

Captive animal facilities in Bhutan, South Asia

R. Marimuthu¹ and B.A. Daniel²

Zoo Outreach Organisation staff members, B.A. Daniel and R. Marimuthu visited Bhutan in November 2008 at the invitation of Nature Conservation Division, Department of Forests, and Ministry of Agriculture. The objective of the trip was to meet and discuss possible future mutual collaboration with NCD which is now headed by Chief Forestry Officer, Mr. Sonam Wangyel Wang. A meeting was arranged to meet all the officials of



the NCD. A presentation was given At that meeting a presentation was given about overall Zoo Outreach Organisation activities and opportunities for consideration of Bhutan.



During this trip, we were fortunate to visit few places in Thimphu, Dochu La, The Royal Botanical Park, Punaka (western Bhutan), Jigme Dorji National Park and Phuntsholing. There are two captive animal facilities which were visited, the Takin Preserve, Mohitang and Gharial Conservation Programme Centre in Phuntsholing.

Takin Preserve, Motithang, Thimphu

Takin Preserve is located in Motithang, Thimphu.

This facility was started by the



Department of Tourism in 1975 as a rescue centre that has a total area of 8.5 acres. The whole area is enclosed by chain link fence with iron boulders. Last year this was taken up by the Nature Conservation Department and it is fully maintained by NCD and its staff the Livestock Officer Mr. Kuenzang Gyeltshen and assisted by a care taker and a keeper.



The main attraction of this preserve, as its name implies is Takin (*Budorcas taxicolor*). Takin was declared as national animal by the Bhutan Government on 25 November 1985. Six Takins, a few sambars and barking deer are kept in this facility. It is a mixed species enclosure the takin and sambar is sharing the same enclosure. But the barking deer is separated. The public is allowed to visit the preserve however, there is no fee for entry. On an average 60-70 people visit every week.



¹ Education Officer, ² Scientist
Zoo Outreach Organisation



This preserve serves as a temporary rescue centre for the whole country. The rescued animals are treated here and put back to the wild. So far the rescue team have rescued a range of wild animals such as tiger, wild cat, Himalayan black bears, leopard, takin, sambar, barking deer, wild pig, goral and monkey. The future plan of NCD is to extend this facility by adding another 20 acres to the existing facility and make it a nationwide "Wildlife



Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre", a facility to provide required treatment and a space to recuperate these injured animals before releasing them back into the wild.

The Takin is closely related to Bhutanese culture, as can be determined by reading the information board at the centre. This wayside graphic narrates the cultural link between the animal and Bhutanese people. The sign states that "*Takin is a unique animal, closely related with Bhutan religious history and mythology. Lama Drukpa Kuenlay (1455-1529), the divine "Mad Man" is one of Bhutan's favourite saints, known for his outrageous antics. One day his devotees were gathered to witness his magical powers and they asked him to perform a miracle. Before complying, he demanded that he be given a complete cow and goat to eat. Having devoured both, leaving only bones, he stuck the goat's head on the bones of the cow. To everyone's amazement, upon a command uttered by Drukpa Kuenlay, the animal came to life, arose, ran to the meadow and began to graze. The animal of the story came to known as the **dong gyem tsey** (Takin) and can be seen grazing in mountain meadows of the kingdom. Due to its uniqueness, the Takin continues to befuddle*

taxonomists. Unable to relate it to any other animal, they have put it in a category by itself, *Budorcas taxicolor*

Gharial Conservation Programme, Norgay, Phuentsholing

Phuentsholing is located adjacent to the Indian border town Jaigoan of West Bengal. The centre



was established in the year 1976 in a small scale without much development in a small pond. This was further improved during the year 2003 in collaboration with Nature

Conservation Division and WWF Bhutan. The total area of the centre extends to 0.58 acre. It was a Crocodile breeding farm and considering the importance of Gharial conservation, Ministry of Agriculture changed its name to Gharial Conservation Programme Centre.



Gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*)

Initially 4 Gharials were brought from Manas (Bhutan) National Park, Bhutan in the year 1976. In April and May 2004 two male Gharials were brought from Gharial Breeding Centre of Royal Chitwan National Park, Nepal as a State gift. So now the centre has six adult Gharials (3:3).

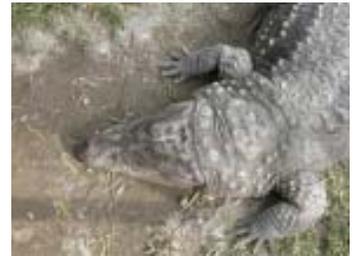
There are two ponds and one of them is new for Gharials which is 13x11x2 Length, width and depth. The gharials laid 38 eggs in 2006 for the first time in three decades, out of which 5 eggs hatched. Out of five four survived for some time and they died





constraint. They laid 200 eggs so far of which 50 hatched and ten (1:9) survived in the last 32 years. Thirty Kg. of beef is feed to 15 crocodiles every 2 days.

In April 2007 Mr. B.P. Dahal from Phuentsholing, a Forest Range Officer who is now the in-charge of the centre took a training at Madras Crocodile Bank in all aspects of captive breeding and care of Gharials. The centre has another permanent caretaker Mr. Ram Bahadur Chhetri and he has been working here for the past 25 years. Then centre provides accommodation for the caretaker and it has incubation chamber. On an average about 400-500 US\$ are spent per month to feed the Gharials and the marsh crocodiles. This does not include caretaker's salary.



later on. In 2008, they again laid 35 eggs and 4 of them hatched. At that time of our visit, we saw four month old hatchlings. Later, we heard from the NCD official that one of them died on soon after, due to diarrhoea. The centre has separate day and night ponds for the hatchlings which is well maintained. Twelve kg of fish are fed to 6 Gharials every alternate day.



Mugger Crocodile (*Crocodylus palustris*)

There are 15 marsh crocodiles (3:12) in different ponds. In 1976, five (2:3) marsh crocodiles were brought from Bhutan Manas. They bred well in the beginning but subsequent from 2004 onwards breeding has been suspended due to space

There is no record about visitor number however 70-80 people visit every week. According to the caretaker the centre attracts about 800 people during the month of December and this will include both Bhutanese and Indian nationals. There is no fee for entry.



photos by B.A. Daniel