
Cambodia's Prey Long forest is “equivalent to life itself” for local communities

Prey Long is the largest area of intact lowland evergreen forest remaining in southeast Asia. It covers an area of about 3,600 square kilometres in the north of Cambodia. The name, “Prey Long”, means “Our forest” in the language of the Kuy indigenous people who live there. Elephants, tigers, bears, gaurs and banteng roam the forest. The hooting of the pileated gibbon can be heard. Hornbills, vipers, wild pigs and rare crocodiles, turtles, otters and frogs live in the forest. Dipterocarp trees tower above the forest canopy, some reaching 45 metres in height.

But Prey Long is under threat. Proposed plans include dozens of mines, plantations, dams, power lines and roads. Illegal logging is taking place. If the plans go ahead, Prey Long would become an industrial zone. The livelihoods of up to 700,000 predominantly indigenous people living in and around the forest are at risk.

A forthcoming video documentary, “One Forest, One Future” by Ben and Jocelyn Pederick, features interviews with some of the local people living in Prey Long. “Kuy people have been custodians of this land since the time of our ancestors,” says Serey Thae. The video shows how people use and protect the forest. “All the big trees have spirits that belong to them. No one cuts those trees,” says Srey Hong. “If they do they will die.”

The threats to Prey Long are part of the third phase of the government's bargain basement sale of the country's land, forests and resources. Phase one: logging concessions. In the 1990s, the government handed over large areas of Cambodia's forest to logging companies. The result was wide scale devastation of the forests. Since 2002, a moratorium on logging concessions has been in place.

Phase two: economic land concessions. Many of these concessions included forest, which companies clearcut. The Tumring Rubber Plantation to the south of Prey Long is one example. In a 2007 report Global Witness documented how the plantation provided the basis for large scale illegal logging of Prey Long by the Seng Keang company, which has close links to the government.

Phase three: exploitation, use and development concessions. The fact that they are not covered by Cambodia's land law does not prevent the government from handing out concessions to mining companies, often covering hundreds of square kilometres. In some cases, no exploration or exploitation licenses exist in the concession area. Global Witness found that millions of dollars in payment for several concessions has simply gone missing.

Of the many mining concessions in and around Prey Long, the largest belongs to Kenertec, a South Korean company which describes itself as “The leader of the environmental energy industry in the 21st century”. In 2008, Kenertec took over 85 per cent of an iron ore mine in Rovieng District, on the northern border of the Prey Long forest. The mine was previously under the control of the China National Machinery & Equipment Import & Export Corporation (a Chinese state-owned company), Pheapimex (one of Cambodia's most powerful companies, responsible for extremely destructive

logging and plantation projects covering vast areas of Cambodia's forests) and the Rattanak Stone Cambodia Development Company (which is controlled by the Commander-in-Chief of the Cambodian Army, Pol Saroeun). The mine site is protected by soldiers, employed by Kenertec.

Kenertec also has exploration rights for eight sites in Cambodia, covering a total area of 1,520 square kilometres, according to the company. Kenertec plans to mine copper, lead, zinc, iron, manganese, silica and jewels. The concession is to the north of Prey Long and overlaps a large area of the forest.

Kenertec also has 60,000 hectares of economic land concessions covering what it calls "scrub-covered land". Kenertec plans to plant rubber trees, cassava and jatropha. A biomass power plant is also planned. The concession area is six times the area allowed under Cambodia's land law.

"Our people are worried," Ru Lark, a villager in Stung Treng told video makers Ben and Jocelyn Pederick. "How many years does the forest have left? How long can Prey Long survive?" Serey Thae takes the film crew into the forest. "Here's the evidence," he says, pointing. "Trees are being cut, as big as 130 cm wide. And then they've been burnt. From the mountain to the plains, the trees have been cut down."

Dr Andrew McDonald of the University of Texas has been studying southeast Asia's rainforests for 15 years and is extremely concerned about Prey Long. In an article in the Phnom Penh Post last year, he notes that there is only one detailed scientific publication about lowland rainforest in Cambodia. That study looked at an area of forest near Sihanoukville in the south of the country. Today, the forest is gone, replaced by a monoculture acacia plantation.

Prey Long, southeast Asia's most important remaining area of lowland rainforest, could face a similar fate.

In 2008, Global Witness interviewed a Kenertec employee. He spoke about Cambodia's potential as an investment opportunity. "I see money everywhere," he said. "In the trees, in the land, everywhere!" The contrast with villagers' view of the forest could hardly be more extreme. "Everything we need comes from the forest," explains En Nam, a villager from Kampong Thom province. "You can't put a value on the forest. It is equivalent to life itself."

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