6.1.3 Cambodia



Context

Virachey National Park lies in north-eastern Cambodia, across Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces and near the borders with Laos and Vietnam. The area contains forests, mountains, rivers and habitats for numerous rare species, but it is also the long-established home of Prao, Kavet, Lun and Kreung Indigenous communities. Their livelihoods and culture are tied to rotational farming, rice cultivation, fishing, hunting, livestock raising, forest-product collection, sacred sites and burial grounds. Virachey was designated in 1993 for over 332,400 hectares. In 2017, the government created the Northeast Biodiversity Conservation Corridor, overlapping community lands used for cultivation, grazing, subsistence, refuge, worship and burial. Sub-Decree No. 192 of July 2023 then expanded and amended Virachey National Park to 405,700 hectares, incorporating parts of both designations. The study focuses particularly on villages in Ta Veng district. It documents how conservation zoning intersects with delayed collective land registration, economic land concessions, mining and hydropower interests, and the prospect of REDD+ carbon-finance activities.

Conflict description

The central grievance is that the 2023 boundary change was made without Free, Prior and Informed Consent. Interviewed community members and local authorities reported that they were neither consulted nor informed. Many first learned of the change when park rangers prohibited farming in March and April 2024, and later through court summons. By February 2025, at least 55 families from four villages were facing proceedings in the Ratanakiri Provincial Court. The research provides detailed data for 51 accused families, many farming plots of between 0.5 and 2 hectares. It reports that official complaints often overstated plot sizes and alleged the removal of valuable trees where farmers described old mixed plantations. Twenty-four of the 51 families were classified as poor, and court travel contributed to debt among 23 families. Restrictions on cultivation have left households unable to harvest or prepare fields, creating food shortages and threatening livelihoods that rely almost entirely on rotational agriculture and forest resources. Collective registration has not resolved the insecurity. One of the affected communities (from the Ta Bok village) began preparing its application in 2014, but surveying was delayed until 2019 and then blocked because the land had been included in the 2017 conservation corridor. A 2020 request to remove the overlap received no response. Another community (from the Pang Kith village) obtained collective title in 2023 for approximately 829.79 hectares, but the area did not match the community's requested map, left farmland outside the title and did not prevent lawsuits against at least nine families. The conflict is intensified by other projects and concessions. Five economic land concessions cover at least 45,000 hectares in the Ta Veng district; mining interests reportedly cover much of the district; and communities have observed exploratory drilling and hydropower studies. A proposed REDD+ project could

add another obstacle to collective registration and traditional farming. Conservation rules thus operate within a wider struggle over control of forests, minerals, water and carbon. The result is not only loss of income, but pressure on community governance, sacred relationships to place and cultural continuity.

Resistance and pathways forward

Community resistance has taken legal, administrative and evidentiary forms. Communities have pursued collective land registration, submitted customary maps and petitioned environmental authorities. Local authorities have issued letters recognising community land use and seeking release from charges, although the court continued summoning residents. Indigenous youth leading the research documented farm locations through GPS and GIS, interviewed affected families and stakeholders, and compared official allegations with conditions on the ground. This counter-documentation challenges descriptions of longstanding fields as forest encroachment. Yet proposed settlements have remained coercive. Rangers and subnational authorities reportedly offered to end proceedings only if families signed letters surrendering the land to the state. One young Prao man received a five-year suspended sentence and a fine of 15 million riels in December 2024. The study therefore rejects land surrender as a fair resolution. It recommends withdrawal of the complaints by the provincial environment department, permission for families to resume farming and urgent action to prevent further food insecurity. It also calls for accelerated collective land registration under the 2001 Land Law, cooperation between land and environment ministries, and recognition of Indigenous collective tenure within protected areas. More broadly, future conservation, REDD+ and development initiatives should apply FPIC and treat customary stewardship as part of biodiversity protection rather than as a threat. A durable pathway requires correcting the protected-area boundaries and registration failures that converted community territories into administratively disputed land, while enabling Indigenous communities to continue managing the forests, fields and cultural sites on which both their survival and conservation outcomes depend.