

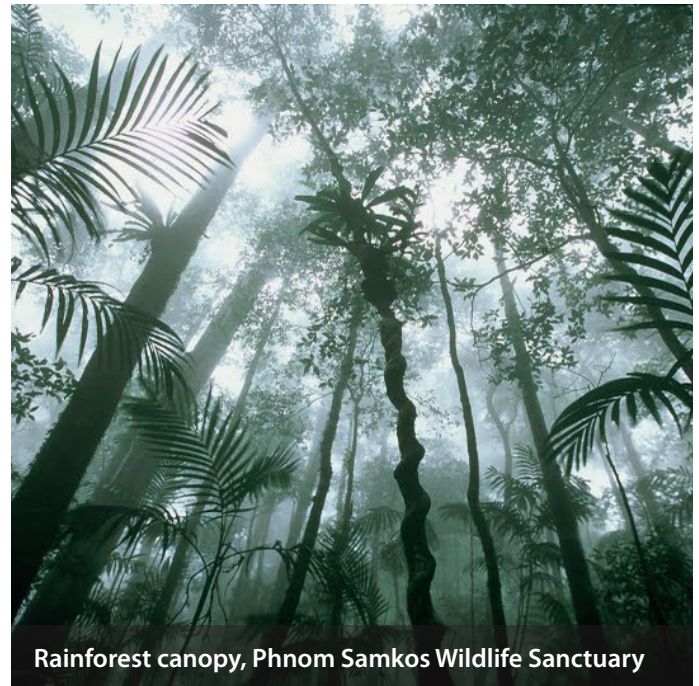
Bridging the gap between conservation and community development in post-conflict Cambodia

This case study is one of a series of five, developed by Fauna & Flora International (FFI) during the USAID funded project *Life on the Edge—conserving biodiversity and rebuilding livelihoods in the wake of natural disaster and human conflict*. This project has enabled FFI to review experiences of working collaboratively within and outside the conservation sector, focusing on five sites where natural disasters or human conflict have threatened biodiversity and livelihoods. The five sites are the Maya Golden Stream Landscape, Belize; the Cardamom Mountains, Cambodia; the Nimba Mountains, Guinea; Aceh Ulu Masen Forest, Indonesia; and Sapo National Park, Liberia. These case studies profile FFI's experience and the lessons learnt at each site. All five case studies are available on www.fauna-flora.org, alongside a paper outlining the rationale and recommendations for working across sectors in post-disaster and conflict situations.

The Cardamom Mountains, located in south-western Cambodia, contain one of the largest and oldest evergreen forests in South-east Asia. The forested mountains, which cover an area of circa 2 million hectares, support a wealth of wildlife including at least 62 globally threatened species as well as providing ecosystem services such as watershed protection and carbon storage.

From the early 1970s the Cardamom Mountains were the stronghold of the Khmer Rouge. When the conflict ended in 1998 the resident population was one fifth of its former size and dozens of ancient villages lay empty. Their vast area and low population density meant that the Cardamom Mountains were seen as a place to settle landless refugees. Thousands of homeless people flooded in from other parts of Cambodia, lured by the apparent abundance of free land that was, for the most part, devoid of landmines. Ignorant of, or choosing to ignore, the fact that most of the mountain range was protected, many organisations funded new roads, commercial crop plantations, cattle ranches and other developments deep into the mountains. Few bothered to conduct environmental impact assessments first, despite these being mandatory by law.

Whilst such rapid in-migration and development aid has benefited many people, it has come at a cost for others, particularly the most vulnerable sectors of society: the war-widows and indigenous minorities. In the absence of safeguards, the improved infrastructure has attracted land speculators, loggers and charcoal burners, and forest land has been seized. The indigenous inhabitants of the Cardamom Mountains traditionally had low-intensity



Rainforest canopy, Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary

Credit: J Holden/FFI

forest-based livelihoods but, with an increasingly mixed population, illegal harvesting of timber and wildlife has increased. This has greatly damaged populations of tigers, pangolins, eaglewood trees, luxury timber trees and other valuable species. Lacking alternatives, many people have turned to whatever they can gather from the forest, using wartime weapons to hunt wildlife.

This case study focuses specifically on Fauna & Flora International's (FFI) work in Veal Veng District, Cambodia's largest district, at the western end of the Cardamom Mountain range. Veal Veng District contains 20 villages in five communes. Social and biological surveys carried out

by FFI and the government in 1999 identified the need to improve the livelihoods of people living in environmentally sensitive parts of Veal Veng District in ways that would be more compatible with biodiversity conservation. The first priority to address was lack of food, because many of the social and environmental problems were driven by hunger. The ability of the villages to produce their own food was hampered by the fact that many residents had spent most, if not all, of their adult lives in refugee camps or as soldiers, and thus lacked basic agricultural skills. Even the more experienced farmers had lost their farms, livestock and seeds during the war. Most farming families turned to destructive forms of slash-and-burn farming, pushing back the forest edge by hundreds of metres every year.

FFI's initial work focused on four villages in O'Som commune where these problems were especially acute. Of particular concern was a proposal to drain Veal Veng Marsh—one of Asia's most important wetlands and the world's largest breeding ground of the Critically Endangered and culturally sacred Siamese crocodile—and turn it into rice fields. FFI called for this to be halted on environmental and cultural grounds; the district clearly needed a better solution to help local people to feed themselves.

Working in partnership

From 2000 onwards, FFI led an innovative programme to integrate community-based environmental conservation and sustainable development throughout Veal Veng District in partnership with the Ministry of Environment and the Forestry Administration. These agencies are responsible for the management of all protected areas, forests and wildlife in Cambodia. Over time, other partners have included the national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) Save Cambodia's Wildlife, Anakot Kumar, and the Cambodian Centre for the Study and Development of Agriculture (CEDAC). The relationship with CEDAC is the focus for this case study.

FFI contracted CEDAC to develop the agricultural support programme because they had a proven track record in this field and had previous experience of working with indigenous people in remote upland areas. Their 'ecological farming' ethos made them particularly well suited for working in environmentally sensitive areas. The relationship therefore began as client-consultant but soon developed into a partnership of equals, with FFI and CEDAC working together to discuss and develop all aspects of the programme in O'Som commune. A key factor in putting CEDAC and FFI on an equal footing was that both



Piles of old ammunition in a commune on the border between Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary, Cambodia, and Thailand

Credit: J Daltry/FFI

partners developed proposals and raised funds for the programme. The stated aim of the FFI-CEDAC partnership is 'to explore and experiment with production systems, income-generation activities and community organising and networking, to allow communities to live sustainably'.

Partnership achievements: outcomes for conservation and livelihoods

Conservation benefits have been striking in O'Som, the commune in which CEDAC, FFI and the Forestry Administration have been working together for the longest. A natural resources management plan was developed with the commune using a participatory process, and the people of O'Som are now actively engaged in protecting the area's forests, wetlands and wildlife. Poaching and accidental killings of Siamese crocodiles have stopped since community warden patrols began, and the use of electro-fishing or other destructive fishing methods is no longer tolerated. Community wardens were also proactive in reporting illegal forest cutting by Vietnamese companies and, acting on this local intelligence, government rangers and military police destroyed the loggers' camps and equipment.

Results in the other four communes have been less dramatic, because of their higher numbers of new settlers with less knowledge and interest in their environment, but there are many positive signs. For example, new communally co-managed forests and local patrol groups are now helping to prevent illegal harvesting of threatened *beng* trees, and have resulted in a 58% decrease in the number of vehicles carrying illegal timber out of the district since 2004. Some illegal clearing of forest does still occur, largely perpetrated by land speculators, who are not party to FFI's and CEDAC's community outreach programmes.

O'Som's residents have also gained tenure to land and essential natural resources, food security, and a modest but rising income. Most families are now able to produce all the food they need: more than 60% now use an organic system of rice intensification and average rice yields have risen from 800 kg per hectare (in 2000) to 2,120 kg per hectare. CEDAC's strong promotion of organic farming has resulted in less herbicide and pesticide use, and thus fewer chemicals entering the waterways. The diversity of crops grown on existing farmland has increased, and people are rearing chickens, catfish and frogs as alternative sources of protein to wild bushmeat. Improved wetland management has enabled the recovery of the wild fish stocks that provide 60% of the commune's protein.

By enabling the commune to form a marketing cooperative, earnings from cardamom harvesting quadrupled between 2002 and 2008. The project's impact and outcomes are being monitored by the project staff and the villagers themselves, all of whom have gained secure access to land and other natural resources, and at least 65% of whom have participated in innovating, adapting and disseminating the new farming methods. Furthermore, CEDAC has trained new trainers, including a number of women, to coach other farmers in Veal Veng District to sustain and expand the agricultural programme.

"What is being planted is more productive and also there has been training and follow up, and now farmers are following each other. Good new ideas have been introduced, like fish raising and growing vegetables. These are now sold in the village at affordable prices. This helps to reduce the importation of produce from outside."

Sek Sam Ath, Pramaoy Commune Chief

Local rights to land and natural resources have been negotiated by FFI and clarified with both the local people and government authorities. All villages now have access to farmland and communal access to nearby forests.

CEDAC has trained villagers to be marketing experts to lead on the cooperative trade of agricultural produce and renewable forest products. Four community shops were established in 2008 and generated USD 700 profit in the first year, despite deliberately selling at reduced prices to local residents. More than 50 community-based organisations have been formed, most with more than 50% women members. Forty-five Savings Groups have been established, and their combined savings had grown to USD 27,686.87 by February 2009, a 57% increase since 2006. Members can borrow money at reasonable interest rates and the benefits stay in the community. Law enforcement has also improved throughout the district, chiefly through FFI and Conservation International's collaborations with the Forestry Administration and Ministry of Environment protected area rangers.

FFI and CEDAC's partnership has achieved the outcomes above by drawing on our unique combined strengths. By working together, the partners have been able to pool resources and services and increase the scale and/or geographical coverage of our work, resulting in complementarity and fewer gaps. For one organisation to attempt this project alone would require a lengthy and more expensive process of recruiting and training new



A sign marking a community forest near O'Som Commune

Credit: Forestry Administration



A participatory land use planning workshop involving community members

staff or consultants. We have been able to develop new approaches that would not otherwise have arisen, such as establishing community wardens, marketing cooperatives, and the participatory creation of community forests and community protected areas. By combining FFI's reputation and experience in conservation with CEDAC's reputation and expertise in supporting rural livelihoods, this partnership is seen to be very credible. This has helped us to persuade government agencies and other stakeholders to accept a number of innovations. The differences between the two organisations is also a strength in the field of funding: the Cambodian NGO CEDAC is eligible for certain bilateral and multilateral grants that are out of FFI's reach, while FFI's reputation and charitable status as an internationally-established NGO enables access to other grants.

Challenges

Running a livelihoods and conservation programme in Veal Veng District presents many challenges. This district is Cambodia's 'Wild West', where the rule of law is commonly disregarded and there is mounting demand for land and natural resources. Rich and well-connected perpetrators are rarely prosecuted. Corruption and weak governance pervade all levels, and often lead to conflict

between government policy and practice. Although the lands of Veal Veng District are entirely protected by law and under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Environment and the Forestry Administration, local government officials frequently disregard this and make their own, unilateral arrangements concerning land sales, acceptance of in-migrants and other agreements. Consequently and very frequently, project staff find that promises made by one government office are ignored or retracted by another, and many of these changes are made in secrecy. In 2007, for example, a mining company was authorised by the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy to begin explorations in Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary, specifically including community-managed forests that had been awarded to villages by the Ministry of Environment only months earlier. FFI, CEDAC and the villagers we work with encounter new threats on an almost daily basis and must either spend time and resources fighting them or accept them and adjust our programme accordingly. Weak governance, corruption and poor coordination is an enormous problem throughout Cambodia.

The nature of the Cardamom Mountains themselves present challenges too. The mountain soils are often thin and infertile, the annual total rainfall is very high (> 6 m per year) but erratic, with severe annual droughts, and crops are frequently destroyed by wild animals. Many of the present population are poorly equipped to live in this environment, because they grew up in the army, refugee camps or richer parts of Cambodia. Furthermore, many villages are remote and difficult to access, thus constraining both the frequency with which project staff can visit them and the villagers' access to markets. The low levels of literacy and numeracy among residents of Veal Veng District has proved a challenge at times, because it has constrained the ways in which training and monitoring are carried out, and limited the villagers' ability to participate in business or other livelihood opportunities.

In addition, the area's turbulent history means that most villagers lack real cohesion and function more as loose clusters of individuals than communities. Most residents are new to the area and lack historical ties to each other or the environment. This can make it difficult to reach a consensus on livelihoods and conservation activities, especially when asking people to put the long-term good of the community ahead of short-term personal gain. The emergence of stronger community groups is among the most important outcomes of this project, both for sustainable development and for conservation. We hope the new community structures will soon provide a district-

wide framework for protected area co-management, with local people taking an ever greater role in caring for the Cardamom Mountains.

“Three or four years ago, people didn’t think too much about working together. Now, since the formation of community protected area groups and other groups by FFI and CEDAC, there is a stronger sense of community.”
Sokkoeun, Department of Environment

Lessons learnt

It is important not to rush the initial stages of an intervention in post-conflict situations. People in such areas are often traumatised, suspicious of one another, frightened of outsiders and highly suggestible. It is vital to spend time building trust and explaining the options and possible risks, to help people make informed choices about their future. Reaching consensus, and developing mechanisms to ensure that development benefits are shared fairly, may take more than a year, especially with groups of people who barely function as communities (a common characteristic of post-war areas where very heterogeneous groups of people may end up living together; even combatants from different sides of the conflict). Organic farming has proved to be more sustainable and, importantly, less expensive for the farmers than using agrochemicals, but takes more time to develop properly. Furthermore, it is important that all organisations in a post-conflict situation are prepared to keep on learning about the situation and to be flexible. This flexibility needs to extend to the partners with which an organisation works: certain groups may be most vocal and keen to collaborate in the aftermath of a conflict, but

it is vital not to overlook people or groups who are less confident and articulate.

Another reason for not rushing into post-conflict interventions is the need for a solid social and biological knowledge of the area. Sustainable rural development requires a good understanding of the local environment, especially in fragile and complex tropical ecosystems such as the Cardamom Mountains. Farming methods that work well in the lowland rice fields, for example, cannot be automatically transferred to the mountains of Veal Veng. Both CEDAC and FFI invested more than a year in researching the area (including testing soils and evaluating biodiversity and traditional land use practices) before advising and assisting the villagers to improve their livelihoods. During this crucial research period we provided emergency food aid to villages, to bridge the gap until training began.

A significant conclusion that can be drawn from this project so far is that conservation and development action need not be expensive. Our work in O’Som has cost less than USD 20 per person per year since 2002, and this investment has tapered as livelihoods have recovered. By comparison, official development assistance to Cambodia during the same period averaged USD 3,300 per person per year.

An important factor in the success of the partnership between FFI and CEDAC is that the project fits well with the expertise and interests of both organisations. FFI focuses on conserving biodiversity through means that are sustainable and take account of human needs. A central tenet of FFI’s approach is the recognition that people in developing countries want and need to improve their well-being, and

Credit: B Simpson/FFI



The formation of a marketing cooperative has enabled people to earn more from cardamoms

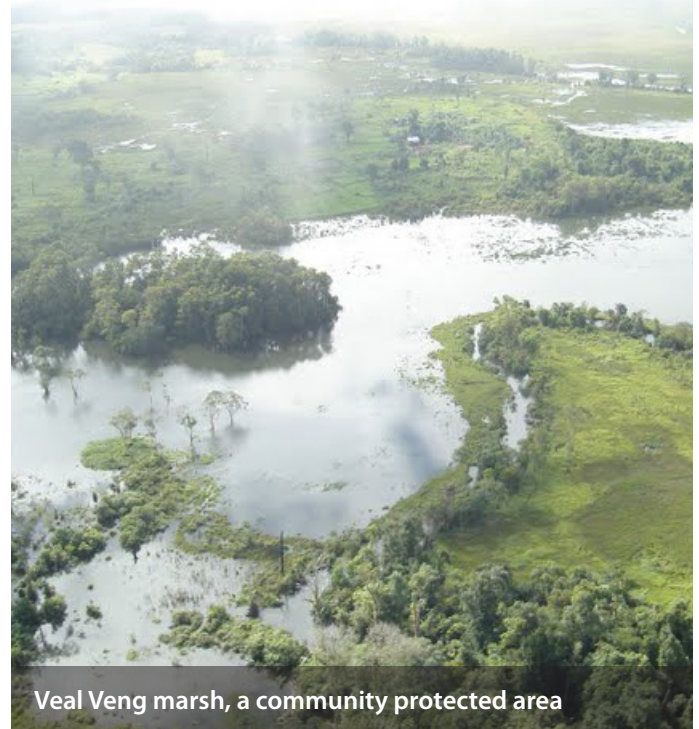
Credit: J Daltry/FFI



A community warden monitoring a Siamese crocodile nest

FFI supports this by devising strategies that both conserve biodiversity and contribute to human development. CEDAC's vision is of a Cambodian society where small farming households enjoy good living conditions and strong mutual cooperation, with the right and power to determine their own destiny, as well as playing a role in the production of healthy food. CEDAC enables small farmers and other rural poor to increase their food production and income while ensuring both environmental sustainability and the maintenance of strong social cooperation. Thus, both partners have environmentally sustainable development and social responsibility at their core, making this a natural union.

It is clear that few organisations are truly proficient at both development and environmental conservation, so there are considerable advantages to working collaboratively or forming partnerships from the earliest stages after a conflict or natural disaster. By working together as partners, as FFI and CEDAC have done, development and conservation organisations can learn from one another and identify development solutions that have the best prospects of lasting success.



Veal Veng marsh, a community protected area

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About FFI

FFI protects threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science and take account of human needs. Operating in more than 40 countries worldwide – mainly in the developing world – FFI saves species from extinction and habitats from destruction, while improving the livelihoods of local people. Founded in 1903, FFI is the world's longest established international conservation body and a registered charity.