

## NATIONAL

# Conservationists Struggle to Watch Over Protected Lands

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One kilogram of the Indochina Tiger's bones sells for more than the average annual salary in Cambodia. An entire body will fetch ten times that amount.

The tiger's sin is that it has become rare, driving up prices paid by Chinese herbalists and big game hunters who prize the pelt, teeth and penis of the largest cat living in Southeast Asia.

The loss of their habitat to Cambodian farmers who clear cut the jungle has only intensified pressures that are driving tigers, Banteng and Asian elephants in Cambodia to extinction.

This week, as world leaders meet in Johannesburg, South Africa, for the second week of the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development, one of Cambodia's endangered animals likely will be caught, killed and sold.

Poachers and others hunt many of the 27 animal species in Cambodia considered threatened or endangered worldwide, according to a report prepared by a consultant last year for the government.

And though new protected areas were created in Mondul Kiri, Koh Kong and Preah Vihear provinces in recent months to combat the hunting and poaching that has decimated Cambodia's wildlife, few of them have management plans or rangers to prevent poachers from carrying out their trade.

Conservationists say that's changing, but slowly. "This is just a start," said Hunter Weiler, international adviser with the Cat Action Treasury. "The real challenge will be to go out there now and protect these areas."

A royal decree in 1993 established 23 protected areas throughout Cambodia and gave the Ministry of Environment the responsibility of running them. Three new areas were established this year and put under the control of the Ministry of Agri-

culture, Forestry and Fisheries.

The protected areas cover 3.3 million hectares, or one-sixth of Cambodia's 18.1 million hectares.

To look at a map of the 26 protected forests, a person could be excused for thinking that large swaths of Cambodia—and the diverse plants and animals they preserve—are in good hands.

The reality is different: Some of the "protected" areas are logged out; others are home to large villages with thousands of people farming and clear cutting the land; still others are protected in name only, with an invisible line in the jungle marking the border and stopping no one from wandering in to poach whatever animals he can find.

As it was originally laid out, the entire 5,000 hectares of Kep "Natural Park" for example has been heavily modified or transformed by construction of homes. One fifth of Ream Natural Park is considered "heavily modified," based on 1983 satellite data, as is half of the Roniem Daun Sam wildlife sanctuary.

On average, one-fifth of the protected areas in Cambodia are disrupted by civilization in some way. And change continues quickly as logging roads are laid in virgin jungle.

"The widespread presence of logging concessions throughout the country undoubtedly has had, and does have, many serious negative effects on some mammal species," reads Cambodia's Biodiversity Status Report/2001 prepared by consultant Judy Smith for the UN Development Program, Food and Agricultural Organization and the Cambodian Ministry of Environment.

"Not only do [logging roads] open access to large areas, they also allow the transport of a larger mass of wildlife, thus facilitating more intensive hunting regimes."

Wildlife rangers working with the community ranger program administered by the Cat Action Treasury, for example, reported

12 tigers killed in the last two years in Koh Kong province. Seven tigers were killed in Preah Vihear province in the same time frame, and 18 Banteng and three tigers were killed in Mondul Kiri province.

The actual numbers of animals killed could be much higher, as these reports were based on eyewitness accounts and interviews with villagers.

And yet there's little to stop the poaching. The government has just 625 rangers—75 of them hired last year—to enforce laws in protected areas. That leaves about one ranger per 5,400 hectares of protected land.

A variety of international conservation groups now pay police and their own forest rangers to hunt poachers and illegal loggers, adding strength to Cambodia's enforcement of protected areas.

But more thorough management of the park system is needed, as noted by the IUCN, the World Conservation Union, in their national biodiversity prospectus of 1997.

"The current fast rate of degradation of Cambodia's environmental inheritance makes urgent a need for a well designed and managed national protected areas system," read the report prepared by David Ashwell in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment.

There's some reason for hope.

Cambodia's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, prepared by the Ministry of Environment and signed by Prime Minister Hun Sen in May, lays out a plan to preserve biodiversity in accordance with international measures set out by the Convention on Biological Diversity, which Cambodia signed eight years ago.

And in some of the protected areas, management plans are firming up. Conservation International is developing a management plan for the lush Cardamom mountain range, with a

trust fund to pay for additional rangers into the future.

The newly designated 471,174-hectare Mondul Kiri Protected Forest may see real protection thanks to an \$827,000 grant from the International Tropical Timber Organization, though the money has not yet been awarded.

But more protected areas remain in Cambodia and management muscle is slow in coming. Even the efforts by the government to protect pristine areas like the Cardamom Mountain Range are beset with development pressures that will require close management.

The subdecree establishing the Cardamom Mountain range a "protected" area includes language on developing the natural resources of the lush mountains, an apparent contradiction to the idea of preservation and conservation. Yet conservation has long been important here. Cambodia was the first nation in Southeast Asia to create a national park when in 1925 the Angkor Temple complex was declared a protected area.

There were obvious reasons to protect the park and its 1,000-year-old temples.

Today the park draws thousands of people every year and funnels a cash stream into government coffers. Conservationists say the difficult part of creating a national park system is convincing local populations that it's more valuable to save a region's biodiversity than to hunt the last tiger living in the area and sell it off for \$500 to \$2,500.

"It's impossible to watch every tree and every animal," said Dale Withington, Cambodia country director for the World Wildlife Fund.

"If sufficient benefits are being developed by local communities then they would have more incentive to protect it and use it sustainably. Enforcement is important, but you also have to have voluntary compliance as well."