Conservationists have taken a massive stride toward saving the world's most endangered crocodile from extinction.

In a major reintroduction last week, they released 50 captive-bred Philippine crocodiles into the wild. Prior to the release, hunting, habitat loss and overfishing had reduced the number of wild Philippine crocodiles to fewer than 100 mature animals. The newly-released crocodiles should be ready to breed in just a few years, the conservationists hope.

Despite being a relatively small crocodile species that poses no threat to humans unless provoked, the Philippines crocodile has been pushed to the brink of extinction. After World War II, crocodile populations in the Philippines became severely depleted by commercial hunters taking the animals for leather. Across the densely populated country, marshes, swamps and creeks were converted to rice fields, removing the crocodile's natural habitat. Overfishing, fishing with dynamite and electricity and the use of pesticides all further reduced the reptile's numbers.

Today, just 100 mature wild Philippine crocodile (Crocodylus mindorensis) survive, restricted to the northern Luzon and southwest Mindanao islands.

Since 1987, Philippine crocodiles have been bred in captivity at the Palawan Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Center of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources on Palawan. Today, the Center is home to around 800 captive crocodiles. But there has been a problem reintroducing the crocodiles back into the wild.

"Philippine crocodiles in captivity are quite aggressive towards each other," says conservationist Jan van der Ploeg of Leiden University in The Netherlands and the Mabuwaya Foundation, a small non-
profit organisation set up in Isabela Province to help save the crocodile. "But the problem with the captive breeding and reintroduction project was not so much the crocodiles but the people. A lot of attention went to the breeding, and too little efforts were made to address the threats, disseminate information and mobilise local support for crocodile conservation," he says.
So van der Ploeg and colleague Merlijn van Weerd set up a community-based Philippine crocodile conservation project in the northern Sierra Madre on the island of Luzon. There they laid the groundwork for last week's reintroduction, gaining the support of the local government and people to release the captive-bred crocodiles.
On 31 July, their project culminated in the release of 50 juvenile crocodiles, each about 1.2 long, into Dicatian Lake in the municipality of Divisacan.
Ten have been fitted with radio transmitters.

"Our team will closely monitor the released crocodiles in the coming months. We hope to collect information that can be used for future releases of Philippine crocodiles," says van der Ploeg. Dicatian Lake is situated in the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park (NSMNP), the largest and biologically the most diverse protected area of the Philippines. The NSMNP now protects the largest single Philippine crocodile population in the wild. "The release of 50 Philippine crocodiles in Dicatian Lake is a major step towards a recovery of the wild population and the future survival of this species," says van der Ploeg. "In a few years the captive-bred crocodiles in Dicatian will be sexually mature. Then we will know whether the release has been a success."
"The team is thrilled," he continues. "This is the crown on our work. We have worked more than eight years in Sierra Madre, and this is a major milestone."
However, the reintroduction almost didn't happen.

"It was a complex operation," van der Ploeg explains. "The crocodiles went by plane from Puerto Princesa to Manila. Then a 12 hour long bus ride to Cauayan in Isabela Province. The provincial governor granted us permission to use the helicopters of the armed forces to transport the 50 animals from Cauayan to Divilacan in the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park."

"We almost had to cancel the release because of the bad weather, but the pilots somehow managed to fly in."

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