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STRATEGY FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION IN CAMBODIA

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Abstract

Cambodia comprises seven major bio-geoclimatic regions. The landscape of the country is centred around the floodplains of the Tonle Sap (Great Lake) and the lower Mekong River. To the southwest of these floodplains are the Elephant and Cardamom Mountains, which rise to an elevation of approximately 1800m, and a coastal zone consisting of a plain and offshore islands. To the northwest and northeast of Tonle Sap and the lower Mekong are rolling lowland plains, hills and plateaus rising gently to the Dangrek Mountains and Northeastern (Annamite) Mountains on the borders with Thailand and Laos/ Vietnam respectively. The climate is dominated by southwest monsoon lasting from May to October, which brings the majority or the annual rainfall, and the northeast monsoon from November to April, with brings a pronounced dry season. Because of the direction of the southwest monsoon, the wettest area of the country, with up to 4000 mm of precipitation, occurs on the windward slopes of the Elephant and Cardamom Mountains. Precipitation is relatively low in the Tonle Sap and Mekong floodplains because their position in the "rain-shadow" of the southwestern mountains, and increases progressively to the north and east towards the border mountain ranges.

The interaction of climate and topography results in a rich floral mosaic, including wetland communities, such as mangroves, fresh and brackish water swamps and swamp forests, and five major dryland forest types ranging from wet and moist evergreen forests through dry semi-deciduous and deciduous forests to sub-tropical montane forests. The swamps and flooded forests of the Tonle Sap and the Mekong floodplain are the most extensive freshwater wetlands in Southeast Asia, providing critical habitat for large numbers of waterbirds and a very important national fishery. The dry semi-deciduous and deciduous forest formations are known to constitute one of the last great refuges of large ungulates and associated predators in all of Southeast Asia.

Cambodia is of exceptional importance for some specific components of faunal biodiversity that have become extinct or greatly reduced in other countries of the region. A few examples of animals in this category include Eld's Deer, Banteng, Jungle Cat, Bengal Florican, Eastern Sarus Crane, Giant Ibis, Greater Adjutant, Estuarine Terrapin and Siamese Crocodile. It is the fact that Cambodia is the last refuge, rather than the centre of biodiversity, for such species that makes the country so important for global conservation.

Natural biodiversity cannot be conserved and managed only at one level. Protected areas will ultimately become mere isolated relics if they are left as islands in a sea of human altered-ecosystems. To effectively conserve a country's natural heritage, biodiversity conservation must function at a variety of scales- regional (province), sub-regional (forest concession or forest management unit), landscape (forest compartment) and stand (annual coupe and cut block).