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Communication: Bio-monitoring of crocodiles in the community-based natural reserve management in the Valley of Sitatunga in southern Benin

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Abstract

The natural reserve of the Valley of Sitatunga is one of the last sanctuaries of the dwarf crocodile (*Osteoleamus tetraspis*) and the West African crocodile (*Crocodylus suchus*) in southern Benin. This study aims at monitoring crocodile populations and mapping crocodile species distribution in the Valley of Sitatunga. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, capture-mark-recapture of crocodiles. Crocodiles were tagged using radio transmitters. Radio-tracking of crocodiles was made using VHF receiver. Crocodile distribution map is drawn to identify the habitats of the two species. Eighty-six crocodiles were caught and seventy-five among which 75 were released in the reserve (73 *O. tetraspis* and 2 *C. suchus*). Twelve *O. tetraspis* were tagged with radio transmitters. *O. tetraspis* are found in the swampy areas characterized by a water column that varies between 1 m to 3 m and characterized by dense vegetation dominated by *Lasiomorpha senegalensis* and *Diplazium samenthii*. *C. suchus* prefers the main bed of the river Sô characterized by low vegetation of *Eichcornia crassipes* and a water column that varies from 2 to 5 m. The low number of *C. suchus* explains their rarity in the reserve and the vulnerability of their population. The sex ratio of dwarf crocodiles varies from 0.47 to 0.53 in favor of females. The *O. tetraspis* captured consist of 30,12 % newborn, 32,53 % juveniles, sub-adults 32,53 % and 4.82 % adults. Improving data collection methods and intensifying awareness campaigns would contribute to for sustainable crocodile conservation in the community-based natural reserve management in the Valley of Sitatunga in southern Benin.

Keys words: crocodile, capture-mark-recapture, distribution, conservation, Benin