Forest Education in Cambodia

By, Courtney Work

Introduction

Cambodia's forests were key players in the process of state formation during the post-socialist, UN-sponsored 'transition' to democracy and a market economy. With un-self-conscious certainty, World Bank, FAO, and UN advisors declared forest exploitation to be Cambodia's best option to support their fledgling democracy. They promoted Forest Concessions, in which vast tracts of forest were leased to international timber companies, as a first step toward transition. This move legitimized existing exploitation chains through which political factions financed their earlier war efforts, and secured newly democratized power to the exclusionary practices of market capitalism. By 1996, the rapacious effects of this policy were already visible, and international brokers attempted to institute some guidelines, and regulations, taking stock of forest resources. The effects of these state-making forest policies on indigenous communities was dramatic.

The socialist years were not quiet in Cambodia's forests, marked as they were by warring factions, but indigenous communities in all parts of the country mark the 'transition' to Forest Concessions as a whole new kind of violence. People's traditional relationship to ancient trees, and especially their respect and unwillingness to cut them, began to change as international loggers, miners, agricultural concessionaires, and national elites claimed rights to these resources. What had always been the property of invisible 'lords of the land' was suddenly claimed by the state. The rapidity and aggressiveness of this transition was, and remains, shocking for residents, as well as civil society and international organizations.

Local people accustomed to informal land laws, from even before the Khmer Rouge, were suddenly thrust into new land and resource regimes. These were often violent encounters, and communities fought back against the appropriation of forests and farm lands. Multiple activist organizations and village associations sprung up across the country as local people were educated the hard way about the relationship between forests and state-making. Over time land conflicts quieted down, but forest conflicts continue, and local advocates have changed their engagement from protest to protection. The most active and effective of the multiple local networks is in Prey Lang Forest, still the largest contiguous forest remaining in Indochina. In this politically and environmentally charged landscape, local villagers from a strong advocacy network who received training and assistance from academic researchers and advocacy organizations, are attempting to transform forest governance. These activities have forced the national government and international aid and conservation organizations to take both local activists and forest governance more seriously. This essay gives a brief overview of the indoctrination of rural citizens into the market economy in Cambodia, and how that transformed the value of the forests as well as local livelihoods. This context of transformed value is important for understanding the terrain of current negotiations and the mutual education of indigenous forest dwellers and national-international state-makers.

Education on New Forest Value

After anarchic attempts to turn forest resources into capital that would support the local government, Forest Concessions (FC) gave way to Economic Land Concessions

(ELC). These were agricultural concessions, awarded to local and international investors, who cleared forests for rubber, sugar cane, and other industrial crops. During the first wave of FC, local villagers were shocked at the quantity and quality of forest resources exploited by concessionaires. The companies had no fear of felling large and powerful trees well known as for their capacity to interfere into human affairs. Many villagers, and especially former soldiers, were swept into the work of transforming trees into cash through the massive influx of entrepreneurs that entered the forest through ELC initiatives. The earliest locally organized protests were in response to the FC, and the power of collective local voices helped to reform them. It is significant that part of reforming FC was the implementation of ELC. International policy advisors assumed that with ELC, the capital would be easier to fix into real national assets.

It was with the ELC that local people felt the most dramatic changes in their forest livelihoods. Converting forest into plantation involves massive inputs of human capital and machines, which brought entirely new objectives, practices, and people into the lives of shifting cultivators. Because part of the objective was to create jobs for people, these dramatic changes often consumed forests close to where people lived, this included rice fields, but especially fallow forest lands used for cultivation. It was in this context that people felt most acutely the changing value of land and resources. In the first instance, their own security and their ancestral claims to land had no value in the market regime. Concessionaires were the only resource users that held legitimate claims to land use. Beyond basic tenure security, the long-standing respect for the life-giving resources of water and land, and the communities of flora and fauna they support, began to erode.

When people realized that the companies would exploit all the forest resources in the area, even beyond their concession boundaries, whole communities started to cut their own forests and sell their own land—hoping to profit before it all disappeared. Many suffered in this changing economic landscape. There were others, however, who took advantage of the change and without remorse, began to sell land and trees. Those who suffered received assistance from civil society organizations that traveled into the affected areas to train and educate people about their new circumstances. Many things came out of this advocacy, multiple protests and petitions were mounted against the companies and the government. To make these kinds of protests, people learned about the land laws and about their rights to resources. They learned that as citizens they had the right to claim land, and as indigenous people, they could leverage their ancestral claims. Multiple new projects and activities entered people's lives as they attempted to apply for communal land titles, to protest the illegal capture of their lands, and to confront the rampant trade in forest products that followed the plantations into the forest. Again, some fought against this exploitation and others joined in. People tell me, "I'd be rich like them if I were willing to sell the forest."

In response to company abuses and government complicity, local networks of activists organized themselves, and with the help of civil society organizations began to systematically confront both the legal ELC and the illegal trade that came in their wake. These activities did have effects and got the attention of the government, as well as international advocacy organizations and researchers. While local advocacy did play a part in later changes to ELC policy, grassroots activists were vilified by the government. Protesters were arrested, and network members who began independent forest patrols were aggressively criminalized and their activities suppressed. The most effective and long-lasting of these local forest patrol groups is the Prey Lang

Community Network (PLCN), which has coordinated community volunteers across four provinces since the late 1990s.

PLCN made enemies among their neighbors and local government officials, but also won awards and gained support from international forest protection organizations and academic researchers. This politically charged field was recently coupled with government reforms and an infusion of training and funding from academic researchers. The results of this convergence are still emerging, but for the remainder of the article I will describe the kinds of training, education, and political engagement that activist-academic research contributed.

Engaged Academics

Two unconnected academic research projects started collaborations with the PLCN in 2014, one focused on training local activists to collect data on natural resources, food stuffs, and medicines in the forest using a specially designed smartphone app. The other project provided training in research methods to improve local advocacy efforts through effective interviewing techniques, data recording practices, drone photography, and GPS mapping. In 2015, PLCN was awarded the UN Equator Prize for environmental protection as a result of their enhanced data collection and reporting capacity. Then, in 2016 the Prey Lang forest was transferred from the jurisdiction of the Forest Administration (FA) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF), to the Ministry of Environment (MoE), which finalized protected area status for the forest. The confluence of these events sparked dialectical changes in forest education and governance for the new teams of MoE rangers, the local activists, and academics.

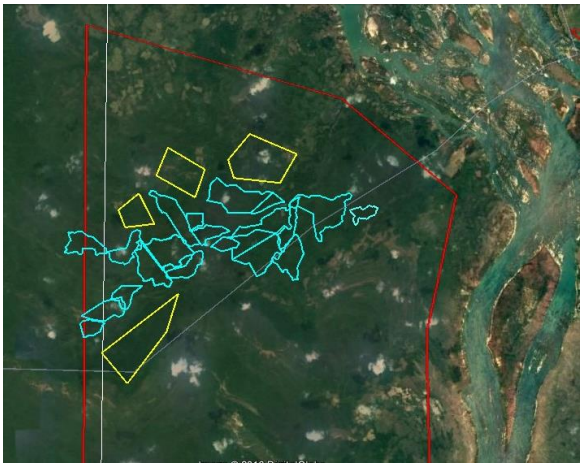
PLCN member recording in the forest

Image taken from the PLCN website: https://preylang.net/

The project using a smartphone app, run by researchers at the University of Copenhagen, was an ethnobotany initiative to record forest resources. This was instantly transformed by local activists, who by that time had learned a lot about managing externally conceived projects for their own benefit. The original smartphone app needed immediate alteration to make space for network members to record forest crimes. This was a powerful addition, and with the help of graduate students managing the database, the network published a report with detailed graphs and numbers of felled trees over the first year. This report was not well received by the FA, who vilified the network and defended their own position. The network stood firm on their findings and continued to collect data, and to revise the app to better suit their needs in the forest. They added spaces to record various types of crimes, to record encounters with authorities, and features that allowed network members to have access to their collected data. Not all features are working as well as the activists want, but the research team is committed to making the necessary adjustments to enhance local forest governance.

The other academic initiative was conceived as a participatory activity from the outset and local challenges were incorporated into the research design of a project funded by the National Science Foundation of the Netherlands (NWO) and implemented through the Regional Center for Sustainable Development at Chiang Mai University and the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague. This project initiated collaborative action research activities in the context of climate change mitigation projects moving into the forest. Local researchers were trained in data collection methods and also in the new forest values emerging through the carbon economy and ecosystems services that are integral to climate change response scenarios. Academic and local researchers worked together to identify issues and develop research agendas, and again, researchers needed to expand their ideas and initiatives to incorporate the real issues on the ground.

This project started by gathering impact data from climate change related land-based projects, like REDD+, forest restoration, and industrial agriculture for ethanol feed-stock production (sugar cane in this case). During this iterative process, local researchers shared detailed data from the ground, and academics shared information about the climate change related projects in their areas. In the case of the forest restoration project, local researchers reported that there were rich in forest resources inside the large project boundary, a boundary whose limits were unknown before academic research efforts. In addition to the vital forest, local people had vast networks of resin trees they were tapping as a key livelihood strategy. Local and academic researchers decided together what tools we needed to document this data, and academics procured and trained local researchers to use drone photography and GPS mapping. Through these techniques, the dense forested areas were photographed and geo-tagged, and the resin forests of local tappers were mapped. Local residents used this data to make claims against the company and the FA, who was the governing body of this controversial project.



Resin forest areas. Red is concession boundary.
Google earth image created by Sien Sothea

Drone training, Kamong Thom; photo by author

The enhanced research skills, data collection, and report production on the part of the local activist network, made possible through collaborations with academic researchers, contributed to transforming the relationship between PLCN and the MoE

when the forest transitioned into a protected area. It was easy for the FA, the former stewards of the Prey Lang forest, to dismiss community claims as lies and defamation, framing activists as vigilantes. Having hard data, backed up with photographic evidence greatly enhance local credibility and hampered attempts to discredit local claims.

In addition, when the MoE took over this, and other, significant and threatened forests across the country, it was in a spirit of forest reform to satisfy public opinion. This spirit of reform included drafts of new environmental laws that included frameworks for collaborative management of forests between locals and government. This was from the beginning, and remains, and uneasy collaboration, and ministry officials prefer to have collaboration on paper rather than in practice. But, by producing hard, reliable data, and presenting it in professional reports, the government can no longer simply dismiss local claims. This new stance forces cooperation between PLCN and the ministry rangers who now patrol the forest together. The relationship continues to be tense, and indigenous forest education has not solved all the challenges people face trying to protect their natural resources.

PLCN member on patrol with MoE ranger in Kratie province; photo by author.

At the time of this writing, the company managing the 'forest restoration' project sold shares in their business venture to an aggressive logging company, but continues to receive permissions for 'restoration' activities from MAFF. Community resin forests are again under threat and local and academic researchers are collaborating on possible new solutions. At the same time, the most recent report on forest crimes published by PLCN was rejected by the MoE as inaccurate and inflammatory. Nonetheless, PLCN continues to patrol with rangers and initiatives to improve forest governance skills of both groups is ongoing. The ministry, like the local communities, has some actors legitimately engaged in protecting forest resources, and others who are lining their pockets through the lucrative trade in illicit forest products. It is possible that as we collectively move further away from sustainable resource uses, it will force another value shift in the face of economic necessity. Only time will tell.

Courtney Work is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Ethnology at the National Chengchi University in Taipei, Taiwan. Born in Minnesota, USA, Work started research activities in Cambodia in 2005. This included post-doctoral work with the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, and the Regional Center for Sustainable Development at Chiangmai University; a PhD in Anthropology from Cornell University and an MA from Brandeis University. Courtney writes on the Anthropology of Religion, Development, and the Environment; the History of Southeast Asian political formations; and Contemporary Political Economy and Climate Change. Current research interests involve death, regeneration, and interactions between humans and chthonic energies.