



MONKS COMMUNITY FOREST

Cambodia



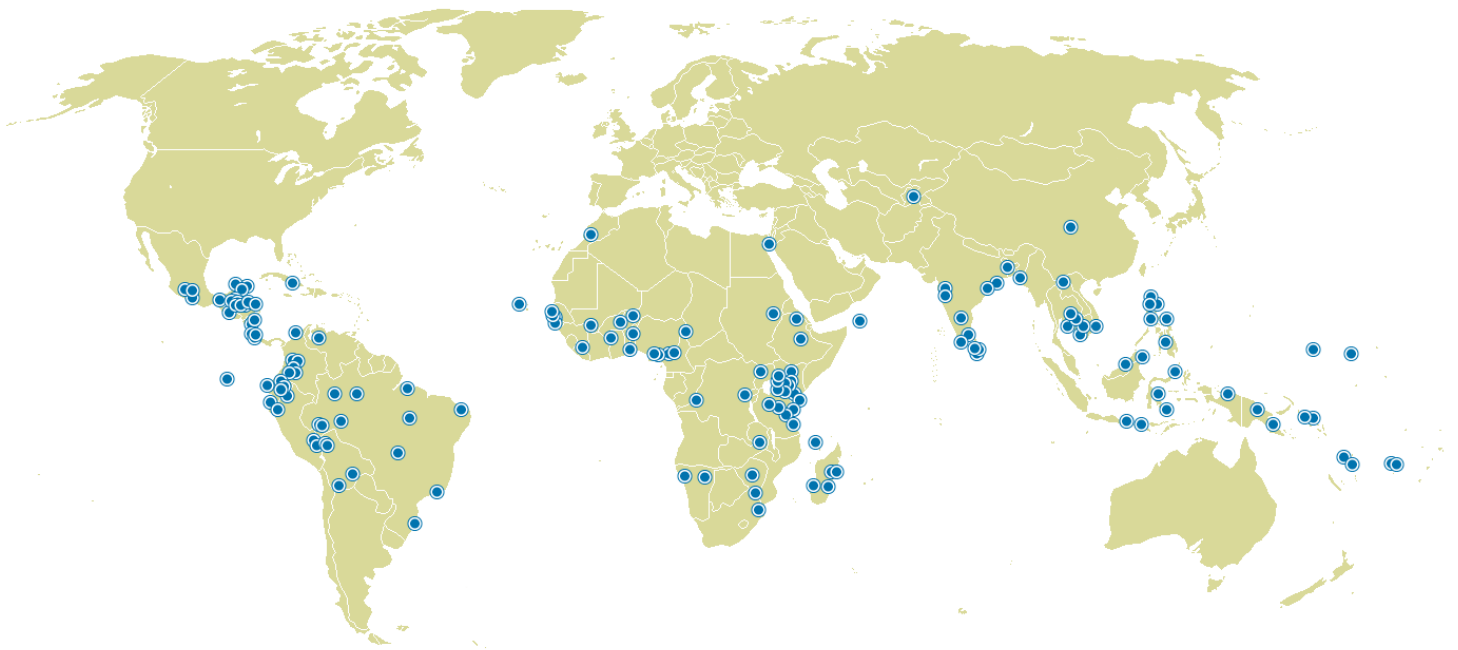
Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to [*'The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize'*](#), a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.



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PROJECT SUMMARY

Monks Community Forest is an 18,261 ha evergreen forest in northwest Cambodia. In response to widespread deforestation, the monks of Samraong Pagoda acquired legal protection of the forest, established patrol teams, demarcated the Forest's boundaries, and raised environmental awareness among local communities. The monks developed unique approaches to law enforcement based on Buddhist principles, demonstrating the power of linking conservation with traditional customs and beliefs.

A co-management committee of villagers, government authorities and NGOs has been developed to manage what is now Cambodia's largest community forest. While logging and hunting are prohibited, villagers may use traditional fishing methods, collect fallen timber for construction, and harvest non-timber forest products like bamboo, wild ginger, fruit and mushrooms.

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KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2012

FOUNDED: 2001

LOCATION: Northwest Cambodia

BENEFICIARIES: More than 3,700 people from six villages

BIODIVERSITY: 18,261-ha community conserved forest



Background and Context



In 2001, the Buddhist monk Venerable Bun Saluth initiated the protection of an 18,261-hectare stretch of evergreen forest in northwest Cambodia, now referred to as the Monks Community Forest (MCF). Venerable Saluth had witnessed the continued decimation of his country's forests by economic concessions, illegal logging and land encroachment. The unlikely conservationist soon had volunteers from his pagoda and the local community organized into patrols that regularly monitored the forest to stop illegal harvesting activities.

With few resources, the monks of the Samraong Pagoda acquired legal protection of the forest, established patrol teams, demarcated forest boundaries, raised environmental awareness among local communities, organized community patrol volunteers, developed co-management committees with local villagers, linked with government authorities and NGOs, established the country's largest community forest, attracted external support for patrolling, awareness and livelihood activities, and significantly reduced forest crime in MCF.

The main purpose of this initiative is to protect forests and conserve biodiversity for future generations, as well as to maintain access to forest resources that benefit the local people's livelihoods in six villages. Currently, nine members comprise the Community Forestry Management Committee (CFMC), which is further supported by forty-four members of village sub-committees from six villages that are working on a voluntary basis to protect the Monks Community Forest.

The two primary activities of the organization are to patrol the area under protection and to raise awareness that the forest is protected. Villagers from six villages help spread awareness within their communities about the need to protect the forest and undertake patrols to stop illegal forestry and forest-related activities. As a direct result, forest crime has been greatly reduced in much of the Monks Community Forest.



Key Activities and Innovations



Modern and traditional forest monitoring

Monks Community Forest has fostered good relationships with local and provincial authorities, including the Forestry Administration, police, and district and provincial governors in their efforts to combat forest crime. As monks, the group is well-positioned to work with a wide range of partners. Monks are respected in Cambodia, where the majority of the population is Buddhist and monks are looked to for their wisdom. The general population view monks as immune from corruption and as those working for the good of the people and the forests. As villagers living close to the Monks Community Forest have stepped forward to patrol and advance conservation efforts, it has become clear that there are also myriad benefits to local livelihoods from forest resources.

Over 3,700 people from six villages participate in and benefit from Monks Community Forest Activities. The vast majority of participants and beneficiaries are poor farmers, economically marginalized with no land title. The community forest provides resources, benefits and services such as shelter, subsistence crops, and commercial products, all of which are essential for their survival and well-being. Participants have also been empowered to have a voice in the management of the community forest through their representatives on the central management committee and on the sub-committees in each village.

An innovative approach

The Monks Community Forest is the first of its kind in Cambodia. The monks approach forest protection as an important part of the spiritual path in Buddhism. The monks apply key Buddhist teachings as the basis of the environmental action and awareness-raising, emphasizing the elimination of suffering of all living beings and living ethically by not killing or harming sentient beings. In working directly with villagers and other stakeholders, the monks highlight the intimate role nature played in Buddha's life, stressing that his birth, enlightenment, and death all occurred in the forest.

The monks have developed a unique "soft" approach to enforcement. The approach minimizes violence by using unarmed patrols, treating offenders without anger, adopting a three-strikes policy to transgression, and using photography to deter offenders. The monks conduct a tree ordination ceremony to bless the community forest's largest and oldest trees, wrapping their trunks in saffron robes to sanctify them. To cut down a tree or hunt wildlife within the ordained forest is considered as serious as harming a monk, with negative repercussions for the next rebirth. Because of their role in Khmer society as moral and spiritual leaders, the involvement of monks in the management and patrolling of the Monks Community Forest brings legitimacy to forest protection and has served as a powerful deterrent to forest crime.

Fig. 1: Total beneficiaries

No.	Village	Families	Women	Men	Total population
1	Srah Keo	116	245	228	473
2	Sampour	171	325	357	682
3	Tumnub Thmey	185	408	404	812
4	Thmey	203	526	500	1,026
5	Char Chas	63	122	115	237
6	Char Thmey	151	292	220	512
Total	6 villages	889	1,918	1,824	3,742

Source: Monks Community Forest, 2010.

Impacts



BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

Patrolling and awareness-raising activities have dramatically reduced logging, hunting and land clearing inside the Monks Community Forest, greatly helping to safeguard the area's biodiversity. While few scientific surveys have been conducted in the area under protection, Monks Community Forests is known to be home to a number of threatened species, including the Sun bear, gibbon, gaur, slow iris, leopard, Green peafowl, and Greater and Lesser adjutants, pangolin and dholes. The forest provides dense evergreen and semi-evergreen canopy cover rich in plant species and diversity. Patrol teams and village sub-committees use simple measurement systems to document the increase of species through MCF patrolling activities, where villagers and monks see wildlife and tree species thriving.

Monks Community Forest is participating in a Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) project. An important component of this work is the conservation and monitoring of biodiversity within MCF through the participation of the local community, whose members will be compensated for their involvement.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

Although logging and hunting are prohibited within the protected area, villagers can fish using traditional methods, collect old timber for materials for their shelters, and harvest non-timber forest products such as bamboo, wild ginger, fruit and mushrooms. Villagers collect these for subsistence use and for traditional medicines, as well as to sell in local markets. Mushrooms are particularly lucrative, earning as much as US\$150-\$200 per month, an important cash source in a country where the average annual income is approximately US\$700.

Villagers recognize the livelihood benefits they receive from the Monks Community Forest, which translates to enthusiasm in participating in project activities. The monks have attracted external funding to assist village patrollers who currently volunteer their time and resources. The funds have provided emergency rice supplies for poor families, assisted them to bring non-timber forest products to market in more cost-effective ways, and provided them with food in exchange for patrolling services.

The monks have actively encouraged the participation of women, although there remains some cultural hesitation for women participating in patrols due to potential dangers. There are presently seven women involved in the village sub-committees. Venerable Saluth aims to have two more women assist the management committee in the Samraong Pagoda. Women are encouraged to take part in awareness-raising activities in the village. While women collect non-timber forest products they alert MCF patrol teams of suspicious or illegal activities. In addition, amongst 889 families from six villages, 1,918 women collect wild vegetables for consumption and for sale in local markets.

POLICY IMPACTS

Monks Community Forest has brought together two key stakeholders of the Cambodian civil society – Buddhist monks and local communities – as powerful actors for environmental protection. Environmental stewardship is an emerging role for the country's monastic community, which is looked to for moral and spiritual guidance in their communities, and which increasingly wants to actively channel Buddhist principles to help society. In turn, monks have empowered villagers living near the Monks Community Forest to take protection of the natural resources upon which they depend into their own hands by participating in conservation efforts and by co-managing the community forest.

Support received from villagers takes the form of contributions to the pagoda and volunteer work, all despite that fact that villagers are economically marginalized and spend a good amount of their time working in the rice fields to provide for their families. Villagers have been motivated by the monks' efforts to protect the forest and wish to contribute. The monks dedicate their time (as well as the modest donations collected at the pagoda) to protecting the Monks Community Forest.

Organizational structure

Nine individuals sit on the Community Forestry Management Committee (CFMC), the main oversight body managing the Monks Community Forest. The CFMC consists of five monks, one female villager, and three male villagers. Venerable Bun Saluth is founder of the initiative and leader of the committee. Under the CFMC, 44 villagers from six villages are elected as village sub-committees: nine members from Thmey village, nine members from Tumnu Thmey, five members from Sampour, seven members from Char

Thmey, five members from Char Chas, and nine members from Srash Keo. Each sub-committee is responsible for leading other villagers to patrol the Monks Community Forest and report to the central management committee. In addition, the CFMC is responsible for the development of strategic plans, oversight of village sub-committees, and administrative and budgetary work. Eighty-six monks in Samraong pagoda participate the conservation efforts through regular forest patrols with village sub-committees.

Monks Community Forest is one of thirteen community forests involved in Cambodia's first reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) carbon offset projects, which could provide sustainable financing for protection activities and livelihood support to local communities over the long term. The monks have developed unique approaches to law enforcement based on Buddhist principles, and demonstrated the power of linking conservation with traditional and religious beliefs. The experiences of the monks offer important lessons for conservation organizations in Cambodia and beyond.



Sustainability and Replication



SUSTAINABILITY

Since its establishment in 2001, Monks Community Forestry has received financial and technical support from Buddhism for Development (BFD), Community Forestry International (CFI), PACT Cambodia, and, most recently, a group of nuns in the United States. The majority of conservation and awareness-raising activities, however, are possible because of donations of time and energy from monks and villagers.

If the REDD project is successful, carbon revenues will provide long-term financing to the Monks Community Forest. The REDD project also enjoys a high profile with a good amount of visibility, which will serve to further incentivize the government and other stakeholders to conserve the area and the related revenues it generates.

Monks Community Forest is arguably more sustainable than many of the large conservation projects in Cambodia, as motivation to protect the forest is deeply rooted in the Khmer spiritual and moral belief system. The monks have been able to cultivate a conservation ethic among villagers living near the MCF by explicitly linking nature conservation to the life of the Buddha, and to Buddhist principles such as karma and living a moral life. Through awareness-raising efforts, the overwhelmingly Buddhist villagers see forest protection as benefiting them spiritually, as well as materially by stabilizing weather patterns for farming, conserving biodiversity for future generations, and maintaining access to forest resources that benefit their livelihoods.

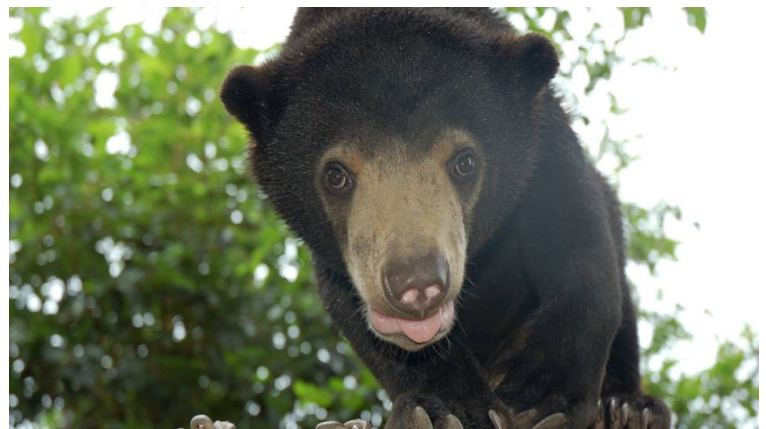
MCF has ambitions to establish more patrols and to conduct farther-reaching awareness-raising activities. More resources are needed for fuel, food and motor bikes to support patrol teams, as well as micro-finance projects for local community members, educational materials, demarcation posts, and convening resources for meetings with key local and provincial officials with villagers.

REPLICATION

The initiative has resulted in the creation of Cambodia's largest community forest, with the support of the Cambodian Forestry Administration and Community Forestry International. With national goals to expand existing community forestry to more than 2 million hectares from the current 113,000 hectares, this site sets a critical precedent in demonstrating that communities can successfully manage larger high-value forest areas.

The example of the MCF has also demonstrated to observers at the local, national, regional and international level the power that belief can have in conservation, expanding the potential role of Buddhist monks and Buddhist communities in the conservation of natural resources. This project has garnered the attention of several researchers and conservationists looking to civil society for new models of successful conservation.

Venerable Saluth is often invited to share experiences and the successes of MCF with different community forest groups within the province and national government officials in the Forestry Administration.



PARTNERS

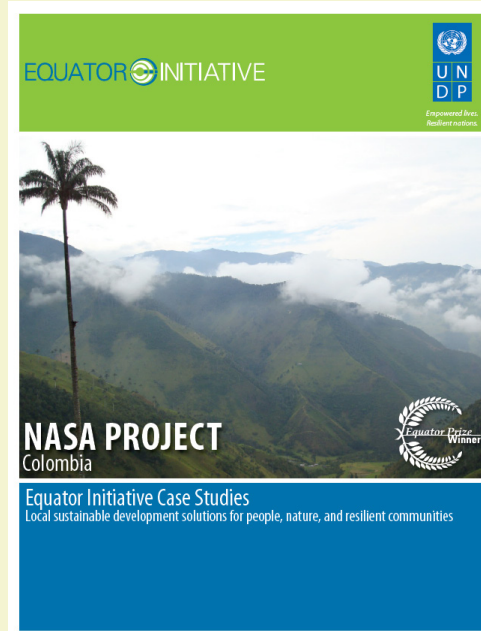
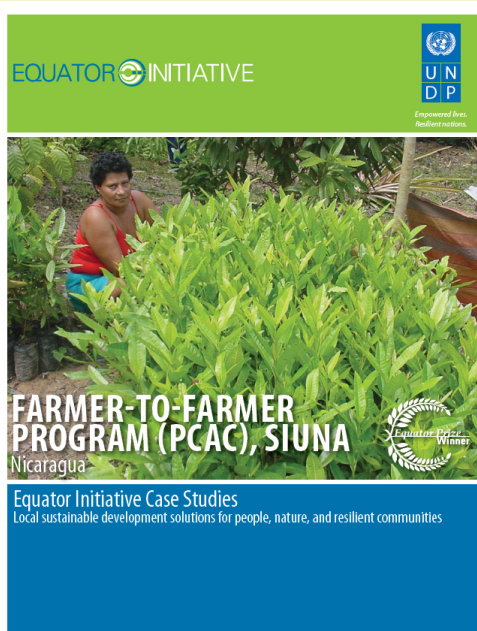
- Buddhism for Development (BFD) was the first NGO to assist the MCF. BFD has provided training and given moral and in-kind support, including a motorbike for patrolling and some funding for petrol.
- Community Forestry International (CFI) has assisted the MCF to obtain legal community forest status and to set up by-laws and regulations on forest protection and management, forest use, and community forest development. CFI advised the MCF team to establish its community forestry management committee (CFMC) and provided a grant of US\$4,000 to fund forest demarcation and patrolling exercises.
- PACT Cambodia in conjunction with the Forestry Administration is developing the pilot reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) project for thirteen community forest sites in Oddar Meanchey, of which MCF is the largest.
- Local Communities are critical to the success of the MCF. Six villages participate, and their representatives sit on the CFMC. Forty villagers volunteer their time and resources to patrol the forest, and many more members of these villages assist in protection efforts, including by providing information to the MCF teams on illegal activities they observe within the forest.



FURTHER REFERENCE

- Video on Monks Community Forest, 2010, UNDP (YouTube) [Watch here.](#)
- Presentation on Monks Community Forest (PowerPoint) [Download here.](#)
- Gurung, J., Hou, K., Long, K., and Maginnis, S. 2010. *Communities Must See the Plus in REDD-plus*. The Forests Dialogue (TFD) [Download here.](#)

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