

NETWORK MEMBER: MONKS' COMMUNITY FOREST



Protecting the Forests of Cambodia Using Buddhism and Legal Empowerment

In the face of lawlessness and impending destruction, the **Monk's Community Forest** has empowered Cambodia's poorest villagers to protect their local forest, and has allowed them to benefit from its resources. By lobbying for "community forest" status, attained in 2009, it has enabled forest-dependent communities to manage their forests sustainably to support their livelihoods.

Founded 2001

**[www.facebook.com/
MonksCommunityForestryOmc](http://www.facebook.com/MonksCommunityForestryOmc)**



Venerable Saluth, founder of the Community Forest, in a previously logged area of forest.

The Dângrêk Mountains in north-western Cambodia are not especially lofty, but they create a lengthy and steep wooded escarpment that creates a barrier to the north of the country's central plains. For this reason, the province that straddles the mountain range, Oddar Meanchay, remained the last stronghold of the Khmer Rouge until the late 1990s.

The years that followed the defeat of the Khmer Rouge were marked by lawlessness and poverty in which logging of the forests was rampant. In Cambodia's weak legal environment, the rights of the local villagers who depend on the forest and its resources are largely ignored. The forests of Cambodia have been under heavy pressure by powerful interests associated with the military and the government for timber exploitation and

economic land concessions.

Since 2001, Buddhist monks from the Samraong Pagoda have been working to protect 18,261 hectares of forest under threat of illegal logging and hunting. Known as the Monks' Community Forest (MCF) they have acquired legal protection of the forest, established voluntary patrol teams, demarcated the forest boundaries, raised environmental awareness among local communities and organized community volunteers.

In so doing the monks and the local people protect community rights to land and natural resources. The project also addresses the fundamental Buddhist principles of helping to end suffering of all living beings, and of increasing compassion. All work in the MCF is conducted with these underlying guiding principles.

“The MCF was officially declared a community forest in 2009,” says Long Sarou of the Monk’s Community Forest project. “This was a particularly important legal designation in Oddar Meanchey province, where commercial logging was so destructive, and where valuable land continues to be taken by elites and lost to the majority of its poor rural citizens. Six villages of almost 4,000 people now rely on this community forest.”

By linking with government authorities and NGOs, and significantly reducing forest crime in the MCF. The MCF is now regarded by local villagers and authorities as one of the best protected community forests in Oddar Meanchey and is Cambodia’s largest community forest.

The monks of Samraong Pagoda, who founded the MCF, through their voluntary patrols showed local communities that they could safeguard the forest. They raised awareness amongst poor and marginalized villagers about their rights to forest resources and how they themselves could participate in upholding the laws of the community forest.

The MCF established a management committee made up of monks and elected members from surrounding villages. Six villages depend on this forest (each village has an MCF sub-committee), and forty people from these villages now voluntarily patrol with the monks to protect the wildlife and resources of the MCF. They have access to the forest for resources such as resin, bamboo and fish, which they can harvest for subsistence use or to sell.

The monks have developed unique approaches to law enforcement based on Buddhist principles. They have minimized violence through unarmed patrols, treating offenders without anger, ordaining trees as monks to protect them, and using photography and large groups of monks on patrol to deter offenders.

In 2010, a patrol team consisting of one monk and five local villagers came across a gang of armed

men hunting banteng, an endangered species. The gang consisted of a policeman and nine villagers from another district called Cheoung Kal. The patrol team heard about 10 gunshots, but because it took place at night, decided to report the incident to the head monk, Venerable Bun Saluth, and return to investigate in the morning. In the morning the patrol discovered the gang had shot dead two of the endangered banteng and logged some timber.

The patrol team carefully approached the gang, and while most of the offenders ran away, the patrol team was successful in arresting the policeman and two others. They also confiscated the banteng, the policeman’s gun and the wood. Venerable Saluth arrived on the scene and took photographs of the men and their confiscated items.

The monks assembled the evidence and handed this over to the local Forestry Administration (FA) office. From there the FA staff prepared the necessary paperwork and made sure that the case went to court. The three were found guilty and the policeman sentenced to five years in jail, and the two villagers were sent to jail for one year.

The monks’ non-violent approach is complemented by strong relationships with government authorities (such as the Forest Department, which helps enforce the law with armed offenders), NGOs, and



Monks place signs to demarcate the boundaries of the community forest.

local villagers.

The Buddhist monks are also carrying out their interpretation of Buddhist 'law' by following Buddhist precepts. The monks believe they have a duty to protect all life, including trees and animals. The strict regulations in the MCF reflect this view: the regulations prohibit all logging and all hunting of animals, regardless of their conservation status. As such they are much stricter than the Cambodian Forestry Law.

The monks see logging a tree or hunting an animal

as taking a life, and not only counter to the virtue of 'no harm', but also a violation of the first of the Five Precepts, the basic duties or commitments undertaken by monks and the basis of Buddhist morality. The first of these precepts can be translated as: 'I undertake the precept to refrain from harming living creatures'. The monks want to prevent the drought, extensive forest fires and floods, shifts in weather and lack of resources resulting from forest degradation that have hurt farmers across Cambodia.

Key Lessons

- 1 Violence is not necessary to secure land and natural resource rights. The gentler, Buddhist approach to law enforcement pioneered by the MCF is sorely needed amongst a population that has suffered a great deal of violence during the Khmer Rouge period and in subsequent years.
- 2 The MCF model is unique in that it is built on a partnership between monks and villagers, which can be very powerful in stopping illegal activity. The presence of monks brings an added legitimacy to the efforts, given the respect they are awarded in Khmer society. People feel they should follow the monks' example.
- 3 The MCF system can be replicated in other areas of Cambodia: it is built on a combination of Buddhist-led law enforcement, supplemented by support by the Forest Department when needed, and local awareness raising and engagement.
- 4 Monks should not be afraid of 'engaged Buddhism', which is in alignment with the way of the Buddha. Approximately 50 other monks live near community forests in Oddar Meanchay province. These forests suffer a much higher level of exploitation than the MCF and there are many lessons that the monks living near these community forests can take from the MCF.
- 5 The MCF has many lessons to share with other communities in Cambodia whose access to land is increasingly threatened. The MCF has demonstrated that with few resources, but with a guiding belief and grassroots activism, environmental rights can be secured.