

Alleged Government-linked Land Grabs Threaten Cambodia's Cardamom Mountains

By [Chris Humphrey](#)

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Rising across remote stretches of southeast Cambodia, the Cardamom Mountains harbor dense tropical rainforest, much of it native growth carpeting the range's wet slopes. Due to its remoteness, the vast protected area has historically seen relatively little human activity, which helped safeguard crucial tracts of wilderness and protected hundreds of rare species.

However, the Cardamoms' status as a vital haven for wildlife is increasingly coming under threat from deforestation, land grabs, and infrastructure projects, and satellite data show an uptick in forest loss across the region in 2020 – including in protected areas. Sources say this increased clearance may be spurred by government-encouraged land grabs aimed at increasing voter confidence in the current administration of Prime Minister Hun Sen ahead of national elections in 2022.

Unique habitat under threat

The Cardamoms' tropical broadleaf forest – some of the least explored in Southeast Asia – forms a refuge both for animals and endangered tree species. Conifers (particularly *dacrydium elatum*), tenasserim pine (*pinus latteri*), birch species (*betula alnoide*) and *hopea pierrei* – a dipterocarp canopy tree that's rare elsewhere yet features widely here – all grow here.

The region is also a vital haven for rare animal species. Pablo Sinovas, Flagship Species Manager for international conservation NGO Fauna & Flora International (FFI), an organization that works in the area, says the Cardamom Mountains “support around half of Cambodia's known bird, reptile and amphibian species, and most of the country's large mammals. This includes threatened species such as Asian elephants, Siamese crocodiles, clouded leopards, sun bear, Asiatic black bear, gaur and dhole.”

Beyond these, large Indian civets (*Viverra zibetha*), banteng (*Bos javanicus*), clouded leopards (*Neofelis nebulosa*) and a large population of Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) all live in the area; last seen in Cambodia in 2007, [plans](#) to reintroduce tigers (*Panthera tigris*) to the Cardamoms have been floated by the government and NGOs. A [2010 study by FFI](#) found the area is home to at least 62 globally threatened animal species and 17 threatened tree species. Sinovas cautioned that deforestation in the area is obviously greatly concerning for the species that depend on these forests.



The banteng (*Bos javanicus*) is a species of wild cattle native to Southeast Asia; males are black while females are brown. They are listed as Endangered by the IUCN, and the largest population is found in Cambodia. Image by Buyung Sukananda via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

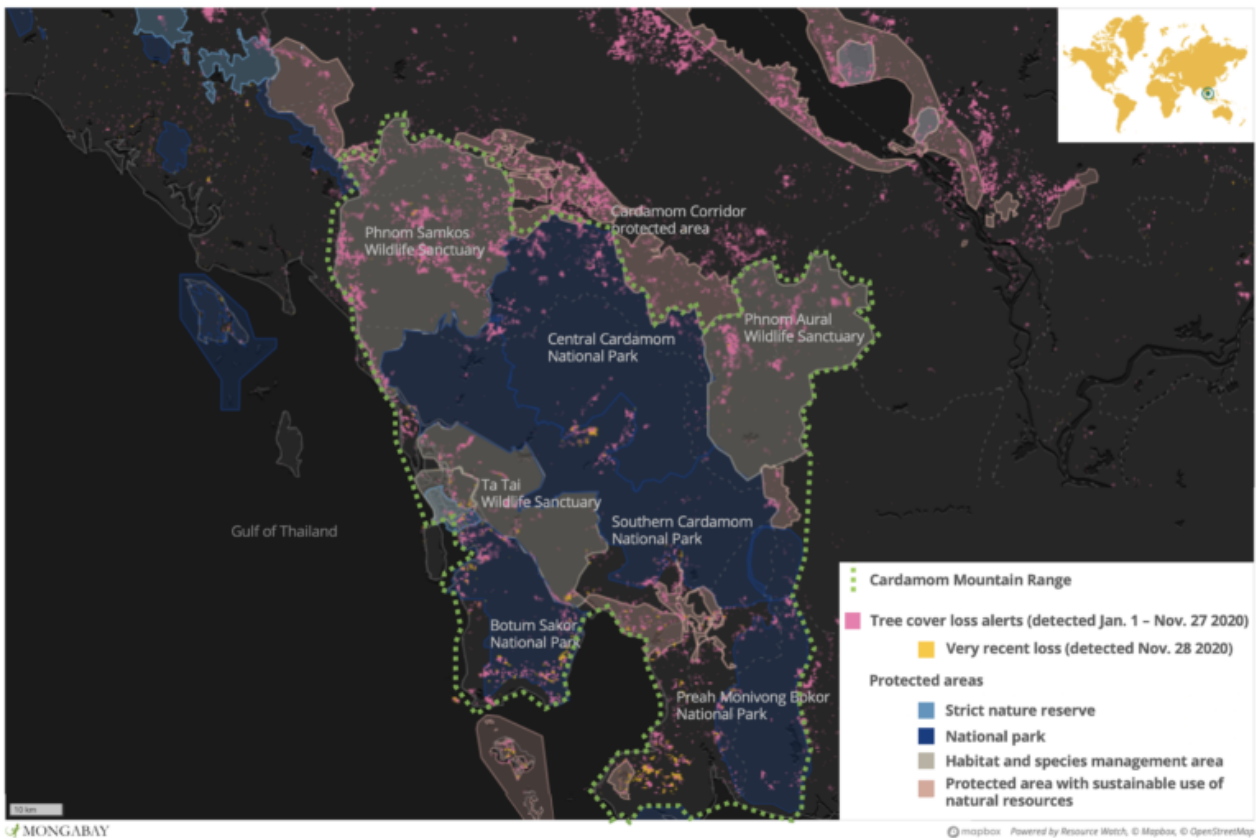


The dhole (*Cuon alpinus*) is a wild canid that roams across South and Southeast Asia. It is listed as Endangered by the IUCN, with habitat loss one of its major threats. Image by Davidvraju via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

The Cardamom Mountains encompass several protected areas, including four national parks (Central Cardamom, Southern Cardamom, Botum Sakor and Preah Monivong Bokor) and four wildlife sanctuaries (Phnom Samkos, Phnom Aural, Peam Krasaep and Tatai). However, even these official designations don't appear to be affording much protection. Satellite data from the University of Maryland (UMD) visualized on [Global Forest Watch](#) show the Cardamoms' national parks and wildlife sanctuaries together lost some 148,000 hectares – more than 8.6% – of their tree cover between 2001 and 2019. Botum Sakor alone lost nearly

a quarter of its tree cover during that time; Phnom Samkos lost more some 15%.

Deforestation doesn't seem to have slowed in 2020, according to preliminary UMD data, with several areas showing upticks in tree cover loss. Phnom Samkos and Botum Sakor remain among the most affected areas, with Central Cardamom National Park seeing deforestation occurring at the peripheries of areas that had previously been cleared, suggesting further encroachment into the forest. This protected area also contains the only known habitat of the frog *Philautus cardamonus*, which is included on the [IUCN Red List](#) for endangered species and also in a [study describing new frog species in the region](#) published in *Zootaxa* earlier this year.

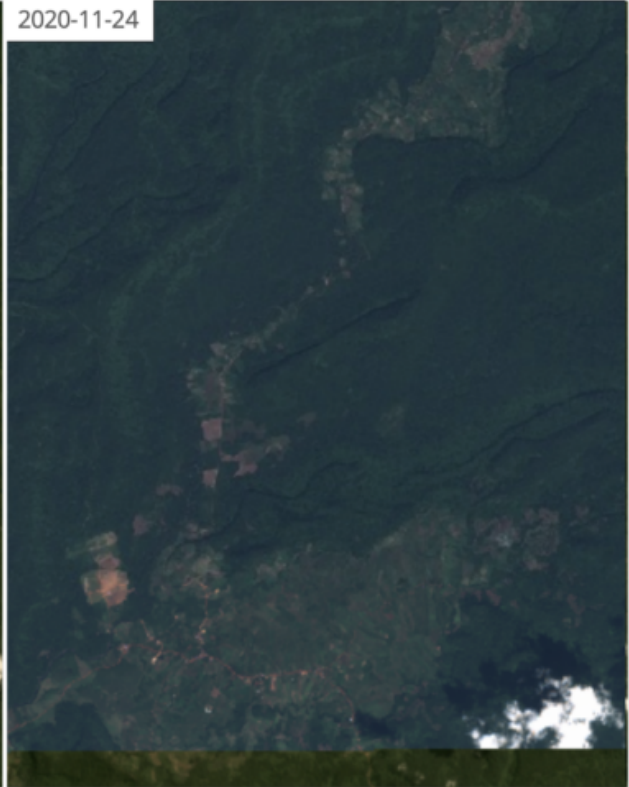


Most of the Cardamom Mountains is supposedly under government protection – but satellite data from the University of Maryland indicate this isn't standing in the way of deforestation activities.

2020-06



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Satellite imagery shows an area of recent deforestation in Southern Cardamom National Park near its border with Central Cardamom National Park. Local sources say most of the forest clearance is likely land done for agriculture, while some may be for infrastructure development.

2020-07



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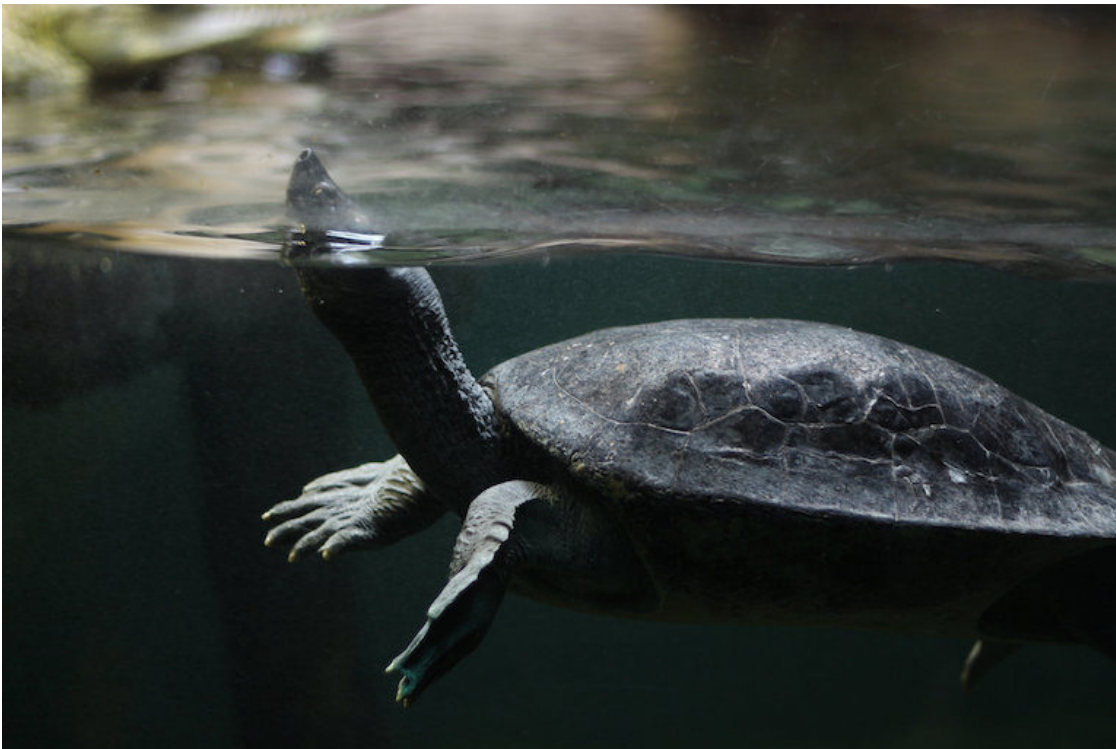
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Deforestation activities in Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary appear to be spreading from flatter, lowland areas up into the mountains.

While this particular surge of forest loss in the Cardamoms is a recent event, the stage was set years ago by the development of a trans-national highway from Thailand [through the southern part of the range](#) in 2002. The road not only bisected vital habitat for big cats and elephants, but allowed agricultural companies and animal poachers access to areas that were once unreachable.

Although stretches of the Cardamom Mountains were [demarcated as the Southern Cardamom National Park in 2016](#), meaning almost the entire region is supposedly offered high-level protections, [unfettered animal poaching continues to be reported](#) alongside increasing forest loss.

Another threat for the Cardamoms looms on the horizon. The government has recently [approved the construction of a hydroelectric](#) dam on the Pursat River, where some of the world's only remaining populations of critically endangered Siamese crocodiles (*Crocodylus siamensis*) still live, as do Cambodia's last known southern river terrapins (*Batagur affinis*) – one of the world's most endangered turtle species. An FFI survey from 2000 also found *Philautus cardamonus*, the aforementioned rare frog species endemic to Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary, in the western Cardamoms where the Pursat flows.



As few as 500 critically endangered southern river terrapins (*Batagur affinis*) may remain in the wild.

Image by Przemek Pietrak via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Sinovas says this development is likely to “cause significant environmental damage, including increased access and forest loss around the construction area” in addition to the damage caused by the dam itself in an area where Siamese crocodiles and *Philautus cardamonus* have been reported.

Government-linked land grabs

More recently, there has been an alleged rush to grab land pursuant to [a directive issued in July by Prime Minister Hun Sen](#) to give titles to impoverished or marginalized people if they

can prove they've lived on their land since 2012. But some say this decree may not be as noble as it sounds.

Sophal Ear, Associate Professor of Diplomacy & World Affairs at Occidental College, Los Angeles, said that with nationwide Cambodian elections coming up in 2022, he believes the move to assign land rights is political, an attempt to galvanize support for Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) from disaffected, poor Cambodians who wouldn't normally vote - including in the Cardamoms.

"The only surprising thing," Ear told Mongabay, "is that impoverished people might actually get something valuable out of it. But I wouldn't hold my breath on that. What is given can be taken away or subsequently land grabbed by someone else: a tycoon, a Senator, an Advisor, take your pick..."

Cambodia's Ministry of Environment and a director of multiple wildlife sanctuaries in the country did not respond to requests for comment.



Loggers transport felled native trees from the Cardamom Mountains. Photo courtesy of Marcus Hardtke.



Roughly hewn logs from the Cardamoms are placed in containers for shipment. Photo courtesy of Marcus Hardtke.

A source familiar with the issue, who asked to remain anonymous, said they have personally seen evidence of land grabs across the country, and that they have been occurring more frequently since the July statement from Hun Sen.

“Since 1993, marginalized communities haven’t had land titles,” the source said. “Some indigenous people maybe never have land titles. Groups that live traditionally on the land just live there naturally. On paper, it’s not even a law, it’s just a statement from Hun Sen saying the CPP wants to make sure people have titles for land. This made it out into a circular which was spread throughout the government, and the Ministry of Environment; the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; and the Ministry of Land Management in particular, have been tasked with implementing the process of land reform through the creation of the Land Reform Committee.”

According to Hun Sen’s statement, families that can “prove” they’ve lived on the land since 2012 can be offered titles covering one hectare of land.

Mongabay previously reported on how this issue led to people [falsely claiming land in Beng Per Wildlife Sanctuary](#). There, the forest was littered by the frail skeletons of hastily-built structures set up by outsiders who claimed to live on the land – the areas around them cleared of native vegetation. Many of those entering the sanctuary to build “homes” there were said to have travelled from major cities.



Outsiders come to wildlife sanctuaries and set up “homes” in order to claim the land and cut down nearby trees. Photo by Chris Humphrey for Mongabay.

Marcus Hardtke, an expert who’s worked on forest issues in Cambodia since 1996 with a number of NGOs and who spent five years with international watchdog organization Global Witness in the early 2000s, says “in-migration” and forest land grabs often appear random in Cambodia; but in reality, it is well organized by wealthy land speculators in cahoots with local authorities.

“Poor people are hired as a front to hide business interests,” Hardtke said, “but ultimately the land ends up in the hands of the organizers. Many of these land grabs are then later legalized in ‘compromises.’ In addition, the protected area regulations are quite often changed, creating loopholes and opportunity for fraud. Members of the military are also known for organized forest land grabbing, especially in protected areas...”

In a move aimed at curtailing the recent invasions in the Cardamoms, on Nov. 19 the Pursat Provincial Administration ordered five commune chiefs in Veal Veng district to [annul land titles issued for plots](#) in Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary. The provincial government reportedly also released a statement banning the illegal purchase and sale of land.

While it’s difficult to say exactly which agriculture companies may be involved in this scheme due to the opacity of their movements, Cambodian tycoon Try Pheap and Vietnamese agriculture companies including [Vietnam Rubber Group](#) and [HAGL](#) have regularly been implicated in land grabs in several parts of the country - including in the Cardamoms, according to Hardtke.



The entrance archway to Try Pheap’s rubber plantation and office in Beng Per Wildlife Sanctuary. Photo by Chris Humphrey for Mongabay.

Hardtke said that large-scale logging has taken place in the Cardamoms not only in 2020 in relation to land grabs and infrastructure projects, but also in bursts over recent years. He says the significant forest loss the region experienced in 2019 was linked to Try Pheap. Mongabay contacted Try Pheap for comment, but received no response.

“There was a massive, industrial-style logging operation in the Cardamoms in 2019, plundering Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary and protected areas in the Central Cardamoms,” Hardtke said. “It continued for almost six months under the noses of the relevant authorities, blatantly illegal by all accounts.

“This just illustrates the level of systemic corruption in this sector. Most of the timber was exported to Vietnam and China and, as usual, timber tycoons were behind it.”

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Articles by: **Chris Humphrey**

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