

Logging route cut into Cambodia's Prey Lang from Think Biotech's concession

by Gerald Flynn | Andy Ball | Meng Kroypunlok on 5 October 2023



- *A road carved from a reforestation concession into the heart of Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary in Cambodia appears to be facilitating the illegal logging and trafficking of valuable timber, a Mongabay investigation has revealed.*
- *The road originates in the concession of Think Biotech, a company previously implicated in forestry crimes, but its director denies being involved in the new road.*
- *The road had advanced 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) into the ostensibly protected Prey Lang before authorities ordered a crackdown — one that activists say was just for show and targeted only small-time loggers.*
- *Community groups and activists say Prey Lang's forests are being decimated at alarming rates, with satellite data showing nearly the same amount of forest cover loss in the past five years as in the previous 18.*

STUNG TRENG, Cambodia — A fresh incursion into Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary has added new evidence to mounting allegations of timber

Conversation 1 Comment

firm-accused-of-creating-a-monopoly-in-the-timber-business/) by Think Biotech, which exists on paper as a reforestation company producing sustainable wood.

Satellite imagery showed that between April 6 and 9, a fresh path had been crudely cut into Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary from Think Biotech's 34,000-hectare (84,000-acre) concession, which extends along the border of the protected forest in Stung Treng and Kratie provinces.

Prey Lang is mainland Southeast Asia's largest lowland evergreen rainforest and a vital carbon sink. The sanctuary spanned nearly 430,000 hectares (1.06 million acres) until August this year, when the Ministry of Environment increased the size of Prey Lang

(<https://news.mongabay.com/2023/08/skepticism-as-cambodia-expands-protected-areas-by-more-than-a-million-hectares/>) to 489,663 hectares (1.21 million acres).

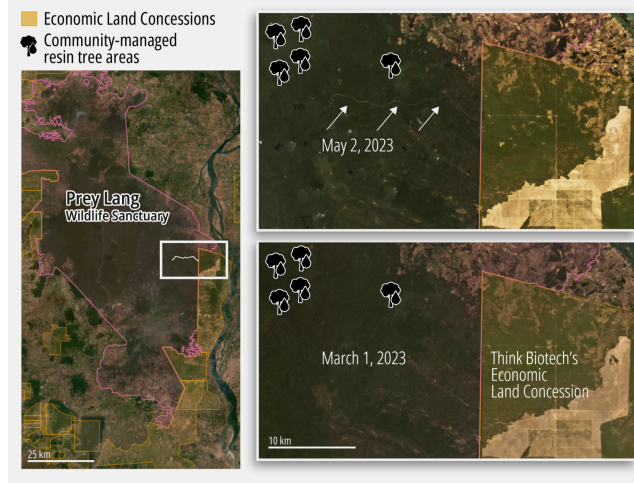
The expansion of Prey Lang, however, comes after some of the worst years on record for illegal logging

(<https://news.mongabay.com/2022/05/large-scale-logging-in-cambodias-prey-lang-linked-to-politically-connected-mining-operation/>) in the wildlife sanctuary.

Satellite imagery from April 2023 shows construction of a new road that appears to begin inside Think Biotech's concession. By April 12, it had cut a meandering path almost 10 kilometers (6 miles) deep into the protected forest of Prey Lang. The path appeared to be bound directly for a cluster of community forests

(https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA02132Q.pdf), many of which hold old-growth resin trees that have been sustainably tapped by Indigenous communities for generations.

Logging Road Cut from Think Biotech's economic land concession into Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary's protected forest towards communities' resin trees



Source: Global Forest Watch / Planet Labs Inc. / Licadho / USAID / Ministry of Environment

MONGABAY

Satellite imagery provided by Planet Labs shows the development of a new road running from Think Biotech's concession in Cambodia's Stung Treng province into the protected Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary. Image by Andrés Alegría / Mongabay.

In a June interview with Mongabay, Think Biotech's director, Lu Chu Chang, denied being involved in the creation of the new road shooting out of his concession into the protected area.

However, communities have previously complained to USAID

(https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA0213C6.pdf)

through its now-defunct \$21 million Greening Prey Lang conservation initiative that Think Biotech — or subcontracted loggers working on its behalf — had pressured the communities, trying to coerce them into selling their resin trees. The communities themselves do not actually own the trees, only the right to tap the resin from them, so even those resin trees that were sold to loggers consensually were cut down illegally.

These complaints came in repeatedly from at least 2019, according to USAID's reports on Prey Lang (<https://dec.usaid.gov/dec/search/FusionSearchResults.aspx?q=greening+prey+lang>), until June 2021, when USAID opted to redirect funding away

(<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/08/usa-id-redirects-funding-in-cambodia-as-future-of-prey-lang-wildlife-sanctuary-hangs-in-the-balance/>) from the Ministry of Environment due to the continued commercial-scale illegal logging taking place in Prey Lang.

Think Biotech has continuously denied allegations (<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/decademics>)

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349041130_Community_monitoring_of_illegal_logging_activists) (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/03/cambodians-fight-the-cancer-eating-away-at-prey-l>) (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/01/cambodia-illegal-logging-harming-indigenous-v=PIOZQY8bDko>) have collectively compiled vast troves of evidence that point to the abuse of I

All roads lead to Think Biotech

Chang strongly denied being involved in illegal logging or that the new road cutting a path through Prey Lang, toward communities' resin trees, had been built by his company. "If it is someone from my concession, you think I can stop them? I have no weapon, I'm no soldier, I'm the businessman, so how can I do it?" he said.

"From our concession or not, I don't know, but I never got this timber. Somebody I know got this timber but this is not our team."

Later in the interview, Chang refuted his earlier claim that he knew who was logging in Prey Lang outside the Think Biotech concession. He also denied knowing who built the road or who was taking timber from the area.



Lu Chu Chang, director of Think Biotech, vehemently denied involvement in illegally felling trees in Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary during his interview with Mongabay in June 2023. Image by Chasing Deforestation / Mongabay.

Composite satellite imagery for May 2023 produced by Planet, a geospatial data company, shows holes in the forest canopy around the tail end of the new road that weren't visible in imagery from December 2022, as well as stark contrasts in a year-on-year analysis of imagery from May 2022. The road also leads directly into the Mitsui REDD+ project area (<https://news.mongabay.com/2022/06/opaque-infrastructure-plans-a-death-sentence-for-cambodias-prey-lang-wildlife-sanctuary/>), which is managed by Conservation International, and strikes into a relatively untouched segment of primary forest within Prey Lang. This new road has opened up access to deeper, older-growth forest — close to community protected areas where valuable resin trees still exist. Chang denied that this timber ever ended up in his concession, instead directing comments to the government.

well, ask them, why [do] you ask me?" he said.
"If I'm the forest criminal, I'd be caged already."

By April 20, the road had advanced another kilometer west, reaching 11 km (6.8 mi); by April 25, construction reached 12 km (7.5 mi) into Prey Lang.

Then the road came to a halt.



Initially identified on satellite imagery, the new road crossing the boundary of Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary was built from within Think Biotech's concession over the course of April 2023. Image by Chasing Deforestation / Mongabay.

On April 26, deputy commander of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) Sao Sokha gave instructions to Cambodia's military police via voice message, ordering them to crack down

(<https://cambodianess.com/article/iron-fist-ordered-to-to-stop-forestry-crime>) on illegal logging in Kampong Thom, Kratie, Preah Vihear and Stung Treng — the four provinces that Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary straddles.

"If it is necessary to use armored vehicles to catch this group, the forest destroyers, and to handcuff them, how many of them are still destroying the forest," Sokha said in the voice message. Sokha is also commander of the Cambodian gendarmerie and chairs the National Commission for the Suppression of Natural Resource Crimes.

This order was picked up by Koh Santepheap, a pro-government news outlet

(<https://kohsantepheapdaily.com.kh/article/1726247.html>) that had just a few days earlier reported on a procession of *koy-yun*, a type of tractor favored by loggers in Cambodia, carrying timber out of the protected area and reportedly delivering it to Think Biotech.

"If district and provincial officials do not crack down on crime, we will crack down, and if they have weapons and shoot us, shoot them back," Sokha said in the voice message that spread rapidly across the messaging app Telegram.

An estimated 150 military police officers were then deployed to Prey Lang almost immediately after Sokha's orders, marking the



For years, environmental activists have reported incidents of illegal logging, but authorities have been unwilling or unable to protect Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary. This logging truck was seen transporting timber near Think Biotech's concession in 2020. Image by Ma Chettra.

Guns for show

When approached for comment on the results of this year's crackdown on illegal logging in Prey Lang, Sokha couldn't be reached by phone and then read but did not respond to questions sent by Mongabay over Telegram. Eng Hy, spokesperson for the Cambodian gendarmerie and the National Commission for the Suppression of Natural Resource Crimes, said "The data is not on my hand. We confiscated the wood and machines, but we did not count [them]."

For many, the crackdown was seen as another performative display of authority ahead of the July 23 national election (<https://cambojanews.com/live-updates-national-elections-2023/>), where the ruling party won 120 of the 125 seats in the national legislature.



In 2011, members of the Prey Lang Community Network, a grassroots activism group intent of preserving the protected area, burn an unmarked stockpile of illegal timber shortly before local authorities attempt to arrest the late forest activist Chut Wutty. Image supplied.

"The crackdown of Sao Sokha, it was only a short period of time but we see that it was not effective because they were only able to crack

the community forest in Teuk Khmao, Kratie province.

Speaking to Mongabay in July, Bunleang said the gendarmerie only arrested 12 loggers, but that these were “small-time people” working for a daily wage, earning 450,000 Khmer Riel (a little over \$100) per cubic meter of timber transported.

“Those 12 were sent to prison, but the large bosses [remain] free,” Bunleang added. “The troops of Sao Sokha have already left [Prey Lang] over a month now after sending those loggers to court.”

On June 30, then-environment minister Say Samal confirmed that he was aware of a new road being cut through Prey Lang coming from Think Biotech's concession, adding that an investigation had been launched.

“Since the investigation is not yet completed, it is impossible to conclude who is behind the alleged road construction,” Samal said in a response to written questions submitted to the ministry by Mongabay. “We remain committed to transparency and will keep the public informed of the progress in addressing this issue. Please be assured that our main priority is to protect our natural resources and biodiversity, and we will take appropriate action if any violations are found.”



An aerial view of the new road linking Think Biotech to Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary taken in May 2023. Image by Andy Ball / Mongabay.

Prey Lang perpetrators still at large

As of October, no updates have been made public regarding the investigation.

The pro-government *Khmer Times* reported on May 5 (<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501284812/private-company-found-to-be-involved-in-prey-lang-illegal-logging/>) that 12 people had been arrested, 11 of whom were sent to court; 328,791 cubic meters (11.6 million

Lang was reportedly involved. The same outlet reported on May 16 (<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501290933/authorities-deny-cyn-report-of-illegal-logging-at-prey-lang/>) that authorities had rejected a civil society group's claims of deforestation in Prey Lang, dismissing the scale of illegal logging in the sanctuary.

Gendarmerie spokesperson Hy said he didn't know about arrests, that no corruption had been uncovered, and that he did not know about the new road cut from Think Biotech's concession into Prey Lang. Instead, he told reporters in August, "If there were crimes, we cracked down, but we did not find any crimes [at Think Biotech]."

On May 24, GRK News, the gendarmerie's official news portal, posted a photo of a truck laden with timber within Think Biotech's concession (https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0T2ismE71iK4pWMDg5ZmeXdktz7vEYqNMaTgJ2KufdekPcD3cNmyBBxYzsSg2N6). Authorities reportedly left the truck and the timber within the concession while awaiting orders from



On May 24, 2023, the Cambodian Gendarmerie uploaded images of a timber truck seized inside the Think Biotech concession during this year's crackdown. Image supplied.

When pressed to explain whether 2023's crackdown would mirror that of preceding attempts to curb illegal logging (<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501196314/prey-lang-illegal-logging-claim-dismissed/>) in Prey Lang by simply arresting small-time loggers rather than those directing the logging operations, Samal said the ongoing investigation in Prey Lang was comprehensive. "While small-time loggers may have been arrested in the crackdowns, it does not mean that larger crimes are exempt from law enforcement," he said, adding that any allegations of bribery among officials would be investigated thoroughly and that the ministry welcomes any evidence or information regarding these claims.

"The Ministry of Environment is not aware of anyone from the ministry involved in this matter," he said. "However, the ministry will take serious steps to take those who are found guilty into accountability and punishment."

officials. By law, timber companies pay royalties based upon their concession size and the volume of timber sold, but Chang alleged he was subject to additional fees including gifts and "lucky money" for special occasions, which Chang said are often small in cost, but numerous in volume.

"You must make this kind of relationship with everybody, even with the small guys, even the small official," he said. "But I cannot pay this every day because I no longer have enough money.

"Even when the government asks [for money] I cannot [pay], because I never do things illegally, I do the regular way," he added.

"They ask me to pay a lot, but I don't want to, I cannot — the workers would get no salary and can I tell them I have no money to pay you? No, I cannot. The government gets the money from me, too much, I cannot pay to the officials and to my own workers, I cry, nobody is helping me."



An aerial view of forest clearing inside Think Biotech's 34,000-hectare concession that was granted in 2012 along along the eastern boundary Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary. Despite being a reforestation project on paper, Think Biotech has repeatedly faced allegations of trespass logging inside the protected area its concession borders. Image by Andy Ball / Mongabay.

Checkpoints link Think Biotech's concession to Prey Lang

Despite the limited outcome of this year's crackdown, both reporters and local communities observed that the gendarmerie's presence in Prey Lang proved effective in the short term by disrupting logging operations. Bunleang, the community forest chief, said he was also aware of the new road cut through Prey Lang from Think Biotech's concession and noted that logging activity around the

fled to avoid arrest.

This was corroborated when reporters visited the Stung Treng section of Prey Lang in May, back when the gendarmerie's crackdown was at its peak. In a village on the border of Prey Lang's northern tip, a man who identified himself as Long said that he had been working for Think Biotech as a security guard and warned reporters that the road into Think Biotech's concession was likely blocked by military police officers, adding that most of the company's private security had already fled.

Long, who was dressed in the peaked cap typical of security guards in the concession, did not provide evidence of employment by Think Biotech, but showed deep familiarity with the interior of the concession, and provided details of timber operations that were corroborated by third parties.

Long and a man in plainclothes who Long said was a colleague took reporters into the Think Biotech concession and pointed to where unofficial wooden checkpoints were manned by the company's security, who had fled at the time, to manage the flow of timber coming in from Prey Lang.



Long took reporters to see a checkpoint that is typically managed by Think Biotech's security team to control the flow of illegally logged timber from Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary into the company's concession. It was temporarily abandoned during the gendarmerie-led crackdown. Image by Chasing Deforestation / Mongabay.

"The company logged tens of thousands of hectares [of forest] in Prey Lang forest, this is the road boundary [of the company] and Prey Lang is over here," Long said. "This is where the company has taken. This is the road of the company [used for] transporting timber, the river is called O'Krak."

These checkpoints, Long said, have been used by loggers, mostly locals living in and around Prey Lang, who cut trees from inside the protected area and then sell it to Think Biotech along roads just like the one identified on satellite imagery in April.

concession, which he added had been mostly cleared of natural forest. "But there are still some available in Prey Lang forest and this checkpoint is to prevent koy-yun from transporting timber toward the river." According to Long, the checkpoints are there not just to provide a convenient means of transporting illegally logged timber from Prey Lang into the company's concession, but also to ensure that the timber is sold solely to Think Biotech.



Activists captured images of koy-yuns transporting timber around the Think Biotech concession at night in 2020. Image by Ma Chettra.

"We cut trees and sell timber to the company also," Long said, adding that he needed money to support his income from Think Biotech.

"They need [timber from us], if there is no problem. [But] when the military police officers move in, [we cannot go logging]."

Long detailed the flow of illicit timber cut down by villagers who receive payment for the wood from Think Biotech, adding that "thousands of koy-yun" pass through the checkpoints along the company's concession border, with the company reportedly paying 700,000 riel (about \$170) for a cubic meter of "red timber."

Two species that Long could identify by their Khmer names included *koki* (*Hopea odorata* (<https://tropical.theferns.info/viewtropical.php?id=Hopea+odorata>)), a resin tree species classified as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, and *beng* (*Azelia xylocarpa* (<https://www.wood-database.com/azelia-xylocarpa/>)), a reddish hardwood. Each koy-yun, he added, could hold 1-2 m³ (35-70 ft³) of timber. The theft of timber from Prey Lang was an open secret, Long said, because Think Biotech had become "greedy" and was taking so many trees from inside the protected area that it had become impossible to maintain a veil of secrecy.

so [they] go to steal in Prey Lang," he said. "Why don't they expand the concession? Because they can't, it would be wrong, so they secretly come inside [Prey Lang] to log the trees."



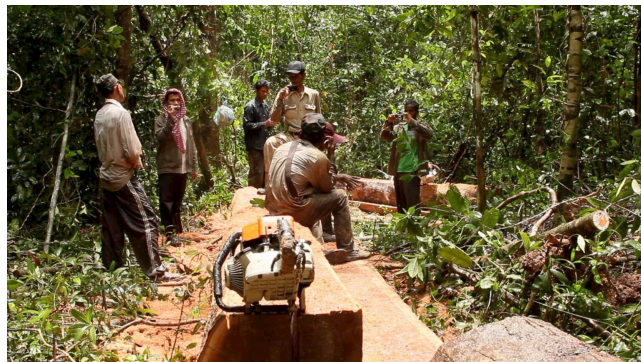
The Indigenous communities that call Prey Lang home have been sustainably tapping resin trees for generations, but these trees are targeted by illegal loggers on account of the tree's height, width and lack of branches that make the species ideal for turning into plywood. Image by Thomas Cristofolletti.

A recent spike in deforestation

The new road and associated logging is just the latest abuse, according to Svay Song, head of the Prey Lang Community Network's (PLCN) Kratie province chapter.

The PLCN is a grassroots community-led organization, largely made up of the Indigenous Kuy people, of whom an estimated 250,000 call Prey Lang home. Working collaboratively, the PLCN has sought to defend Prey Lang from the various threats.

"I have observed Prey Lang forest from 2000 until 2023," Song said. "I have been working with the PLCN and doing this for a long time, but for the last four or five years, I see that Prey Lang forest is only getting stranger; more frequently, we see that the forest clearance and land clearance for ownership is committed by powerful individuals."

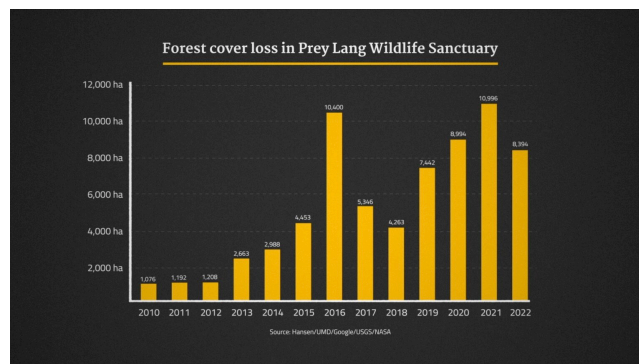


members of the Prey Lang Community Network while on patrol through the forest in 2011. Image supplied.

The PLCN's commitment to preventing forest loss in Prey Lang, mostly by patrolling the forest and attempting to document the destruction or to apprehend illegal loggers, has painted a target on the group's back. In February 2020, the Cambodian government banned the PLCN from entering the forest (<https://vodenglish.news/officials-block-prey-lang-activists-from-forest-ahead-of-annual-event/>), effectively ending the group's ability to conduct patrols, stating that the NGO was not properly registered with the Ministry of Interior and was acting illegally.

While this hasn't entirely stopped the PLCN from monitoring forest loss within Prey Lang, it has coincided with a spike in deforestation that the PLCN said was a direct result (<https://cambojanews.com/environment-ministry-enabling-deforestation-by-preventing-patrols-plcn-says/>) of its patrols being stopped by the government.

Satellite data from Global Forest Watch and the University of Maryland's Global Land Analysis and Discovery (GLAD) Laboratory (<https://storage.googleapis.com/earthenginepartners-hansen/GFC-2022-v1.10/download.html>) show that Prey Lang lost 8,934 hectares (22,076 acres) of tree cover in 2022 alone — more than any other protected area in Cambodia (<https://cambojanews.com/satellite-data-shows-protected-areas-faced-brunt-of-deforestation-in-2022/>). Of this loss, 6,280 hectares (15,518 acres), or 70%, was primary forest. 2021 saw a record-breaking 10,996 hectares (27,172 acres) of tree cover in Prey Lang vanish as loggers operated with impunity under the cover of COVID-19 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-deforestation-politics-featu/as-loggers-exploit-virus-cambodian-forest-protectors-defy-state-ban-idUSKBN22E016>).



Data from Global Forest Watch shows how deforestation spiked sharply shortly after Lu Chu Chang took over Think

“The areas that I patrol, that I've seen and can still remember, there are new roads [being built], there are companies with bulldozers taking the timber,” Song said. “It means that our natural resources, our forests, are getting fewer and fewer. It is unthinkable compared to five years ago.”

This spike also coincides with a change in management at Think Biotech, whose South Korean directors abandoned the project in December 2018, allowing it to fall into the hands of Chang, who also heads the now largely inactive Cambodia Timber Industry Association, once a powerful lobby group for industrial loggers. Chang is also a director of Angkor Plywood, a company that has been repeatedly accused of buying laundered timber from Think Biotech (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/03/cambodians-fight-the-cancer-eating-away-at-prey-lang-wildlife-sanctuary/>).

Between 2001 and 2018

(<https://gfw.global/3E5Wu0J>), Prey Lang lost some 40,000 hectares (99,000 acres) of tree cover, according to Global Forest Watch, but between 2019 and 2022

(<https://gfw.global/43Wtx1v>), more than 36,400 hectares (90,000 acres) were lost, making the past four years almost as destructive as the 18 years that preceded them. Between 2002 and 2022, Prey Lang lost nearly a fifth (<https://gfw.global/3shYjoj>) of its primary forest cover.

Over the course of 2018, Prey Lang lost 4,363 hectares (10,781 acres) of forest cover, a figure that nearly doubled to 7,442 hectares (18,390 acres) in 2019, immediately after Chang took over, and then to 8,994 hectares (22,225 acres) lost in 2020, before 2021 became the worst year for forest cover loss on record in Prey Lang, when 10,996 hectares of forest were cleared.

Preliminary data for 2023 from Global Forest Watch suggest deforestation this year is set to exceed [map=eyJjZW50ZXliOmsibGF0IjoxMy4xMzAwMTI4MzI5ODAwNzEsImxuZyI6MTA1Ljc0NTcyNzY2](https://gfw.global/3shYjoj) of tree cover loss, particularly in the southern portion of the reserve.

“Actually, Prey Lang, I know, has big troubles,”

Chang said when presented with the data.

“This problem is not from me because I got Think Biotech.”



In 2020, illegal loggers operating near the Think Biotech concession took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to quietly gut Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary. Image by Ma Chettra.

Prey Lang hurtling toward destruction

But this isn't the first time that a new road has sprouted from Think Biotech's concession and fueled the illicit timber trade in Prey Lang (<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/05/cambodian-firm-accused-of-creating-a-monopoly-in-the-timber-business/>). In April 2022, Mongabay reporters uncovered a new marble mine (<https://news.mongabay.com/2022/05/large-scale-logging-in-cambodias-prey-lang-linked-to-politically-connected-mining-operation/>) that had been licensed to operate inside the protected area, directly to the west of Think Biotech's concession. Over the first three months of 2022, a road was built, again beginning in Think Biotech's concession, and linked up to the marble mining operation owned by KP Cement, another politically connected company.

The gendarmerie-led crackdown also saw this road fall silent temporarily.

"These days, it is quiet," Bunleang said in July. "But [the illegal logging and transporting of timber] is still anarchic — the cement company that destroyed the forest has not transported the logs out yet but they still cut the trees."

In spite of the brief (<https://gfw.global/3sK4lJe>) respite provided by Sao Sokha's crackdown, the continued logging and mining of Prey Lang appears to be returning to previous levels.

With the crackdown reportedly over by June, Global Forest Watch data show 116,929 deforestation alerts between June 1 and Sept. 7, with much of the destruction localized around mining operations in the south of the protected area and the northwest, close to Long's village in the Stung Treng section of the forest.

be brought to justice before the consequences of Cambodia's uniquely high rate of deforestation come home to roost.

"If the forest is gone, it will cause natural disasters, impacting more natural resources — our biodiversity will be lost," said Song from the PLCN.

"We request that the media help to disseminate the Prey Lang issues because it is our forest," Song said. "We protect it, we work for days, we voluntarily face many challenges and sacrifice different things for its protection for Khmer people; please help to protect and enforce the law properly so that our natural resources will last until the next generation."

Banner image: The roughly 12km road cut through Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary carves into the protected forest, heading towards communities' resin trees. Image by Andy Ball / Mongabay.

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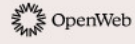
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