

Forest Trends: Cambodia Losing Forests at Alarming Rate

Cambodia is losing its natural forests at an alarming rate, accelerated in recent years by corporations illegally using permits for large-scale agricultural businesses to harvest trees in some of the country's most important protected areas and national forests, according to a new study by Forest Trends, an international non-profit organization. (<http://forest-trends.org/releases/p/conversion-timber-forest-monitoring-and-land-use-governance-in-cambodia>)

The Forest Trends report, the first comprehensive analysis linking the growing number of industrial agricultural development projects to the escalating destruction of Cambodian forests, found:

- Cambodia is losing forests at the rate of 804 square miles a year, primarily because the government gives large land concessions to large-scale commercial agricultural companies – many of which operate illegally.
- These allocations of land for economic development totaled 2.6 million hectares (10,000 square miles) in 2013, the most recent reliable data. That is almost four times the amount of land large corporations held in 2004. (see attached chart)
- As a result, nearly 14 percent of the country has been allocated to domestic and foreign corporations for large-scale commercial agriculture and other development. A whopping 80 percent of that land is within the boundaries of national parks or other protected forest areas, where some of Southeast Asia's oldest, most biodiverse, and valuable forests remain.

“The fact that permits for economic land concessions are being used as an unlawful vehicle to exhaust the remaining timber resources of the country at such a rapid rate represents a total system failure of the country's forest protection laws,” said Kerstin Canby, Director of Forest Trends' Forest Trade and Finance program.

Forest Trends researchers used fire reports based on NASA satellite images of 32,053 forest fires during the 2012-13 dry season to draft computer algorithms for identifying forests that are being cut. Data from the satellite imagery revealed that carbon emissions from evergreen forests cut in concessions areas are almost 10 times higher than those outside the agricultural concessions, confirming that corporations are targeting the oldest and most valuable forests – many of them on national forest lands – for logging, the report said.

The Forest Trends analysis said the Cambodian government's current “patchwork of regulations on the land use planning are spread across numerous, uncoordinated agricultural, forestry and other agencies, and are often seemingly arbitrarily applied by the authorities.”

The study found it especially troubling that the increases in illegal deforestation continued even after Cambodia began receiving money in 2011 in return for agreeing to follow international sustainable forest standards under the UN's Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) program.

The findings have major implications for Cambodia's participation in international forest sustainability programs such as REDD+, as well as its ability to continue to export timber products to environmentally-sensitive markets in the EU, US, Australia, and other regions.

The Forest Trends study offers recommendations for Cambodia to improve its laws and regulations, create greater transparency, and curb corruption.

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Forest Trends is a non-profit organization that aims to expand the value of forests to society, promote sustainable forest management and conservation by creating and capturing market values for ecosystems, and enhancing the livelihoods of local communities who depend on forests.

For more information visit: www.forest-trends.org

Media Contact: Will Tucker
wtucker@forest-trends.org
(202) 446-1996