
Cambodia: can banning be the solution to mangrove conservation?

Forests of Cambodia are being menaced by Vietnamese loggers (see WRM Bulletin 18). However, this is not the only problem that Cambodian forests are facing. Half of the mangroves of the province of Koh Kong have been cleared either for shrimp farming or for high quality charcoal production. Of the province's original 10,000 hectares of mangrove forest, only 5,000 remain nowadays. Five years ago, the Ministry of the Environment had warned that the clearing of the mangroves would irreparably damage fisheries and wildlife in the area. Initially, clearing the land for shrimp farming was the major problem, but with the collapse of that industry, now charcoal production has become the activity responsible for mangrove destruction.

The government of the province has declared a ban on the cutting of mangroves, supposedly to meet a balance between development and preservation. The move has been welcomed by Cambodian environmentalist NGOs, which consider that, even if the reasons for the ban can be considered cynical, it is an attempt to avoid mangroves to disappear completely. Civil society organizations also underscore that there is a need to find job alternatives for the people who have been surviving on charcoal production.

Some areas of the province are prepared to stop the harvest of mangroves for charcoal production for the moment. Nevertheless, local communities have denounced that in other areas the trade is protected by the military. There is also the problem of people earning their living on charcoal. For example, An Samnang, one of the workers in charcoal production, coming from Prey Veng province, said he started producing charcoal in Koh Kong when the crops failed in his home village. Such work, even if risky and requiring living in a malarial area, allowed him to make a living. If mangroves are to be saved, it will therefore be insufficient --and socially unfair-- to use banning as the only tool. People, as well as mangroves, need solutions in order to survive.

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