

Forests of Hope

Avoiding deforestation and combating climate change

Site profile

Western Siem Pang Forest, Cambodia

The forests of Western Siem Pang, Cambodia, are one of the last remnants of the ecosystem that once covered large areas in central Indochina. The forests are extensive, and BirdLife has identified a key site covering over 150,000 ha, with 90% intact forest and populations of an astonishing total of five Critically Endangered bird species. National legislation permits establishment of the area as a Protected Forest, part of the national permanent forest estate but not a formal Protected Area; this would represent an ideal arrangement for local communities and Government while conserving the area's biodiversity and carbon stocks.

The photograph shows an aerial view over part of Western Siem Pang forest, with a characteristic wet meadow and pool (trapeang), of critical importance for some of the rarest species.



Basic information

Country: Cambodia

Site name: Western Siem Pang Forest

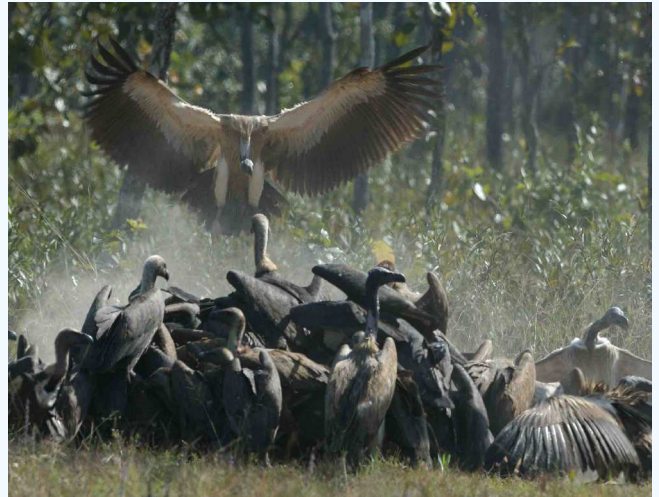
Province, District and Location: Western Siem Pang site (IBA number KH008) is in NE Cambodia, connecting Virachey National Park in Cambodia to the E with Xe Pian National Protected Area in Laos to the W; it lies in Stung Treng Province, Siem Pang District.

Site area: 152,822 ha

■ Biodiversity and current status

Ninety percent of Western Siem Pang is covered by intact forest typical of the original vegetation of the region. Half is Dry Dipterocarp Forest and 40 % denser semi-evergreen Forest; the remainder is degraded semi-evergreen Forest (5%), deforested land including cultivation (3%) and water (2%). The forest is relatively open in many places, denser in others, and has a grassy understorey. Scattered throughout the forest are a number of pools and seasonally wet meadows which are of great importance to the site's biodiversity.

The IBA is an excellent example of the dry forest ecosystem of central Indochina. It supports an astonishing 5 critically endangered species: White-shouldered Ibis *Pseudibis davisoni*, Giant Ibis *Thaumatibis gigantea*, White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps tenuirostris* and Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*. The presence of 5 Critical bird species is globally unique to this small part of Cambodia and southern Laos. Other threatened bird species include Green Peafowl *Pavo muticus*, Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* and Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*. It also supports a



Western Siem Pang is one of the last strongholds for Asian vultures: all three South-East Asian species are present, all Critically Endangered. Shown here are Slender-billed and White-rumped Vultures. Photo: Jonathan C. Eames

range of threatened mammal species including Eld's Deer *Cervus eldi*.

■ Threats

The biggest threat to biodiversity at the IBA is posed by plans to grant a land concession for the establishment of a plantation, which would have irreversible impacts on biodiversity. Meanwhile low-level threats include overgrazing of livestock, small-scale extraction of timber for local or commercial use, and clearance of forest for cultivation. Collection of large waterbirds, presumably for food, has also been noted as a threat.



White-shouldered Ibis is another of the Critically Endangered species at Western Siem Pang. The largest ever count at any site was recently made at Western Siem Pang: at least 161 birds. Photo: Jonathan C. Eames.

■ **Current conservation approach**

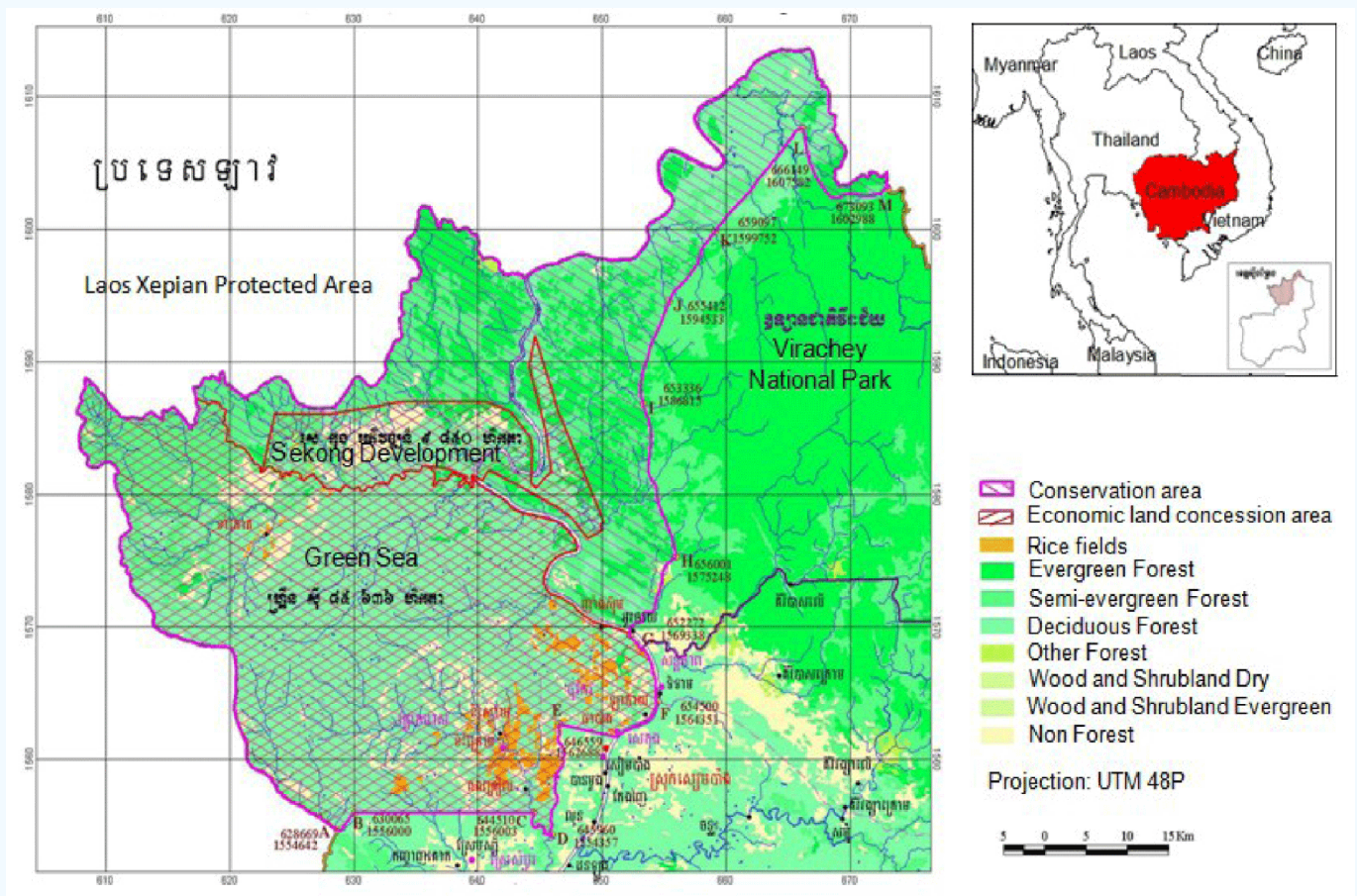
Governance: Since 2001 the southern and central part of the site has been under a 70 year concession to a Cambodian company to establish teak and other forms of tree crop plantations. The legality of this concession is questionable and it is currently under government review. This company has not begun any clearance activities within the site, but, in a joint venture with a British company, it has developed a *Jatropha* plantation in the south of the District, outside the boundaries of the Proposed Protected Forest. We understand that a second smaller concession within the site will shortly be cancelled.

Current difficulties: The Forestry Administration (FA) is the body charged with managing the nation’s forest estate but suffers the typical shortcomings of under-resourced government, prevalent in many developing countries. The FA finds it hard to meet its mandate, a task made more difficult by rampant illegal “land-grabbing” by vested interests that has prevailed of late over much of Cambodia. Without project action, the forest will continue to be degraded and lost piecemeal, if it is not cleared for plantations.

■ **New conservation approach**

The approach proposed is the designation of Western Siem Pang as “Protected Forest”; this would make the area part of the national permanent forest estate, but not part of the Protected Areas system. The Government wishes and needs to maximize revenue from forest, and large concessions are possible, which are ideal for conserving dispersed species; a project response must deliver such revenue. Privately held forest leaseholds are permitted for logging concessions and Protected Areas, for up to 99 years.

Progress is already being made. On 21 August 2009, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Cambodia decided to proceed with the sub-decree to establish Western Siem Pang Protected Forest covering 152,825 ha; the proposal is to be submitted to the Council of Ministers by end of the year. MAFF is reviewing the concessions threatening the forest. These momentous events demonstrate the exceptional opportunity that the site offers, and the commitment of the Government to a new management vision; however, the process is not yet complete, threats remain and long-term management will still be a challenge.



Map of the proposed project area, which is marked as “Conservation area”



Timber harvesting in semi-evergreen forest is a local threat. Photo: BirdLife International.

To explore the feasibility of a forest carbon project in the Western Siem Pang forest, a pilot survey and threat assessment was carried out of forest carbon stocks and potential project approaches explored in 2009. Any conservation project must develop interventions that provide positive impacts on local livelihoods and food security. Assuming deforestation would continue without intervention to halt it, and with other typical assumptions, a conservation initiative could potentially deliver substantial payments for reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation; results are currently being under review.

Further assessments are needed to develop the programme budget in relation to expected income streams that must meet management costs and lease payments. These will consider possibility of additional revenue from forest restoration, ecotourism and payments for ecosystem services. Success will also rely on ensuring continuing government support and law enforcement, and respect for the terms of the leasehold.

■ History and capacity

BirdLife and the Forestry Administration have been working at Western Siem Pang for five years, providing low levels of support to enable monitoring of key species and protection of key landscape features. Forestry Administration, with BirdLife support, have recently proposed the establishment of a Protected Forest to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. BirdLife in Indochina (Cambodia Programme) is a dynamic team with wide ranging activities in Cambodia; among other achievements, BirdLife has led the efforts that resulted in the protection of Boeung Prek Lapouv, one of the last grassland sites in the Mekong Delta.

■ Detailed knowledge of the forest

The forest has been well studied by BirdLife International in Indochina (Cambodia Programme), working with the Forest Administration, in particular on the ecology and conservation of Critically Endangered birds. Initial stakeholder and poverty analyses have been carried out.



Western Siem Pang Forest is threatened by plans to convert forest to plantations. Photo: Jonathan C. Eames.

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