

Mongabay Series: [Global Forest Reporting Network](#)

Laos could be the 'most important' home for the elusive Owston's civet

7th March 2016 / **Shreya Dasgupta**

Scientists say that the Owston's civet has been locally extirpated across most of its historical range, and Xe Sap National Protected Area - and other large tracts of wet evergreen forest in easternmost Lao PDR - could possibly be the last best hope for the species.

- *From December 2012 to December 2013, biologists set up 39 camera traps in Xe Sap National Protected Area (NPA) located in southeastern Laos.*
- *Of all animals captured on photographs, Owston's civet was the most frequently recorded carnivore, making it the first live records of these animals from South Lao PDR, according to study.*
- *The little-known Owston's civet, however, has been wiped out from most of its historical range, scientists say, mainly due to poaching.*

In the remote parts of southeastern Laos PDR, biologists have discovered a "surprisingly" high number of the little-known Owston's civets. These civets, known only from Vietnam, Laos and a small part of southern China, are listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN Red List.

From December 2012 to December 2013, a team of researchers set up 39 camera traps in Xe Sap National Protected Area (NPA) located in southeastern Laos. Of all animals captured on photographs, Owston's civet was the most frequently recorded carnivore, making it the first live records of these animals from South Lao PDR, the authors write in a recent paper published in [Small Carnivore Conservation](#).

Scientists say that Xe Sap NPA — and other large tracts of wet evergreen forest in easternmost Lao PDR — could possibly be the most important known areas for the species.



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The Owston's civet has been locally wiped out from most of its historical range, scientists say. Photo credit WWF-CarBi

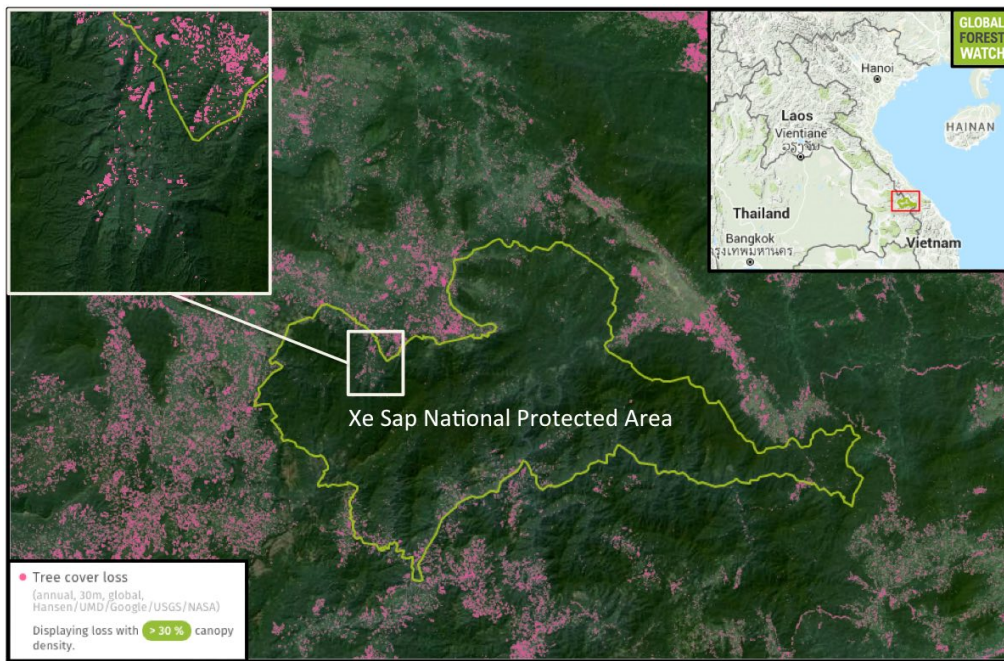
This is because the Owston's civet has most likely been locally wiped out from most of its historical range, co-author Andrew Tilker, a conservation scientist of Global Wildlife Conservation in Austin, Texas, and affiliated to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), told Mongabay.

"It appears to be rare in much of its former range, a victim of the relentless poaching, and to a lesser extent habitat destruction, that occur in the region," Tilker added. "It's likely that many camera-trapping efforts in the area haven't recorded the species because it has been locally extirpated."

For example, when WWF recently surveyed the Hue and Quang Nam Saola Nature Reserves in Vietnam — historically in the range of the Owston's civet — they failed to detect a single individual of this species, Tilker said. So it seems plausible that the species is gone from these regions, he [added](#).

The Owston's civet spends most of its time on the ground. And this makes it vulnerable to poaching, researchers say. In fact, snaring (trapping animals using a small trapping device with a noose) is widespread throughout the range of the civet, the team adds.

"The magnitude of snaring is difficult to overstate: in some protected areas in Vietnam and Laos there are hundreds of snares per square kilometer across a vast geographic scale," Tilker said. "This level of snaring has decimated ground-dwelling wildlife populations across the region, especially in more densely-populated Vietnam. Unfortunately, Owston's civet is believed to be more terrestrial (surface dwelling) than other civet species, and therefore may be more heavily impacted by snaring. Although habitat loss and degradation have certainly had a negative impact on Owston's civet, these threats are likely a distant second to snaring."



Xe Sap National Protected Area (PA) has been somewhat immune from the deforestation activities surrounding it. Still, the PA lost nearly 1,500 hectares of tree cover loss from 2001 through 2014. Data indicate deforestation may be on the upswing, with tree cover loss rates climbing between 2009 and 2014. Owston's civets were found by camera traps in the western portion of Xe Sap, which has seen an increase in deforestation around its edges and into its valleys.

Xe Sap NPA, however, could still be supporting a "healthy" population of the Owston's civets, possibly because of lower hunting pressure in the park, the study notes.

For instance, WWF's camera trap surveys have detected other species that are vulnerable to hunting in Xe Sap NPA, such as hog badger (*Arctonyx collaris*) and gaur (*Bos gaurus*), but not in the Saola Nature Reserves in Vietnam.

"This indicates that hunting levels are likely much less intense in western Xe Sap NPA," Tilker said.

The actual number of Owston's civet in the region is still unknown, though. The species is largely under-studied, and even rough estimates are difficult, according to Tilker.

Like the Annamite striped rabbit (*Nesolagus timminsi*), Saola (*Pseudoryx nghethinhensis*) and the large-antlered muntjac (*Muntiacus vuquangensis*), the Owston's civet is found only in the Annamites — a mountain range spanning across Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.

"The fight to protect Owston's civet is therefore part of a larger effort to protect the irreplaceable biodiversity of the Annamites," Tilker said. "The relevant question now from a conservation perspective, is which areas still support populations of this threatened mammal. To protect remaining populations of Owston's civet, we need both further research on the species and heightened protection efforts. Concerted efforts to find remaining populations are a top priority. However, ultimately the best way to protect this species in situ is by significantly reducing hunting levels."

Citation:

- Gray TNE, Thongsamouth K & Tilker A (2015) [Recent camera-trap records of Owston's Civet *Chrotogale owstoni* and other small carnivores from Xe Sap National Protected Area, southern Lao PDR](#). *Small Carnivore Conservation*, Vol. 51: 29–33.