPF Policy

CEPF is committed to transparent operations and to helping civil society groups share experiences, lessons learned, and results. Final project completion reports are made available on our Web site, www.cepf.net, and publicized in our newsletter and other communications.

Please include your full contact details below:

35. Name: Alex McWilliam

36. Organization: Wildlife Conservation Society37. Mailing address: PO Box 6712, Vientiane, Lao PDR

38. Telephone number: +856 21 215400 **39. E-mail address:** amcwilliam@wcs.org