

Death of a thousand cuts

Despite being a protected area, Prey Lang forest in Northern Cambodia is being stripped of its rosewood and felled to make way for mining concessions.

PREY LANG IS A 3,600SQKM FOREST spanning Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Kampong Cham, Kratie and Stung Treng provinces in Northern Cambodia. To nature-lovers, it's a valuable patch of green housing seven distinct forest ecosystems and home to more than 50 endangered animal and bird species including the national bird, the Giant Ibis. To illegal loggers, its value derives from it being a source of precious Siamese rosewood.

Though the Cambodian government has, in 2012, marked off Prey Lang as protected and implemented a ban on all timber export to reduce devastating rates of illegal logging, trees have continued to be felled. The problem is country-wide: today only 3% of Cambodia is left covered in rainforest, down from 70% back in the 1970s. That's due to the country's endemic corruption, lax law enforcement and – specifically in the Prey Lang area – contradicting land concessions granted for mining and other economic interests.

International agencies and NGOs have long tried to push back, mostly with projects to empower local communities, organise fundraisers, or encourage people to write pleas to the Cambodian prime minister to more strictly enforce the regulations. Other groups, like local outfit Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN), take a more active stance, sending rangers on foot to deter illegal logging, and welcoming volunteers or interns to help with communications and basic natural resource management.

Aside from its ecological diversity, Prey Lang is a major watershed feeding the Mekong River and Tonle Sap, bodies of water that are crucial to the economy of a significant percentage of Cambodian households. It's also home to more than 250,000 indigenous people, including the Kuy, whose name for Prey Lang means simply 'Our forest'. But with Siamese Rosewood fetching US\$5,000 per cubic metre in Cambodia, or 10 times that amount once smuggled into China, Prey Lang has become a cesspool of corruption with rosewood logs even found in the homes of high-ranking government officials. According to the UK-based Environmental Investigation Agency, at least 12,202 cubic metres of the timber was exported from Cambodia between

June 2013 and December 2014.

With such riches at stake, there have been threats made against local communities and anti-logging rangers, as well as to the wildlife. In the past, AK47-armed police have threatened communities and patrollers with physical harm and criminal charges. Illegal shootings and detentions at the border are not uncommon. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Environment (MoE) – who failed to respond to our requests for an interview – has insisted that forest cover is growing despite satellite images from NASA clearly showing that Prey Lang, as well as other forested regions of Cambodia, have been steadily shrinking.

PLCN coordination committee member Srey They says he's seen these false reports first-hand and claims that only half of the MoE rangers are trustworthy.

“When we see MoE's reports about the illegal logging in Prey Lang in general, they are completely different from ours. They listen to and

do everything according to their bosses' orders. 50% [of MoE officers] support PLCN and the other 50% support loggers because the rangers have conflicts of interest involved in logging themselves or have received bribes from loggers.”

That not to say all their efforts were futile: in 2002, logging concessions were banned, though the government continued to award licenses to agro-industry and mining companies, both of which clear-cut the land. Last year, a partial ban on chainsaws was implemented.

The future seems bleak for Prey Lang, but groups like PLCN say the fight continues: “We hope that our community will be a part of implementing law enforcement in the forest; we hope that deforestation will end,” says They.

In 2016, the group started asking visitors to the Prey Lang area to post selfies with the hashtags #treeselfie and #standwithPLCN to boost awareness of the threats to the forest.

Check out preylang.net to see how you can do your bit. **AA**

