



Project Beetle diversity in Laos

Laos

Having a surface area comparable to Great Britain (236'000 km²), Laos currently counts only slightly more than 6 million inhabitants. The population density is not more than about 19 inh./ km², but with an uneven distribution across the country, going down to less than 8 inh./ km² in rural areas. Pristine nature can still be found in many areas, although population pressure is steadily increasing in recent years. In order to investigate the country's original biodiversity, surveys are urgently needed, before many of the species have disappeared forever.

Beetle fauna of Laos

Scientific knowledge on the Laotian fauna is still very poor today. Although a few French colonial officials were able to obtain insect material already in the late 19th century, the first thorough collecting efforts were done by a missionary, René Vitalis de Salvaza, between 1910 and 1920. He was able to collect at various localities, mainly along the Mekong River, whereas most of the country remained inaccessible to him. The French collector Miéville was able to obtain some few specimens from the mountain province of Xieng Khouang, which are now in Paris. More comprehensive surveys focussing on Cerambycidae were conducted by Rondon in the 1950ies. After this time, the borders of Laos were closed for foreigners, including scientists. As they opened again in the 1990ies, several Czech colleagues took the opportunity to gain a bit more entomological knowledge. Also some other colleagues have been collecting: Harald Schillhammer (Natural History Museum of Vienna) in 1996; Otto Merkl and Gabor Csorba (Museum Budapest) in 1998, Carolus Holzschuh (private collector) and Peter Jaeger (Senckenberg Museum, Frankfurt). Other scientists followed.

The project

The Natural History Museum of Basel has already been able to conduct expeditions to Laos in the years 2003, 2004, 2007. The results were so encouraging that a more extensive five-year survey project was created, in order to increase the knowledge on Laotian beetles at a larger scale.

We envisaged the following steps to attain our goals:

- Further expeditions, already conducted in 2009, 2010, 2011 and planned for 2013
- A symposium about the insect fauna of Laos, to be held in Basel (Autumn 2013)
- An exhibition in Laos (2013)
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- A monograph containing scientific contributions to the beetle fauna of Laos, issued as special volumes of our journal "Entomologica Basiliensia et Collectionis Frey"
- Training of Laotian students in entomological field methods and taxonomy

In this framework, we were also did some structural changes within the Natural History Museum of Basel. As our new collection manager specialised on the curation of the Laos material, we employed Michael Geiser. He will be doing his dissertation in collaboration between our museum and the University of Basel. Apart from his taxonomic revision of the family Prionoceridae in Indochina, he will also be working on the biogeography of Laos.

Since 2003, we were able to obtain already over 150'000 beetle specimens of nearly all families occurring in Laos. Several preparators are constantly working on the processing of additional specimens. We are anxious to collect material from as many different areas of Laos as possible, to gain also a good faunistic overview of the fauna. Few areas are still inaccessible due to political troubles.

Our approach

The results of our surveys will be published in special volumes of our museum's journal. We are particularly looking for revisions of species groups, genera etc. occurring in Laos, or checklists the known Laotian species within a family, as well as descriptions of new species standing in a clear context, including keys for identification. If you are interested in working on a particular group, we are delighted to get in contact with you.

Looking forward for a good cooperation
Cordially,

Michel Brancucci
Head of the project