

Last call for Prey Long

Future of pristine forest seen as test of govt's ecological resolve

BY ANDREW McDONALD

Recent botanical research in central Cambodia has provided a glimmer of hope for preserving the last vestige of the country's primeval, lowland forests.

COMMENT Known as Prey Long, this exceptional region in southern Kampong Thom province covers about 2,000 square kilometers, half of which have never been logged because poor road access has protected it from bulldozers, chainsaws and axes.

Dipterocarp trees still tower above a relatively high 25-meter canopy, some reaching 45 meters in height. These grand, living monuments have captured the attention of conservationists, foresters, governmental officials, and of course, loggers.

To assess the ultimate fate of Prey Long, recent botanical surveys by the University of Copenhagen and Cambodia's Forestry Administration have gathered preliminary data on these vulnerable remnants of virgin rainforest.

In common with all first-growth rainforests, Prey Long is shady, cool and species-rich. Herds of elephants still roam the forest; calls of the rare pileated woodpecker are heard in the canopy.

unique type of marsh forest in the low-lying tributaries of the Mekong River.

This aquatic forest supports an ecosystem that is extremely rare and apparently restricted to central Cambodia.

As botanical studies continue, it is becoming evident that this vegetation type conserves numerous rare plant species, many likely unknown to science.

The understory of this aquatic vegetation is particularly distinctive, with tree ferns and areca palms casting an especially dark shadow across the forest floor. Climbing ferns and flowering vines clamber up trees to compete for light with orchids and mosses.

Reports of rare crocodiles and otters add yet another dimension to the importance of these wetland sites, though there's concern that the sightings have been made by hunters.

Bush meat collectors agree unanimously and enthusiastically that the unlogged forest and permanent water sources attract thirsty wildlife during the dry season. The hunters' activities continue to threaten some of the region's most vulnerable and endangered animals.

While the discovery of a wet lowland rainforest



Erasing Asia tree by tree

When future historians begin to assess the causes and effects of deforestation in the 20th century, their discussions may well begin with the wanton destruction of Asian rainforests.

Most tropical Asian countries have either eliminated or severely altered more than 85 percent of their original plant cover. The destruction is continental in scale and probably unprecedented in natural history.

Cambodia maintains about 50 percent of its original forest cover - often much degraded, but forests nonetheless - and comprises a significant part of the "Indo-Burma hotspot": a biogeographic region renowned for its high biological diversity.

In recognition of this extraordinary biological richness, Cambodia in the early 1990s chose to establish protected areas in mountainous regions, where demand for arable land was less acute and logging was more expensive.

Timber companies, however, typically enjoy first right of access to highly lucrative stands of wet, lowland forests as they produce high timber volumes and need minimal investment for road construction and timber extraction.

This general policy lacks logic because it encourages

the rare piliated gibbon still resonate from the dense tree canopies; colorful vipers slither across wild pig trails in search of chorusing frogs; and hornbills still fly clumsily from one fruiting fig tree to another.



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Rare species of frog and snake thrive in Prey Long.

lowland rainforest is cause for celebration among conservationists, it is also a matter of great concern.

The virgin forests of Prey Long fall within the boundaries of two dormant logging concessions held by companies in Japan and China. Were it not for the wise annulment of Cambodia's forest concessions by the Forestry Administration in 2001, there is no doubt that Prey Long would have already joined the ranks of former lowland forests in the history books.

The future of Prey Long's first-growth forest is being assessed in terms of its monetary and historical values.

The Cambodian government must make important decisions



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Prey Long forest is a relic of Cambodia's most valuable tree communities, providing a clear but possibly fleeting picture of the region's lowland forest environment before logging altered much of Asia's original plant cover.

about whether the country's rare and quintessential forest types are worth more to its citizens as a short-term timber windfall or long-term site for the conservation of native germplasm and the study of Cambodia's lowland ecosystems.

The Forestry Administration has already identified Kampong Thom Province as a critical source of seeds for 15 of Cambodia's 20 most valuable species of tree, but the full scope of Prey

Long's natural riches has yet to be explored.

Certainly, all facets of its biological diversity – at the genetic, organismic and community levels – warrant protection.

An intact forest might also help to ensure a healthy water catchment for the Mekong and Tonle Sap and perhaps forestall rising sedimentation rates in Cambodia's great lake.

There is no time to spare. A network of well-worn paths and ox-cart roads provides easy access to these rich forests and an organized timber company could clear them in two or three years. Saving these forests will require quick, decisive action by stakeholders inside and outside Cambodia.

The situation provides a golden opportunity for Western consumer nations, the Japan-based International Tropical Timber Organization, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to make amends for laughable environmental mistakes in the past?

It could also serve as a worthy first-case model for a developed country or countries to acquire carbon credits by buying timber rights in the region.

Whatever the case, time is running out to save the last substantial lowland rainforest in Indochina from being ravaged by loggers.

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logic because it circumvents sound conservation plans, since lowland rainforests sustain unique species and biological communities that are not represented in mountainous terrain.

Just how unique are living communities of lowland environments in relation to mountainous terrain? In Cambodia we simply do not know. The only detailed scientific publication about a lowland rainforest in Cambodia focuses on an evergreen rainforest that once thrived near Sihanoukville.

This forest is lost to history, having been converted into an acacia tree plantation for making pulp and woodchips for plasterboard.

This situation is unfortunate, because it means Cambodian foresters have no single study to which they can refer for guidance to make sound land management decisions.

This is a sorry state of affairs for a country that depends heavily on its timber resources, especially so when all other lowland rainforests in Cambodia, such as those once found on the southern slopes of the Cardamom and Phnom Damrei (Bokor) mountains, are damaged beyond recognition.

These once productive woodlands will require many decades of careful management before timber extraction can resume. Or, perhaps of equal importance, they will need many centuries of safe-keeping before they return to their original state.

(Andrew McDonald)

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