
Cambodia: Sustainable use of the forest by villagers

Contrary to the corporate “mining” approach to forests which invariably implies their destruction, stand out the diverse uses transmitted from generation to generation of indigenous and local communities which have developed a wide and deep knowledge (beyond science) of the forest that have allowed them to benefit from it in a sustainable manner.

The villagers of the Ansar Chambok commune, nearby Tonle Sap Lake, are a case in point. At present they estimate that approximately half of their income comes from the collection of forest products, in particular resin tapping. What follows are some quotes from a recent WRM report (see details below), which illustrate forest management by a community, now threatened by two powerful tree plantation companies: Wuzhishan and Green Rich.

“Dry and liquid resin is collected from Trach and Cheuteal trees respectively, both dipterocarp species. Trees must be mature, usually at least 60 centimetres in diameter, in order to be tapped without harming the tree. In Ksach L’eath village most of the resin tappers are women who inherited their trees from their mothers or grandmothers, as a form of dowry.

Dry resin is crushed into a fine powder and mixed with liquid resin. The resulting paste is either fashioned into a roll and wrapped in dried leaves to make torches or mixed with sand and applied directly on the wooden surfaces it is to protect, notably fishing boats. Resin torches are sold for between 300 to 350 riel [0,074 - 0,08 US dollars] and resin paste is sold for between 100 and 150 riel [0,025 -0,037 US dollars] for a kilogramme depending on the quantities and quality involved.

The following extracts from interviews with resin collectors indicate how important resin trees are to local livelihoods:

Resin collector 1: “I own 35 trees, both cheuteal and trach. I have another 100 trees in reserve, which I will tap once they mature. I visit my trees every three to seven days. Every month I am able to make 350 resin torches. I inherited my big trees from my mother, who inherited them from her mother. Recently some of my trees have been cut down and others marked with red paint by the company [Wuzhishan LS tree plantation giant]...”

Resin collector 2: “I have 70 trees. I am 78 years old and I learned to tap trees from my parents. My children are now resin tappers. My trees that are close to the village I tap every three days; the ones far away I visit every week. After each trip I can make 40 torches which I exchange for rice and prahok [a fermented fish paste, a Cambodian staple]. My 2 hectares of land don’t provide enough rice to feed the eight people in my family.”

Resin collector 3: “I have 48 trees which are all mature and tapped. I inherited them from my grandmother, who taught me how to tap them. Right after the Khmer Rouge I came back to the area and reclaimed my trees. This is all I know how to do and they are all I have. Every week I can make 50 resin torches.”

Resin collector 4: “I am worried that I will lose everything. I have 3 hectares of land, but the village chief told me that they are all in the concession. I had 50 resin trees, but now only 20 are left. Thirty of my trees were cut in the last week. I don’t know who did it, but they were cut with axes and chainsaws and only the stumps and crowns remain – the timber has disappeared.”

“Besides resin, local people identified a plethora of products collected from the forest. Several dozens of vine species are collected; their uses are varied and range from material for weaving fishing baskets, to ingredients for traditional medicines, to fibre for ropes. For instance, the vine known as Voar Trey (fish vine) is used by fishers on the Tonle Sap Lake for manufacturing fishing traps. One hundred pieces are sold for 4,000 riel (US\$1) and one person can collect on average 200 to 300 pieces in one day. However, fishers are gradually abandoning the use of vines for the manufacture of fishing traps as the supply is becoming unreliable. Traps are now made of synthetic materials: plastic and nylon. Unlike vines, these will not bio-degrade if lost or abandoned by fishers in the lake. Furthermore, the switch to synthetic materials allows for a resulting finer mesh in the traps, thus capturing juvenile fish and impacting on population structures and breeding patterns”.

“Over 20 tree species grow in the Ansar Chambok forests. Most objects found in rural Cambodian farms and homes are made by the inhabitants themselves, usually from materials collected in and around farms. Only recently have consumer products and modern appliances started finding their way into Cambodian homes. Timber is used for firewood, housing, furniture, musical instruments and farming implements, such as oxcarts, wooden trucks, ploughs and threshers. Objects of worship such as statues are also made from timber, and in some cases the trees themselves are objects of worship. Despite the intensive selective logging that took place in the commune throughout the 1980s, local people are eager to point out that the forest is regenerating and that none of the tree species has disappeared locally. There is, however a clear understanding and concern that numerous species will become locally extinct as a result of Wuzhishan’s proposed clear-cutting and conversion to monoculture plantations”.

“Bamboo and rattan is collected for household use. Bamboo is used for manufacturing small household implements and furniture, often as an alternate to wood. Rattan is used for baskets, twine and furniture. Villagers receive orders from furniture and mat manufacturers from neighboring provinces. A piece of rattan sells for 300 riel”.

“Local people identified over 26 varieties of forest fruit, which is collected intensively when in season and consumed by the villagers, any surplus is sold to market vendors or from roadside stalls along the national highway. Many urban Cambodians view, often nostalgically, these fruit as delicacies and are prepared to travel lengthy distances to buy them. Other food found in the forest and consumed or sold by villagers are bamboo shoots, wild potatoes and mushrooms. Local people were able to name 15 varieties of edible mushrooms that occur in the area and which they collect when in season. According to UNDP Human Development Indicators 36 per cent of Cambodia’s people are undernourished, as are 45 per cent of the children under the age of five. The forests provide not only additional food many a Cambodian needs, but often the nutritional variety that humans require in order to remain healthy. Losing the forest and the array of foods it provides would render the inhabitants of Ansar Chambok even more vulnerable to nutritional deficiencies”.

“Each village or cluster of villages in Ansar Chambok has a Kru Khmer, a practitioner of traditional Khmer medicine. The Kru Khmer will attend to child births, treat illnesses and injuries, and ward off evil spirits or spells that people sometimes believe have been cast upon them. The ministrations of the Kru Khmer are often a mix of magic rituals, incantations and administration of concoctions whose recipes are determined during dreams. The Kru Khmer’s secrets are jealously guarded and only

passed on from generation to generation to the knowing. Most of the ingredients for the medicine are found in the forest”.

Wuzhishan is encroaching the forest land of these people, which is to say their livelihoods, their culture, their memory. Still, local resistance has managed to stop –at least temporarily– the damage. On such strength we take example, and pose our hopes.

The full report “The death of the Forest: A Report on Wuzhishan's and Green Rich's Plantation activities in Cambodia”, December 2005, WRM series on tree plantations N° 4”, is available at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Cambodia/BookCambodia.html>