

## Cross-border Wildlife Trade in Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia

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### Introduction

After decades of conflict, the Kingdom of Cambodia is struggling to rebuild itself. In doing so, the country faces many challenges, political, economic, social, and environmental. Protection of the country's biodiversity may prove to be one of its greatest challenges. Much attention has been focused on deforestation, but overexploitation of wild species of flora and fauna also poses a significant threat. Despite laws forbidding the hunting of wildlife, regulation of this exploitation remains difficult. In addition to the difficulty of controlling hunting, the fact that many products are exported introduces a host of other problems including border control. This note briefly examines the wildlife trade in a single province, Ratanakiri, and its relationship to border issues.

Historically, Cambodia has been renowned for its extensive forests and exotic flora and fauna. By the 1990's, however, many of the country's 21 provinces have suffered rapid deforestation (six provinces - Kompong Chhang, Kompong Speu, Kandal, Prey Veng, Takeo, and Svay Rieng have lost most of their forests and are experiencing fuelwood shortages). Ratanakiri, a northeastern province sharing borders with Laos and Vietnam, with a small human population and large amount of intact forest is reputed to be a haven for Cambodian wildlife.<sup>1</sup> Even here, however, there is evidence of a large-scale, well-organised trade in wildlife including many endangered species.

### Ratanakiri

Although population data is sketchy, local officials in Ratanakiri estimated the province contained 18 minority tribes numbering approximately 76,000. Farming is the principal activity of the minority peoples who practice slash-and-burn agriculture. Hunting has always been a secondary activity, usually conducted in the dry season from November to April. There are few professional hunters as in the past, hunting was primarily for subsistence purposes. However, improved transportation, the availability of firearms and ammunition, and increasing demand for wildlife products from

neighbouring countries have combined to make hunting an important economic activity. An effective distribution system exists and seems to function with little interference from border control.

Game meat and other wildlife products including antlers, horns, and skins are sometimes brought to shops in the current provincial capital of Banlong and the former capital of Lomphat. Teams of buyers who visit the villages to purchase domestic animals for market also purchase wildlife when it's available. Products are shipped to Phnom Penh, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

Species in trade include Sambar deer (*Cervus unicolor*), banteng (*Bos javanicus*), gaur (*Bos gaurus*), tiger (*Panthera tigris*), clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*), and pangolin (*Manis javanica*) and many others. As baseline population data for many of these species is limited, the actual impact of this trade is unknown but current levels may well be threatening.

### Boundary issues

Any effort on the part of the central government to control the export of wildlife will be complicated by various examples of border demarcation and administration problems.

Despite the Paris Agreements of 1991, disagreements between the Kingdom of Cambodia and its neighbours Vietnam and Thailand over the location of international borders still exist. According to local officials, the Cambodian border control station at the official Cambodian-Vietnamese crossing point in Ratanakiri is located approximately five kilometers from the internationally-recognised boundary.

In many ways the ties between provinces and their neighbours are greater than those between provincial authorities and central government. Cambodia's northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri and Stung Treang were part of Laos during the US aerial bombing in 1969 and in the 1970's during the Khmer Rouge, period only to return in 1979. The following pro-Vietnamese government of the State of Cambodia resulted in close relations with

Vietnam and a substantial number of Vietnamese settlers relocated to Ratanakiri.

These ethnic ties have in turn influenced the nature of border crossings between the three countries. In addition to the centrally and provincially controlled checkpoints, hundreds of illegal controlled checkpoints exist. The same is true of travel documents with locally-issued border cards used as well as passports and official *laissez-passer* documents. Cultural and kinship ties together with porous border facilitate the transportation of wildlife from Cambodia to both Laos and Vietnam.

Another unexpected factor in the wildlife trade was the impact of the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races or FULRO. Remnants of the Montagnard guerilla army were in the Cambodian province of Mondolkiri from 1979 until late 1993 when over 400 guerillas and their families were relocated to the United States. In addition to conducting raids into Vietnam, teams of the guerillas hunted wildlife for food and for sale throughout northern Mondolkiri and southern Ratanakiri.

Wildlife is an important part of the cultures of Cambodia's minority peoples and the majority Khmer. Wild animals are the principal characters in many folktales and have significance in both Buddhist and animist religion. Animals are credited with supernatural powers. Hunters in the Lomphat district perform rituals to ensure a successful hunt, but believe that the animals which men hunt have their own rituals to protect them from the hunters. Certain animal parts are powerful talismans which protect the wearer from harm. Ivory from broken tusks lodged in trees or found on the ground is considered 'sacred' because the animal was not killed to obtain it. Buddhist images carved from this ivory are highly prized.

Hunting has traditionally been a secondary activity in Ratanakiri, but increased demand for wildlife products within the country and in neighbouring countries is an impetus for increased levels of exploitation of wildlife including species which are considered endangered. This exploitation is fostered by many factors including those outlined above. Traditional cultural ties and emerging economic trends encourage the cross-border flow of individuals and wildlife products. If the central authorities wish to regulate wildlife exploitation or cross-border movements effectively, they must take into consideration established cultural and economic patterns.

## References

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Marcus Phipps was in Cambodia in April-June, 1994 as a consultant for TRAFFIC southeast Asia. TRAFFIC (Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce) is supported by the WWF and IUCN. The mission of the TRAFFIC Network is to enhance the conservation of biological diversity by monitoring and reporting trade or other forms of utilisation of animals and plants and their derivatives; identifying areas of such utilisation that may be detrimental to any species; and assisting the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) and other appropriate bodies in facilitating the control of trade and in curtailing possible threats to species created by trade or other forms of utilisation.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Estimates of the amount of forest cover vary widely as Cambodia's poor security situation makes reliable data collection next to impossible. Provincial forestry officials calculate the forest cover in Ratanakiri at a total of 736,666 hectares.