

U.S. Expert Studies Gharial Deaths

By GIRIRAJ AGARWAL

This winter, villagers at the National Chambal Sanctuary near Etawah in Uttar Pradesh were stumped by the large-scale deaths of gharials in the Chambal River. The World Wide Fund for Nature-India estimates that more than 100 gharials died in a period of two and a half months since December. Was it because of climate change? An infectious disease?

Brian Stacy, a veterinary pathologist from the University of Florida, flew to India to join international and local experts to find out what killed the reptiles. The Switzerland-based World Conservation Union has moved gharials (*Gavialis gangeticus*) from endangered to critically endangered status. Two years ago, it says, fewer than 235 adult gharials swam in the rivers, mostly in India and Nepal, snapping up small fish with a swiping motion of their long snouts.

Stacy, who first came to India in 1998-99 as a student at the Madras Crocodile Bank in Chennai, Tamil Nadu joined the

other experts on a 40-kilometer tour of the Chambal River, examining live and dead gharials. They soon found one cause of death: the toxic waters at the confluence of the Chambal and the Yamuna.

"We found that the gharials had evidence of kidney failure," says Stacy. "Various findings suggested a toxin is involved. Toxicological studies are ongoing."

But then, why were only gharials dying? And only large ones, 1.6 to 4.1 meters long? "One theory is the fish they are eating are the source of toxins. But this needs to be investigated," says Stacy.

The specialists met top officials, including the chief ministers, of the Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh governments and will prepare a report with suggestions on how to save the remaining gharials.

"The Yamuna did not get polluted in a day. It's a long-term problem and the solution is going to be equally long term," says Stacy. "Such a catastrophe may help stimulate action."

From right: Brian Stacy, wildlife experts Shailendra Singh, Dhruvajyoti Basu and Annirudha Belsare examine a dead gharial on the banks of the Chambal River near Etawah in Uttar Pradesh.

For more information:

The World Wide Fund for Nature-India

<http://www.wwfIndia.org/>

