

First insight into the ecology of an elusive and threatened rabbit

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Credit: Leibniz-IZW / WWF-Vietnam CarBi Project / Hue Saola Nature Reserve

The Annamite mountains of Vietnam and Lao PDR (Laos) harbour exceptional species richness and endemism, but its wildlife is under threat from widespread and intensive poaching. The region is home to the Annamite striped rabbit (*Nesolagus timminsi*), a little-known lagomorph only discovered by science in 1995. A new study carried out by the Leibniz Institute for Zoo- and Wildlife Research (Leibniz-IZW) in collaboration with WWF-Vietnam, WWF-Laos, and the Central Institute for Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences (CRES) of the Vietnam National University, provides the first detailed information about the species ecology. The study is published in the international journal *Oryx*.

The researchers used camera-trapping to study the Annamite striped rabbit in five areas of Vietnam and Laos. Camera traps placed across the landscape showed that although the rabbit occurs in all areas, the species was nowhere common, and in one protected area it appears to be approaching local extinction. These results show that the intensive poaching in Vietnam and Laos, accomplished by setting wire snares, has clearly impacted striped rabbit populations. However, the fact that it still occurs at all in a region that has experienced such intensive snaring provides hope that, with effective anti-poaching efforts, these populations could recover.

"It is exciting to provide the first insight into such an elusive species," says Andrew Tilker, Ph.D. student at Leibniz-IZW and an associate conservation scientist at Global Wildlife Conservation. "Of course, this information is interesting from a scientific perspective, but more importantly it can help inform evidence-driven conservation initiatives. Our results provide exact locations for targeted snare removal efforts. We also establish the first conservation baseline for the species, which can be used to monitor population trends."

Dr. Ben Rawson, WWF-Vietnam's Conservation and Program Development Director, hopes that intensive efforts to halt snaring will result in rebounds in the Annamite striped rabbit populations. "With continued snare removal efforts in the Saola Nature Reserves led by WWF and our local partners, we are confident that this remarkable species can thrive."

One of the most significant findings of this study is that the Annamite striped rabbit occurs in an unprotected forest area in Laos, near a remote village called Ban Palé. The presence of the rabbit in the Palé area – along with other rare and threatened species – further supports ongoing initiatives to grant this area official protected status. The Palé area is under imminent threat from illegal hunting, logging, and gold-mining operations.

Francois Guegan, conservation director for WWF-Laos, notes: "We must act now to stop these threats and to provide effective protection to Palé. We have to work together, and we have to act fast. Otherwise we will lose the Annamite striped rabbit and other conservation-priority species from this site."

"The Annamite striped rabbit is part of what makes the Annamites unique," says co-author Associate Professor Minh Le from Vietnam National University. "This study shows how fragile the species' survival is, even in protected areas." An Nguyen, Field Coordinator for the Leibniz-IZW project, agrees. "The species is hanging on – but for how much longer? We need to improve law enforcement, stop snaring, and reduce the demand for bush-meat. One organization alone cannot do this. We need to work together – if the Annamite striped rabbit is to survive."