Many New Herps Found in the Past Decade.

Greater Mekong region has brought many new herps in the past decade.

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According to First Contact in the Greater Mekong, a report launched by the WWF, 1068 species were discovered or newly identified by science in the Greater Mekong Region of Southeast Asia between 1997 and 2007 – which averages two new species a week.

While most species were discovered in the largely unexplored jungles and wetlands, some were first found in surprising places. The Siamese Peninsula pit viper was found slithering through the rafters of a restaurant in Khao Yai National Park in Thailand.

“This report cements the Greater Mekong’s reputation as a biological treasure trove -- one of the world’s most important storehouses of rare and exotic species,” said Dekila Chungyalpa, Director of the WWF-US Greater Mekong Program. “Scientists keep peeling back the layers and uncovering more and more wildlife wonders.”

The findings, highlighted in this report, include 519 plants, 279 fish, 88 frogs, 88 spiders, 46 lizards, 22 snakes, 15 mammals, 4 birds, 4 turtles, 2 salamanders and a toad. The region comprises the six countries through which the Mekong River flows including Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and the southern Chinese province of Yunnan. It is estimated thousands of new invertebrate species were also discovered during this period, further highlighting the region’s immense biodiversity.

“This region is like what I read about as a child in the stories of Charles Darwin,” said Dr. Thomas Ziegler, Curator at the Cologne Zoo. “It is a great feeling being in an unexplored area and to document its biodiversity for the first time…both enigmatic and beautiful,” he said.

The report stresses that economic development and environmental protection must go hand-in-hand to provide for livelihoods and alleviate poverty, but also to ensure the survival of the Greater Mekong's astonishing array of species and natural habitats.

“This poorly understood biodiversity is facing unprecedented pressure…for scientists, this means that almost every field survey yields new diversity, but documenting it is a race against time,” said Raoul Bain, Biodiversity Specialist from the American Museum of Natural History.

The report’s authors recommend a formal, cross-border agreement between the governments of the Greater Mekong to address the threats to biodiversity in the region.

The WWF network is working throughout the Greater Mekong region to promote this agreement and address the threats to biodiversity from its base in Vientiane, Laos. Stuart Chapman, who heads the WWF network’s Greater Mekong Programme, says that protecting habitat while partnering with governments, businesses and local communities to address threats from development and agriculture is essential.

“Who knows what else is out there waiting to be discovered, but what is clear is that there is plenty more where this came from,” Chapman said. “The scientific world is only just realizing what people here have known for centuries.”