Staking a Claim in Cambodia's Highlands

Ratanakiri Highlanders make handicrafts using forest products. (Photo courtesy of Yeak Lom Lake Management Committee)

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Long after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, rebels lurked in the jungles of Ratanakiri, a province in northeast Cambodia. Outsiders stayed away from the forest, which meant that the forest remained intact. But in the early 1990s, the situation changed. The rebels gradually gave up their arms — and the logging trucks started to arrive.

They came by the hundreds, rumbling up and down the country's main highway — a narrow red dirt road — taking loads of lumber across the border to Viet Nam. Settlers from other parts of Cambodia also poured into Ratanakiri, and investors looking to grow cash crops bought up huge tracts of land. Jungle gave way to plantations and fields, and forest resources began to disappear.

CBNRM project

This has created serious problems — particularly for indigenous people, who rely on the forest for their livelihood. Although most of Cambodia's population is Khmer, in Ratanakiri province almost three-quarters of the population belongs to an ethnic minority. The province's six ethnic minorities are collectively known as Highlanders. In the traditionally hierarchical society of Cambodia, these people had never spoken up for their rights — until they became involved in a community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) project.

The project, which began in 1996, was initiated by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). In 1997, the Centre combined forces with the Cambodia Area Rehabilitation and Regeneration Project (CARERE), a rural development project funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Relying on the forest

Many Highlanders rely exclusively on the forest to survive. As Seu Chelone, a woman who lives in Som Thom Commune, explains: "We need firewood, vegetables, fruit, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and we can have these things from the forest. We see the forest as our market."
In the project, Highlanders from three communes (Som Thom, Yeak Lom, and Ochum) began working with Cambodian researchers to map forest resources, and document indigenous knowledge of the forest. A core team of community members received technical training in mapping skills and participatory action research techniques. This team then trained villagers, showing them how to record observations and collect data in the field. Villagers created land use maps, sketching boundaries and documenting land uses. Their findings were verified by the research team, which used global positioning systems (GPS) to double-check that privately owned land had not been included inadvertently.

**Traditional resource management**

"We wondered if they went and cut the forest just anywhere," says Nehm Sovanna, the national team leader for the Ratanakiri project. "But we found there is a very clear mechanism for using their natural resources and protecting them. They have specific areas for swidden agriculture where they rotate crops. In swidden agriculture, you cut the forest, you burn it, you cultivate it, and then you move and let the forest grow back for 10 to 20 years. There is also the wildlife forest, watershed forest, and spirit [or sacred] forest."

The tall trees of the spirit forests are protected by Highlanders: to cut them is to invite disaster, according to traditional beliefs."If you cut down a tree from the spirit forest, something bad will happen," explains a villager. "For example, maybe a tiger might eat you."

**Spirit forests**

When researchers examined one of the spirit forests, they realized this area would not regenerate if it was cut. The soil was not fertile enough and the area was too exposed to wind and rain. "We found out that, yes, it is right: you really cannot cut the spirit forest," says Mr Sovanna.

This finding bolstered the Highlanders' confidence in their traditional mechanisms for managing forest resources, which had broken down as loggers, investors, and settlers moved to Ratanakiri. Tempted by offers of cash, some Highlanders were leading loggers to the best trees or selling their land — their only resource — to speculators. In addition, outsiders have started farming land the Highlanders had left to fallow.

**Documenting boundaries**

To help gain recognition for traditional management systems, part of the project focused on documenting boundaries of traditional resource areas. Villagers also agreed on rules and regulations for community forest management. They set fines for anyone in the village who cuts trees — or helps others to do so. Researchers and villagers also began investigating ways to increase agricultural production.

In 1996, however, the cash-strapped Government of Cambodia had granted a palm oil company a concession of 20,000 hectares — right in the middle of the Highlanders' land. Local people were not consulted. By 1998, over the objections of the community, intensive logging was taking place in the commune — and the spirit forests were not to be spared.

**Logging confrontations**

John Ashish, a local researcher with the project, describes a confrontation between a villager and a logger: "One villager had chosen a tree from the forest and marked it to claim it. He was going to use this tree to build his house. When the loggers came in, he stood by his tree and tried to stop
them from cutting it. He said, 'This is my tree. I marked it to build my house.' The logger replied: 'We don't want to hear from you. You are nothing.' The tree was cut down."

Yet the villagers were mobilized by the project — and they had research results to make their case. They had also established a relationship with the provincial government since the project was implemented in close cooperation with the Department of the Environment.

**Provincial workshop**

At a provincial workshop in 1999, villagers explained their land use map and illustrated how they depended on the forest. Governor Kham Kheun was impressed: "The government does not have a clear land use plan. In Ratanakiri, we can see that the villagers have made the kind of plan we need, based on a classification of the types of soil in the forest."

"We want to help the community protect its natural resources," he adds. Governor Kheun, who grew up in Ratanakiri, went to bat for the Highlanders with the national government. In July 2000, the palm oil concession was drastically reduced — to 5,000 hectares. At the same time, the Governor also endorsed Som Thom community forestry, effectively signing the forest to the community for management.

**New land law**

The provincial government now sees the CBNRM project as a model and wants to extend it into other areas. The Department of the Environment has already received several requests from other communities to participate. Moreover, as a result of the project, both OXFAM and the UNDP hired lawyers who worked with the project participants to help draft a new land law that reflects issues affecting Highlanders, such as indigenous people's communal rights. A Cambodian helped to lobby the case for Highlanders at a ministerial level, and with other non-governmental and international organizations. The bill was adopted by the Council of Ministers, and is now before the National Assembly. If it is approved, indigenous communities will have the legal right to possess and use public land to support their traditional livelihood practices.

"Villagers are changing their way of thinking," says Sal Yutch, a village development chief. "We can see that the only way to safeguard our resources is to work together as a community."

*Lisa Waldick, a writer with IDRC in Ottawa, recently visited the Ratanakiri CBNRM project in Cambodia.*

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