



Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation

The Phnom Penh Declaration: Importance of environmental and social impact assessments prior to infrastructure development in the Mondulhiri Protected Forest and other Cambodian biodiversity hotspots

The 300 participants from 29 countries who attended the meeting of the Asia-Pacific Chapter of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ATBC) held in Phnom Penh from 30 March to 2 April, 2015, organized under the main theme of *The Future of Biodiversity in Tropical Asia: Addressing Local and Global Challenges*,

1. Appreciating that the forests, river systems and other natural environments of Southeast Asia are among the most biologically diverse and environmentally important ecosystems on the Earth,
2. Recognizing that the number and proportion of threatened, endangered, and critically endangered species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and tree species is higher in Southeast Asia than in any other region of the planet,
3. Mindful of the dependency of the livelihood of rural people in Cambodia and its neighboring countries on sustainable use of renewable biological resources, such as freshwater fishery and non-timber forest products from natural and semi-natural ecosystems,
4. Observing that a very large number of major infrastructure projects, such as new highways, roads, hydroelectric dams, power lines, gas lines, and other energy projects, are currently being planned or are under construction in Southeast Asia,
5. Mindful that roads constructed by logging, industrial crop and infrastructure projects have been shown to sharply increase rates of immigration, non-sustainable resource overexploitation, deforestation, forest burning, poaching, illegal wildlife trade, and other serious environmental impacts,
6. Concerned that forest degradation, deforestation and land conversion threatens ecosystem services provided by forests, such as a steady supply of water, climate regulation, moderation of heat waves, soil conservation and traditional forest products,
7. Welcoming the efforts by the Royal Government of Cambodia to review and revise national land allocation policies to meet the challenge of balancing the welfare of rural people, economic development, and conservation of its natural and cultural heritages,

Make the following recommendations,

- a. To work together to strengthen the decision support tools and information available that enable prioritization and decision about the best location of infrastructure projects.**

b. To conduct thorough environmental and social impact assessments as part of infrastructure development in areas particularly important for conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services,

c. To consider the views from multiple stakeholders while evaluating potential trade-offs associated with infrastructure development,

d. To carefully evaluate the alternatives and follow with the developmental plan that minimizes the environmental impacts,

e. In particular, to conduct a thorough environmental impact assessment and consider alternative developmental plans to the proposed Srea Ampos - Kbal Damrei Road in Mondulkiri Protection Forest, and any other road proposed to be built in a Protection Forest in Cambodia for the reasons detailed below.

The Mondulkiri Protected Forest is a globally important protected area that supports some of the most threatened species in Asia. The construction of the Srea Ampos - Kbal Damrei Road would require deforesting 36 kilometers of protected forest, including 19 kilometers within the designated Special Ecosystem Zone, which forms the core of the largest area of lowland deciduous dipterocarp forest remaining in South-east Asia.

The Mondulkiri Protected Forest provides Cambodia with substantial natural resources and ecosystem services. In addition, it has unique and global significance for biodiversity, given that it supports the world's largest population of banteng *Bos javanicus*, the largest population of Leopard *Panthera pardus* in Indochina, and more than 230 bird species, including 9 species listed by the IUCN as Globally Threatened.

The Special Ecosystem Zone sustains more than 150 individuals of *Elephas maximus*, representing the largest population of elephants in Cambodia. This population moves across the route of the proposed road as part of their annual migrations.

The current road development plan poses a high risk of diminishing the opportunity for sustainable, nature-based tourism that would be critical to secure long-term economic returns to local communities and provincial government.

In conclusion, we recommend thorough environmental impact assessment and wise planning based on it, which may entail cancellation of road proposals for Mondulkiri Province, and other Protection Forests, and development of alternative plans, in order to minimize damage to the natural capital of Cambodia, and Southeast Asia.

Phnom Penh, 2nd April 2015
The Participants