

Overview of reintroduction exercises in South and East Asia

Sanjay Molur and Sally Walker

As chairs of the recently established (December 2002) regional branch of the Reintroduction Specialist Group for South and East Asia, the following objectives have been identified by us for the region.

Identify re-introduction projects in the region: There have been many genuine reintroduction attempts in the region, and one of the first tasks has been to try and compile all of them along with their complete *modus operandi*.

Network re-introduction practitioners: All participants of reintroduction activities in South and East Asia will be identified and a database will be maintained.

Compile all releases till date: A number of agencies have released animals in the wild in the name of reintroduction. Having a list of such releases will be of use to evaluate them as per the guidelines of reintroduction and advise accordingly.

Segregate scientific/well planned and unscientific releases: Analysis of all projects under the above headings will help in drawing up position statements and action plans for evaluating future projects on the basis of the RSG guidelines.

Publish newsletter: A separate, web-based newsletter for the region will be published as frequently as possible to encourage projects to be highlighted as well as evaluate projects of their utility.

Conduct training/meetings: The concept of reintroduction is not a very well understood subject and we arrange training at any possible opportunity to people at various levels who are involved in any stage(s) of reintroductions. The annual meetings we have started are in themselves training. We also include reintroduction in our frequent field techniques training courses. Until date we have conducted a meeting with training component in Sri Lanka and another to be in Pakistan, 29-30 November 04. We had included reintroduction in our February 04 training on field techniques for non-volant small mammals in Coimbatore, and will also do in the February 05 Bangladesh training for both volant and non-volant small mammals.

Typical exercises undertaken in the name of Reintroduction

The term reintroduction is often confused with the glamour it carries rather than the scientific method one has to follow to make it successful and potentially viable. In compiling the various projects within India, as a starting point, we came across a overwhelmingly large proportion of releases of animals and plants which were referred to as reintroduction but which did not meet any of the criteria for same. These are continuing at an alarming rate. Here we list a few instances of releases disguised as reintroductions for the following reasons:

Name and fame: This is a very common reason for planning a reintroduction. Many individuals have in the past (and some even now) have released animals with the intention of making a name and becoming famous within their capacities as officers in tenure or to prove a successful role in office. Some species that have suffered such release are lions and gibbons, among others. Such efforts are often

characterised by poor research, no planning, short executive time and no follow up monitoring.

Excess stock release: Many zoos, universities and forest department deer parks in India have released excess stock of deer into nearby forests due to lack of space in the enclosures. Right reintroductions are planned from stage one and are never considered as part of excess stock release due to unplanned breeding of animals in captivity. Spotted deer is one the most common species released this way. Failures are due to: lack of breeding plans and space, diseased animals, and insufficient preparation

Animal welfare: A recent phenomenon in the country is to release laboratory animals into the wild without any scientific evaluation, by animal welfare organisations and NGOs. These are hazardous for both released animals and their conspecifics and others in the wild. Lack of scientific application, diseased and experimental animals, released in prime habitats, no monitoring are some typical scenarios.

Man-animal conflicts: This is a typical example of shifting problems by shifting problem-animals from one place to another. This is being done with the support of various governments and courts who do not understand the implications. Even more frightening are those who do understand the implications but are satisfied to move the problem away from their area. Primates and leopards are some examples. NGOs, courts, civic bodies, forest departments, zoos and animal welfare activists become involved due to political pressure.

Afforestation: Some plants are released or planted without sufficient planning or study to increase green cover and to convert wastelands in the name of ecological restorations. Examples are Prosopis, Acacia, Eucalyptus, Wattle, Pine, etc. The problems include poor knowledge & application, lack of science, political motivation, emphasis on "easy" instead of appropriate species, etc.

Well meaning: Reintroductions in the past have been conducted for a variety of good reasons like saving species from extinction (gharial, mugger), to clean up rivers (freshwater turtles), etc. These exercises (also the recently conducted Red Panda release) conducted by forest departments, zoos, government, institutes, individuals and NGOs lack the overall needs of a successful reintroduction programme. Although temporarily satisfying the projects have setbacks due to the following reasons: need of the hour releases, not well financed, lack of long-term planning, monitoring & management, man-animal conflicts, etc.

Even though these examples are all from India, there are equally many or more from South East Asia, and for the same reasons.

Some well-planned reintroductions in the region include the following: *Rana taipehensis* frog in Taipei (in the planning stage), Gharial in India (done well to save the species, but not followed up, therefore partially successful and if nothing is done about it in future, the exercise will be a complete failure as the species might become extinct due to threats and lack of habitat), Romer's Tree Frog in Hong Kong, primates in Vietnam, Orangutans in Indonesia, etc.