

USAID redirects funding in Cambodia as future of Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary hangs in the balance

by Gerald Flynn on 5 August 2021



- *In June, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced it would be ending its assistance to Cambodian government entities through the USAID Greening Prey Lang project.*
 - *In its statement, the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh said the decision is due to continued and unprosecuted illegal logging and wildlife crimes in the protected area, along with efforts by the Cambodian government to “silence and target local communities” and activists. The Cambodian government, however, maintains that the cessation of funding from USAID was due to the ministry having reached capacity to protect Prey Lang without foreign funding.*
 - *Satellite data show Prey Lang has lost nearly 9% of its forest cover over the past five years, and researchers and activists say its remaining forest is being eyed by logging companies.*
 - *While USAID’s decision to stop funding the Cambodian government has been well-received by many academics and environmentalists, there is fear that the move could*
-

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — More than a month has passed since the Cambodia branch of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced it would be ending its assistance to Cambodian government entities through the USAID Greening Prey Lang project and the future of the 431,683-hectare wildlife sanctuary remains shrouded in uncertainty.

According to a June 17 statement from the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh (<https://kh.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-phnom-penh-statement-on-the-usaid-greening-prey-lang-funding-redirect/>), USAID's decision to terminate the Greening Prey Lang project was due to illegal logging operations that have continued with impunity, along with the prevalence of unprosecuted wildlife crimes.

"In addition, the [Cambodian] government continues to silence and target local communities and their civil society partners who are justifiably concerned about the loss of their natural resources," the statement reads.

Members of the Prey Lang Community Network — a grassroots community organization dedicated to protecting the forest — say they have been prevented from carrying out their patrols and from gathering evidence of large-scale logging operations that are responsible for the widespread deforestation that has plagued USAID's credibility in relation to Prey Lang.

Activists like Ouch Leng — a Goldman Environment Prize winner (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/03/cambodians-fight-the-cancer-eating-away-at-prey-lang-wildlife-sanctuary/>) — have been detained while campaigning to save Prey Lang's forests, while at least seven young activists associated with Mother Nature Cambodia have been arrested — and in some cases convicted

(<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/05/outrage-as-cambodian-court-convicts-activists-for-inciting-social-chaos/>) — on what are largely seen

(<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/06/cambodia-assault-on-environmental-defenders-escalates-as-four-more-charged-imprisonment/>) as politically motivated (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/06/rights-groups-demand-end-to-cambodias-persecution-of-green-activists/>) charges of incitement and plotting to overthrow the government as part of Cambodia's intensified crackdown on environmentalists.



Ouch Leng. Image courtesy of the Goldman Environmental Prize.

"Unfortunately, the situation is worsening," the embassy's statement reads. "Since 2016, despite USAID's support for increased ranger patrols, training of law enforcement, and development of a national protected area management system, the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary has lost approximately 38,000 hectares of forest, nearly 9 percent of its forest cover."

With concerns mounting and tree cover vanishing, the U.S. Embassy's statement said that assistance would now be "redirected to support civil society, the private sector, and local efforts." It remains unclear whether any of this assistance will be focused on Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary.

When asked what assistance would be provided by USAID and where it will be directed, a representative for USAID Cambodia said that details were still being finalized regarding the redirection of funds and that no comment could be given at this time.

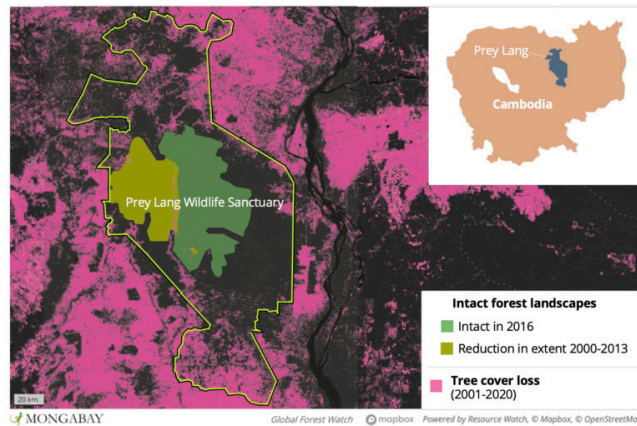
Neth Pheaktra, spokesperson for the Ministry of Environment, maintained that the cessation of funding from USAID was due to the ministry having reached capacity to protect Prey Lang without foreign funding.

"We continue to protect our forest as usual with our own means and will mobilize the necessary resource for the conservations," he said, adding that accusations of large-scale logging operations had been stamped out and that only small-scale forest crimes persist in Prey Lang.

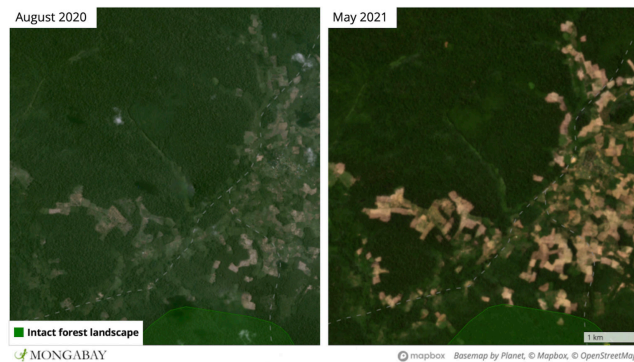
"This is based on the [Ministry of Environment's] own observations and the reality," Pheaktra said.

A distorted reality

which shows some 37,000 hectares — equivalent to 8.9% of Prey Lang's tree cover — had been lost



Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary contains Cambodia's last Intact Forest Landscape, which is an area of native vegetation that's large and undisturbed enough to retain its original biodiversity levels.



Satellite imagery from Planet Labs shows surging forest loss in the northern portion of Prey Lang – including into the country's last IFL.

"I suppose that the negative media coverage about deforestation, the prosecution of activists, and the blocking of the patrols played a role," Argyriou said when asked what factors had contributed to USAID's decision.

"I cannot avoid considering a disagreement between USAID and [the Ministry of Environment] over the transmission line, although this is just wishful thinking."

The 299-kilometer (186-mile) power lines Argyriou referenced are expected to run from Cambodia's border with Thailand to Phnom Penh and then back up to its border with Laos, cutting through Prey Lang — a decision that previously prompted concerns among conservationists and USAID alike.

(<https://vodenglish.news/power-line-to-cut-through-prey-lang-troubling-conservation-partners/>)

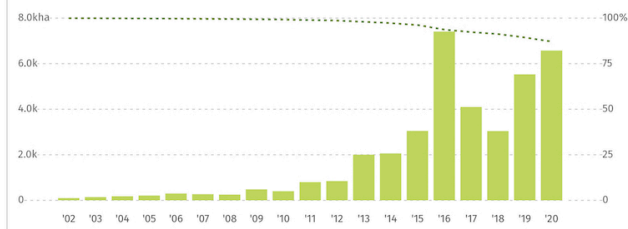
Argyriou said he doubted the Ministry of Environment has the capacity or will to properly protect Prey Lang from logging

ban on activists entering the protected area. "I think the first step to solving a problem is to recognize it," he said. "I conclude that [the Ministry of Environment] doesn't recognize the existence of large-scale logging. Therefore, I don't expect much."

Argyriou noted that tree cover loss alerts from UMD's Global Land Analysis & Discovery (GLAD) lab had increased in Prey Lang in recent months, which could be interpreted as an uptick in deforestation.

"There are many imminent treats to the Prey Lang, which have never been reported by the Greening Prey Lang [project]," said Ida Theilade, a professor at the University of Copenhagen.

From 2002 to 2020, Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary lost 37.7kha of humid primary forest, making up 68% of its total tree cover loss in the same time period. Total area of humid primary forest in Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary decreased by 13% in this time period.



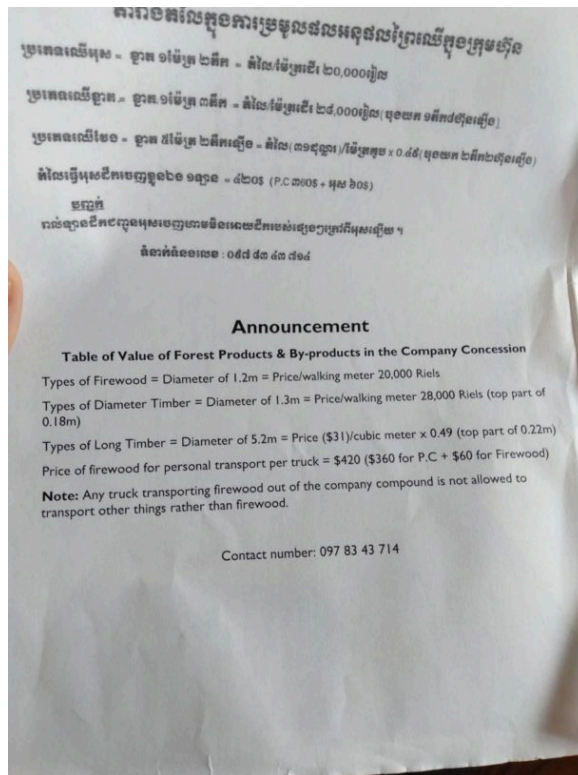
Data from the University of Maryland visualized on Global Forest Watch show deforestation of primary forest in Prey Lang spiked in 2016. After subsequently declining over the following two years, the rate of forest loss appears to be increasing once again in recent years, with 2020 registering the second-most forest loss since measurement began in 2002.

Among those threats, Theilade listed the proposed power lines, for which forest clearance has already begun, and logging by companies like Think Biotech, Angkor Plywood and Thy Nga, which she said are exploiting local populations to disguise their large-scale logging operations as small, local-run operations.

Multiple calls to Angkor Plywood and Thy Nga went unanswered, but Lu Chu Chang, director of Think Biotech, denied that his company was involved in illegal logging activity, saying that Think Biotech's attempts to create a supply chain for wood was aimed at stamping out illegal logging.

"If this project [is a] success then the illegal logging can be prevented and [it will] protect the environment, so we try to get more land [for the] plantation," said Chu Chang, who declined to say how much more land he hoped to acquire.

Wildlife Sanctuary from the government, but Chu Chang denied hiring locals to illegally clear forest or purchasing illegally felled trees — despite flyers reportedly found in and near the Think Biotech compound that advertise prices the company will pay locals for wood.



A translated version of one of flyers reportedly being distributed near the Think Biotech compound and in neighboring villages. Image courtesy of Gerald Flynn.

“If no-one develops a plantation, we can't prevent illegal logging,” Chu Chang said. “If the plantation is a success, people can easily find [a] livelihood and no-one will want to harvest the jungle.”

Theilade of the University of Copenhagen added that another threat looms near Prey Lang in the form of “a Chinese Gold Mine which is expanding fast in Kratie near the border to Kampong Thom. There is a shaft, rails and wagons and dormitories for workers. We have been monitoring the mine using satellite imagery.”

While little is known about the mine, particularly whether it is an official concession or another illegal operation, the mining industry has previously caused problems in Prey Lang and was linked by environmentalists to poisoning in Kratie province that killed at least 13 people in 2018

(<https://news.mongabay.com/2018/08/gold-mining-suspected-as-cause-of-cambodian-mass-poisonings/>).

instead they asked rangers to take pictures of birds and repress local forest patrols," she said, noting that Tetra Tech — the implementing partner in USAID's Prey Lang project — has made billions in Cambodia through these contracts, despite having limited experience in socio-environmental protection. "As the Prey Lang Community Network said: USAID and Tetra Tech staff eat well in the day but we poor people sleep well in the night," Theilade said, adding that she hopes to see a more sincere project from USAID in the future.

"It's hard to see how it could get much worse"

The Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN), whose patrols were banned by the government in early 2020, said that deforestation and intimidation had increased sharply in recent months across all four provinces that the group covers.

A representative for the PLCN who wished to remain anonymous due to fear of reprisal said that USAID's decision to remove itself from cooperation with the government was due to widespread and systemic corruption, a lack of transparency over spending, continued environmental crimes and an unwillingness to work with or accept criticism from local groups like the PLCN.

The representative could not confirm whether USAID would work with the PLCN in the future — the two reportedly have had a fractious relationship in the past — but suggested that the PLCN is best placed to protect and manage Prey Lang's natural resources.



*Prey Lang is home to many threatened species, such as binturongs (*Arctictis binturong*). Also known as bearcats, binturongs are listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN; one of their primary threats is habitat loss from logging. Image by Rhett Butler/Mongabay.*

through a strong community network effort. However, they warned that should USAID decide to fund private sector initiatives in the protected area, there is a risk that the forest cannot be saved.

But while USAID's decision to stop funding the Cambodian government, which is widely believed to be complicit in large-scale forest crimes (<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Forest-crimes-in-Cambodia-Rings-of-illegality-in-Prey-Lang-Wildlife-Sanctuary-GITOC-2021.pdf>), has been well-received by many academics and environmentalists, there is fear that the move could give the green light to government-supported logging operations.

"That light is green and has been for some time," said Courtney Work, an assistant professor at the Department of Ethnology in Taiwan's National Chengchi University. "They are extracting as quickly as possible using local labor. That local labor is crucial, because it allows them to continue saying it's only small-scale logging – because it's only small people actually in the forest doing the cutting."

Work, who was one of the 110 academics who wrote an open letter (<https://preylang.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Joint-Letter-to-H.E.-Say-Samal-and-USAID.pdf>) to both Environment Minister Say Samal and Veena Reddy, then-director of mission at USAID Cambodia to express concern over the Greening Prey Lang project's failures, said that the persistent advocacy of the scientific community had helped to sway the U.S. government's decision, but noted that USAID is not yet clear of Prey Lang.

"USAID is not pulling out yet, but they are changing their strategy to try to keep their hands clean while eating at this dirty trough," she said, adding that while USAID's assessment of deforestation in Prey Lang appears to be accurate, the numbers fail to underscore the scope of the problem in the protected area.



Satellite imagery from Planet Labs shows deforestation expanding in the southern portion of Prey Lang.

The bigger picture, she argued, requires an acknowledgement of the ecocide and cultural genocides that are being committed in Prey Lang as the forest is felled and local communities are displaced amid a disregard for the agreements that underpin USAID's Greening Prey Lang project and other international conventions that Cambodia is a party to.

"That disregard is by not only the notoriously corrupt Cambodian government but also by all their do-gooding counterparts without whom apparently things would be so much worse," she said, listing USAID, Wildlife Conservation Society, the World Bank and Conservation International as said counterparts.

"Honestly, it's hard to see how it could be much worse. And, each and every one of them is fully aware of what's going on. Or they're idiots. We can no longer have it both ways. If they are not idiots, they're charlatans," she said.

Wildlife Conservation Society, the World Bank and Conservation International did not respond to requests for comment.

Fears surrounding a REDD+ project in Prey Lang

Work is not alone in her criticism of USAID's efforts in Cambodian conservation. Frédéric Bourdier, a researcher with the University Paris Sorbonne, campaigned internationally to put an end to the Greening Prey Lang project.

"It was decided to go ahead and reach the source: USAID in Washington ... based on the main idea that the common US citizen will not appreciate being aware that their own money goes to such a toxic project," Bourdier said.

He railed against USAID's June 8 announcement (<https://www.facebook.com/354608881805349/posts/882776878988544/?sfnsn=mo>) that it would be entering into a REDD+ project in Preah Vihear province, one of the four provinces that Prey Lang Wildlife

voiced concerns that the project is ignoring the needs of local communities that depend on forest resources and harvest trees in a more sustainable way than do industrial companies.

"This REDD+ project, announced by USAID, will not cover all of Prey Lang, but a significant area including 51 villages," he said. "REDD+ projects in Cambodia, since their beginning, have not been very convincing and local inhabitants — often forest dwellers — became more victims than beneficiaries."

So far five such REDD+ projects have been established throughout Cambodia, with varying levels of success, but regardless of the funds generated from carbon credits sold, researchers have warned (<https://cambodianess.com/article/redd-projects-still-struggling-to-live-up-to-expectations-in-cambodia>) that these financial gains have largely come at the expense of Indigenous communities and smallholder farmers who have lost control of their ancestral lands in the face of conservation efforts.

USAID declined to comment on its REDD+ ambitions in Cambodia.

"So this is the paradox: Greening Prey Lang collapses and at the same time it seems to be replaced by a big REDD+ project, which means, globally, that a big US polluter will buy carbon credits from Cambodia," Bourdier said. "This company, via USAID, will compensate its dirty activity done on US territory, by providing substantial amount of money for, at the end of the day, preventing [forest-dependent communities] in a given territory from cutting trees."

When asked whether there is much hope for Prey Lang, its ecosystems and its indigenous communities, Bourdier replied simply: "Good question, for the moment we can only speculate."

Banner image: *Ouch Leng nails a sign prohibiting logging in Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary. Image courtesy of the Goldman Environmental Prize.*

Feedback: Use this form (<https://form.jotform.com/70284397762163>) to send a message to the editor of this post. If you want to post a public comment, you can do that at the bottom of the page.

Mongabay was founded as a nonprofit to ensure greater access to trustworthy information on our planet's most pressing issues. Reader support keeps Mongabay reporters on Nature's frontline, delivering daily environmental news and analysis on stories that matter. Join us with a tax-deductible donation to enable more environmental journalism that drives on-the-ground impact around the world.

DONATE

Article published by Morgan Erickson-Davis



PRINT
(AMP?
PRINT)

Commenting as **Guest**

Log in | Sign up



What do you think?



Sort by **Best** ▾

SH

Sandeep Haulser ...

6 August, 2021

Yet another article about Prey Lang, with the same critical quotes from the same academics sitting in their nice positions in Europe, about a project they've never actually seen on the ground, with no actual reporting on the ground. Never are any actual solutions offered, just fairly uninformed cri...**See more**

Reply · 1 · Share

E

ErikH STAFF ...

10 August, 2021

We appreciate you taking the time to post a comment, Sandeep, since this article concerns a western funder that announced it would be ending assistance due to continued and un-prosecuted illegal logging and wildlife crimes in the protected area, it does not seem terribly strange to me to also quote...**See more**

Reply · 1 · Share

JL

John Lowrie ...

6 August, 2021

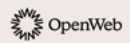
What we do know for certain is #deforestation has gone on unabated for decades in Cambodia despite multi-donor + mega-rich #CONservation NGOs there. In other words with their tacit cloak of approval. World Wildlife Fund set up in 1995; WCS in 1999, Global Witness was kicked out in 2005 after report...**See more** *(Edited)*


Reply · · Share

online hate, then who
are the real trolls?

It's time to save
online conversation.

[Learn more](#)



AdChoices 

Sponsored