

News

Cambodia's first conservation genetics lab to tackle illegal ivory trade

It is estimated that >30,000 African elephants are killed every year for their ivory and that populations of the species declined by 30% between 2007 and 2014. Asian elephants are also facing severe threats, with fewer than 52,000 animals remaining. Though Cambodia has prohibited the sale of ivory since 1994, this does not include ivory originating from outside the country and Cambodia has been identified as a country 'important to watch' for illegal ivory trade by CITES. In 2015 and 2016, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) conducted market surveys to determine levels of ivory trade and consumer demand in three major cities: Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Sihanoukville. These revealed that the domestic market for ivory may be growing and that many retailers of ivory products target Chinese tourists. As Thailand and China become more proactive in stopping the ivory trade, there is concern that Chinese demand for ivory could shift to countries such as Cambodia.

To address these issues, FFI has initiated a new project to tackle illegal ivory trade in Cambodia. Supported by the UK Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the project will allow FFI to build on its understanding of Cambodia's ivory markets through continued market surveys in the three major cities and research on trade networks. This information will be crucial to support effective law enforcement and policy interventions to stop illegal ivory trade in future. The project will also allow FFI and the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland to build on their work with the Royal University of Phnom Penh to support Cambodia's first conservation genetics laboratory. Using elephant dung previously collected by FFI and the Cambodian Elephant Conservation Group, staff will be trained in the development and use of genetic markers that allow confiscated ivory to be tested to see whether it is of African or Asian origin, providing useful information about poaching and trade networks. The project will also support implementation of the *Cambodia Elephant Conservation Action Plan* and *National Ivory Action Plan*. All of these actions will help to disrupt trade networks and ultimately reduce Cambodia's role in the transit and marketing of ivory.

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Our tribes—our heritage, indigenous minority groups in northeastern Cambodia

Cultural traditions add greatly to the richness and variety of a country. They also boost innovation, promoting economic growth and socially vibrant communities. Over 276,000 members of 24 indigenous groups are estimated to live in Cambodia (equalling 2% of the national population), mainly in Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri. Indigenous groups in northeastern Cambodia were not influenced by Indian culture like the ethnic Khmer majority and often adhere to ancient customs and animist beliefs which distinguish them from modern Khmer and each other. These are collectively known as *Khmer Loeu* (highland Khmer), a term introduced in the 1950s by the late King Norodom Sihanouk to encourage unity and harmony between indigenous minority groups and ethnic Khmer in Cambodia.

In August 2017, Save Cambodia's Wildlife, a local environmental NGO, released a 10-minute film and a lavishly produced book about four major indigenous tribes in northeastern Cambodia whose customs and practices are slowly disappearing: namely the Brao, Kavet, Kreung and Khmer-Lao. Supported by Welthungerhilfe and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the book includes an introduction to indigenous groups in Cambodia and individual chapters devoted to the history, religious beliefs, traditions and lifestyles of each of the four groups in turn. Each chapter is leavened with testimonials that draw upon the perspectives of individuals each group, including shamans, farmers, housewives, village chiefs, fishermen and school teachers. These collectively illustrate the importance of forest and other natural resources for each indigenous group as well as the variety of threats these now face.

Save Cambodia's Wildlife empowers rural communities to preserve their culture and traditions. It supports these to understand their rights, traditions, and environment to enable them to protect their livelihoods and to reduce pressure on natural resources. Further information on its work and publications can be found at <https://www.cambodiaswildlife.org>.

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