News

First study of wildlife poisoning practices in Preah Vihear Province

Wildlife poisoning is an increasing concern for conservation in Cambodia, but little is known about this practice. With support from the Ministry of Environment, we conducted the first comprehensive study of wildlife poisoning which was published this year in the *Oryx* journal. The study was conducted in 2017 across 12 villages within the Chheb and Kulen Promtep wildlife sanctuaries in the Northern Plains landscape in Preah Vihear Province. We used a mixed-methods approach including interviews with 57 key informants, 24 focus group discussions, and a questionnaire survey of 462 respondents based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour framework.

We found that wildlife poisoning is widespread, occurring in nine of the 12 villages studied. Prevalence varied from just a few households to approximately 30% of each village, according to informants. Hunters place carbamate pesticides (known locally as 'termite poisons') with rice or fish near waterholes during the dry season to harvest wild meat for consumption at home. To avoid health risks, they remove the head and internal organs of harvested animals before eating. Despite this, we recorded many negative impacts of poisoning on wildlife, the environment, and people. For example, several reports of poisoned cattle were recorded. As a result, most residents strongly disapprove of wildlife poisoning, and some villages have acted against it, by warning offenders or organising community meetings.

Wildlife poisoning is a major threat to endangered wildlife and human health and must be urgently addressed by national authorities and local communities. Cambodian law regulating or banning various carbamate pesticides must be enforced, and regulations on the sale of pesticides should be imposed to ensure clear labelling and education about their safe use. Local authorities should also engage with community leaders on the issue. For example, instituting a reporting hotline would enable communities to respond to poisoning incidents.

The full details of our study are available in English at https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605319001492 and in Khmer at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12146181.v1

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Launch of national action plan to conserve Cambodian elephants

Asian elephants *Elephas maximus* are widely regarded as a flagship, keystone and umbrella species for conservation due to their cultural significance, important role in ecosystems and large area requirements. The species is regarded as Endangered because its global population has declined by an estimated 50% in the past 60–75 years while its range has been reduced by almost 90%. Populations of wild elephants in Cambodia have also decreased dramatically and are now believed to number 400–600 animals, most of which occur in the Cardamom Mountains Landscape and Eastern Plains Landscape, with much smaller numbers fragmented across several areas including Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary, Virachey National Park and Chheb Wildlife Sanctuary. Given ongoing threats posed by habitat loss and fragmentation, human-elephant conflict and poaching, coupled with stochastic and genetic vulnerabilities due to the small size of remaining populations, concerted actions are urgently required to avoid extinction of the species in Cambodia.

Following years of dedicated research and consultations with a wide variety of stakeholders including the Cambodian Elephant Conservation Group, the Ministry of Environment has launched a ten-year (2020–2029) action plan to conserve wild elephants in Cambodia. The goal of the action plan is to provide a policy framework and management mechanism for stakeholders to reduce threats to the long-term survival of elephants nationally. To this end, it proposes a variety of activities across seven strategic areas: 1) reduction of habitat loss, 2) improved habitat connectivity, 3) strengthened law enforcement, 4) prevention of wild captures, 5) mitigation of human-elephant conflict, 6) improved awareness and 7) dedicated research efforts.

Implementation of the action plan will require coordination of stakeholders nationally and regionally, adequate resources, and landscape-level approaches to secure the remaining viable sub-populations and

promote their recovery. The adoption of the first national strategy for conservation of Asian elephants in Cambodia presents a unique opportunity to renew momentum in this regard. Bilingual copies (Khmer & English) of the action plan are available at https://www.fauna-flora.org/projects/elephant-conservation-cambodia

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Local community protects an important population of Endangered *Bos javanicus* in Kampong Speu Province

Local community members have been protecting ≈1,000 ha of forest in Thporng District in Kampong Speu Province without outside support since 2003. This area of forest, known as the Prambei Mom Community Forest, supports ca. 50 individuals of the Endangered banteng *Bos javanicus* (Fig. 1) and is now surrounded by plantations. Due to local forest loss, most of the surviving wildlife in the area has retreated into the few small patches of natural forest that remain in the wider landscape. Wildlife Alliance began working at the site in 2018 when it was requested by the community to help an adult bull banteng that was caught in a snare at the site.

Despite patrols by local community rangers, hunting continues at the site, mostly through the use of snares (Fig. 2). Safari-style hunting parties have also taken place and on one occasion in 2018, a Wildlife Alliance team was present and apprehended one offender. Since this time, safari-style hunting has ceased at the site and numbers of snares within the forest have been greatly reduced, although they are still being removed from neighbouring plantations by the community rangers.

The Forestry Administration, Wildlife Alliance and several Cambodian businesses are now providing support to the community. For instance, construction of an official building at the site was recently funded by Oknha Ly Yung Phat. Camera trap surveys by Wildlife Alliance indicate at least six banteng calves were born within the forest in 2020, and have confirmed the presence of other species including green peafowl *Pavo muticus*, southern red muntjac *Muntiacus muntjak*, golden jackal *Canis aureus*, wild pig *Sus scrofa* and yellow-throated marten *Martes flavigula*. Following the death of a snared banteng at the site in February 2020, there have been no subsequent incidents of snared wildlife and ongoing camera trapping has yet to show evidence of further injured animals. We plan to obtain an accurate estimate of banteng numbers in the area using camera traps and drones during the 2020/2021 dry season and hope this information will help efforts to ensure the safety of this important population of endangered animals.

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Fig. 1 Herd of banteng in Prambei Mom Community Forest, Kampong Speu Province, 2019 (© J.C. Eames).

Fig. 2 Snared banteng cow in Prambei Mom Community Forest, showing an injured leg (© Try S.).