

Eye on Cambodia: Environment



Location

Ou Lang is a small village on the Mekong River in the Strung Treng Province, surrounded by paddy fields, natural forests and areas of stunning biodiversity.



Background Issues

Current estimates of Cambodia's remaining forest cover vary widely depending on what sources are used, but popular thinking suggests that about 50% of Cambodia's land area has some sort of woodland or jungle cover. Sustainable use of the natural resources the land offers is important, as about 75% of the population are involved with agriculture and rely upon them to make a living and to live. Unchecked non-sustainable resource use, illegal logging and shifting cultivation are causing uncontrolled destruction of this wealth that is so vital for improving rural livelihoods and generating income.

The upshot is, that the rich natural habitats of Cambodia's deciduous, evergreen and mangrove forests have been drastically tainted, affecting the quality and quantity of habitat for biodiversity and non-timber forest resources, both important elements of food and livelihood security.

Family Background



As well as being involved in several other organisations, Mr. Hang Nyat is on the village CBO council for chicken raising, while being a farmer in the paddies and also a carpenter. When he is not busy with the rice he finds some time to grow vegetables in his CRDT-provided vegetable garden. He is 53 and he, and his 5 children came to the village in 2002 from the Kampong Cham province. 4 of his children are studying, but one finished school at grade 7 to help him with farming duties.

What have CRDT done?

"The most important thing CRDT have brought to me is the new agriculture techniques, such as SRI (System of Rice Intensification), and the chicken, duck and vegetable farming – but they have also brought us fish ponds, rainwater storage, biodigesters, toilets and the river hand pumps. Since being a beneficiary for CRDT my family is better off than we were before." As a carpenter Mr. Hang Nyat was quick to learn about how to install river hand pump systems and rain water storage collectors. He has become an official installer for CRDT and they pay him to go to other villages and build them. This nets him a little extra income as well as: "a few duck eggs to eat as well..."

He goes on to explain further: "Sometimes people catch fish from the river, but they spend a lot of time to catch enough for the whole family to consume. CRDT introduced the fish farm to help supplement home consumption". He said that before, he did not pay attention to the vegetable garden. "But as CRDT could see that we were not that interested, they gave us seeds. Now, we are very interested!" And he makes a good point regarding the river water hand pumps: "Mostly people have to carry water from the river, and during the dry season it is hard, as the water level goes down very low. Just going up and down the river bank with water we are already tired, so most people can see the benefit in hand pump systems".

What has changed?

Mr. Hang Nyat was nowhere to be found when we turned up at his house. But what we did find was the stumps of trees cut down littering the landscape... After traveling to the other side of the river and then through rice paddies and a swamp which meant removing shoes, we emerged at an expanse of rice paddy and a solitary shack.



"I get my wood from the nearby forest for building things, we all do, and many of us use wood for fires and cooking also. Since I



arrived in 2002, I can see a change in the number of the trees in the forest, the number has gone down". He added: "It is a small change, as people only really use trees to build houses so the change is small scale... but it has still gone down. At the moment in the village, no-one clears trees for plantations etc. And there is no luxury timber left to cut down and sell... This has all already been taken". So he's not banking on forest timber for the future income of the village? "In the future we will make income from livestock production, raising chickens, ducks, pigs and buffalo.

This is the most important income for the future, also collecting resin from the forest. Vegetable and rice production is not big enough to make much income, it is only good for home consumption".

A young girl turns up at the shack and takes a pew. Where does he get his fish and meat from, and has his attitude towards this changed? "Families with no fish pond have to catch fish from the river, but I have a CRDT fish pond so I never have to fish in the river. We can use meat from the ducks, chickens and pigs to eat. I sell some of the surplus to generate income but not very

much". As we left his house on the previous side of the river, Eng, the CRDT Field Coordinator said he could smell the "nice, frying duck eggs". My mouth was watering.

But what environmental problems are they facing at the moment? And has he heard about climate change? "In the house environment there is rubbish, people do not manage waste very well. Coconut shells and plastic bags around the house looks very messy, and can result in bad health, for example, the water in the coconut shell is a good place for mosquitoes to breed". Mr. Hang Nyat didn't know what climate change was, he had never heard of it. But another man in the shack with us HAD heard of it. He said that it was like a big change for everyone, it might become very hot where it wasn't before, the rains may fall irregularly and out of season. He had heard about gas and smoke that we make going into the atmosphere. So it seems this is not a complete mystery to these people. Our friend also said: "Climate change is important to know about, but I don't know what can be done. They are only worries, I worry but I don't know how to control this". CRDT need to start explaining to the villagers that alternative livelihoods, such as they support, can be important adaptations to a changing climate.



In the future, Mr Hang Nyat wants to continue to cooperate with CRDT and gain as many new agriculture techniques as possible, and he hopes to keep installing the rainwater storage and making extra income that way. "I see a good future for my family and for the village, I can see much improvement from the years before. In 2002-2003 we couldn't see big houses in the village, but now there are many, and people before did not have complete walls in their houses but now they do. Any project or organization that wants to introduce something new to develop the rural area will be supported by the villagers".



"And on Cambodia, I have good hope for the future. It is no different from the village or family, I can see improvements. During Khmer Rouge regime, we had civil war, from 1979-1993 there were no NGOs for development in Cambodia, but after '93 there were many. I cannot imagine it will get worse again and go back. Cambodia will get better".