

MARCH 2011

## OVERVIEW

### IIED Sustainable Markets Group

**Project name:**

Scaling-up sustainable conservation through ecotourism and community-based monitoring

**Project leader:**

Muyeye Chambwera

**Time frame:**

2005–2011

**Cost:**

£321,937

**Objective:**

To build the capacity of government and local communities to manage globally significant biodiversity and establish sustainable wildlife tourism in the Eastern Plains Landscape of northeast Cambodia.

## PROJECT SUMMARY

The dry forests of Cambodia's eastern plains harbour a wealth of biodiversity and support traditional local livelihoods. Partnering with WWF Cambodia, we helped introduce collaborative management of these forests by the government and adjacent communities, first in a pilot area and then more widely. Dialogue between officials and local people led to the division of protected forests into several management categories, including zones where communities can sustainably harvest resources and implement forest-based enterprises such as wild honey collection and tourism. Communities and government jointly patrol forests and monitor wildlife, while 'eco clubs' set up by the project are promoting environmental management in schools and surrounding communities.

## THEORY OF CHANGE

The traditional approach of conserving biological resources through protected areas often creates tension between government and communities. Attempts by local people to derive livelihoods from the resources are labelled illegal, while their contribution to resource management is ignored. With limited funds and weak governance, protected-area management systems become ineffective and resources are

# Community-based forest management

Government and communities in Cambodia have partnered up to protect wildlife and attract ecotourists.

On Cambodia's eastern plains lie some of the world's vastest undisturbed tropical dry forests. Some 60 per cent of the country is covered in tropical deciduous trees, evergreens and scrub, largely free of roads, that shelter rich biodiversity. Named one of the 200 most valuable global ecoregions by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), this remote forest habitat is a promising place for critically endangered tigers, leopards and Asian elephants to reestablish their populations.

Local communities also get their living from the forest. Ninety-two per cent of nearby households gather products such as wild honey, food plants and traditional medicines to use at home or sell in markets. And in the eyes of policymakers, the area shows economic potential as a future destination for ecotourism.

Yet by the 2000s, both local people and wildlife had entered a lose-lose situation. To protect the ecosystem, Cambodian officials staked out no-go sanctuaries, barring people from their traditional collecting activities. But enforcement was uneven, and continued hunting and poaching — along with pressure around the parks from a rising population and expanding rubber plantations — sent key species into decline. Like many biologically rich regions around the globe, Cambodia looked set to fall short of conservation targets in the UN Convention on Biodiversity and other instruments.

As part of the UK's Darwin Initiative to aid developing countries in meeting

these targets, IIED partnered with WWF, looking for ways to reverse the trends. They found inspiration in places such as Southern Africa and Nepal where IIED and WWF also work. There, projects have successfully addressed similar issues involving natural resource-reliant communities living adjacent to precious protected areas. The key to the programmes was helping local people become resource managers and tourism entrepreneurs.

## South-South success

To bring the approach to Cambodia, IIED and WWF ran a multi-pronged initiative, combining wildlife monitoring and protection, community engagement and capacity building, team-building and training of park rangers, private-sector outreach, and building political support.

Namibia, Zimbabwe and other countries had pioneered a system for community-based biodiversity monitoring, where locals collected and analysed data. To learn how this could be adapted to Cambodian forests, community leaders and government officials visited related projects throughout Southern Africa.

At the local level WWF held discussions on the value and income potential of forest resources, while in Phnom Penh they worked with the government to review national regulations and find ways to allow community involvement. Increasingly aware of their stake in healthy forests, communities began lobbying for access

degraded. Everyone loses except those few who use economic or political influence to perform mostly illegal activities. To escape this trap, conservation efforts need alternative financing and community collaboration. Wise use of natural resources — especially in enterprises such as ecotourism and wild honey collection — could generate funds to finance management activities and develop the local economy, providing incentives for all players to contribute to the protection of nature reserves. With minimal impact on biodiversity, these ventures transform communities from ‘poachers’ to managers and entrepreneurs, giving hope that valuable ecosystems under pressure can survive.

### KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- The Cambodian government’s priorities changed radically, from keeping people out of the forest to backing community-based management and sustainable harvesting. This shift — rarely seen in the conservation sector — required winning national and local support.
- South-South learning can go beyond general ‘knowledge-sharing’ conferences, with striking results. Here, a tried-and-tested management model from Southern Africa had impacts that quickly convinced Cambodian policymakers to diversify their use of forests into sustainable enterprises such as ecotourism.
- It takes time to build communities’ capacity to run business enterprises. In the Cambodian eastern plains, local people launching ecotourism projects will need further guidance from specialists in areas such as marketing.

### PARTNERS’ VIEW

*Awareness and economic incentives are important factors that motivated communities’ active participation in this project. Working with communities required significant investment initially but in the long run it can be an efficient and effective way of sustaining conservation work in the Eastern Plains. I’d like to see it as a form of sustainable financing for protected-area management — when communities start contributing their own resources (time, finance, energy) in conservation efforts.*

Amy Maling  
WWF Cambodia

### IIED SUSTAINABLE MARKETS GROUP

The Sustainable Markets Group drives IIED’s efforts to ensure that markets contribute to positive social, environmental and economic outcomes. The group brings together IIED’s work on market governance, business models, market failure, consumption, investment and the economics of climate change.



Government officials and community groups worked together to divide the forest into zones.

and stewardship responsibilities. A participatory planning process was carried out, and community members were trained to take part in three-dimensional mapping that documented the distribution of resources and impact of economic activities such as agriculture.

The result was a new zonation scheme. The forest was divided into a core protected zone, a buffer zone, and ‘community zones’ where sustainable harvesting and tourism was allowed and the community participated in wildlife monitoring. Originally, the government believed they should maintain sole control of the ecosystem and prevent all economic activities. But they came to recognise that certain forest zones could only be viable if local people took charge of managing them.

The project was piloted in the largest of the eastern forest parks, the Mondulkiri Protected Forest, and quickly showed notable impacts. Trained community rangers began teaming up with government officials on patrols, forming a closer relationship than the Southern African programmes had seen. Photos from wildlife-monitoring ‘camera traps’ suggested elephants, wild cattle and leopards could be returning to the forest — and reproducing. Illegal activities and conflicts over resources waned. The project now covers 15,000 square kilometres of forest, and the government would like to extend the project to other protected areas.

### Tourism and education

At the same time, the project fostered sustainable ecotourism ventures, aiming to help locals create new businesses, jobs and revenue for their growing population. Cambodia’s first provincial ecotourism committee was established to plan and

manage this development, with representatives from communities, government, NGOs and private companies. Community-based organisations built a homestay facility, developed ‘honey tours’ where visitors can watch traditional harvesting, and designed woven crafts to sell. The groups received financial training and have already welcomed their first guests, depositing a portion of profits into a community fund. Although IIED’s involvement here is ending, we see a need for further capacity-building in areas such as marketing to get these enterprises off the ground.

A good future indicator comes from the project’s environmental education component. A modest investment backed ‘Eco Clubs’ in local schools, mainly led by schoolchildren. The children influence the wider community, and some will become key decision makers. Their involvement today underwrites the sustainability of these efforts in coming decades as they are already integrating issues such as climate change in their activities.

Another key to sustainability was the partnership style we used. Because IIED acted as advisor to local partners but never managed day-to-day operations, we can now withdraw from up-and-running initiatives without disrupting them. And community groups enjoy a strong sense of ownership of ventures they have both designed and carried out. This result, together with the clear success of South-South learning in the project, should inform much of IIED’s ongoing work.

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