

Social Assessment, Including Indigenous Peoples' Plan

Strengthening community based bird biodiversity conservation and monitoring through local livelihood improvement and capacity building in 3S River Basin, Cambodia

This Social Assessment was prepared by Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) and incorporates an Indigenous People's Plan for this project, for which RUPP is requesting funding support from the Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund (CEPF). This social assessment includes background to the project, identifies Indigenous Peoples in the project area, assesses expected positive and negative project impacts on Indigenous Peoples, describes how free, prior and informed consultations have been carried out with affected communities, outlines measures to avoid adverse impacts and provide culturally appropriate benefits, explains how these measures will be monitored, and details a grievance mechanism.

Background

The project goal is conservation of threatened bird biodiversity through education and awareness-raising, conservation incentive programs, livelihood improvement, and capacity building of local communities and concerned provincial government agencies to implement participatory monitoring and management interventions in the Sekong and Sesan River. Primary project objectives include: 1) working with local communities to establish and assess the level of payment acceptance for protection of bird nests; 2) implementing the conservation incentive scheme for nest and habitat protection of targeted sandbar-nesting bird and softshell turtle species by developing protection agreements with local communities; 3) establishing community development funds linked to nest and habitat protection agreements; 4) establishing a monitoring program to evaluate trends in bird populations, habitats, and the success of the conservation incentive program under community-based protection agreements; 5) enhance mechanisms for integrating monitoring data and community-based conservation interventions with provincial government conservation management activities; and 6) building local conservation capacity through education and training for local students and communities in bird survey, ecological monitoring, and bird nest protection methods.

This project was developed based on existing project activities that have been conducted by RUPP since 2011, first with support from a CEPF small grant to conduct a pilot study, and continued with support from MacArthur Foundation. Support from CEPF for this project will allow RUPP to continue and expand on its previous activities.

Focal species for conservation include sandbar-nesting birds (River Tern *Sterna aurantia*, Great Thick-knee *Esacus recurvirostris*, River Lapwing *Vanellus duvaucelli*, Small Pratincole *Glareola lactea*, and Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*) and turtles (Cantor's Giant Softshell Turtle *Pelochelys cantorii* and Asiatic Softshell Turtle *Amyda cartilaginea*). Nest protection will be implemented along the Sekong River comprising the entire Cambodian stretch of river, and the Sesan River between Ta Veng district town

in Ratanakiri Province and Ksach Thmei village in Stung Treng Province. Project activities will involve five key sites for wildlife conservation (two on Sekong River and 3 on Sesan River) and will include community participants from eight villages (Nyeun and Nyang Som villages on Sekong River; Koh Pong, Hat Pok, Voeng Hoy, Lumphoat, Svay Rieng, and Ksach Thmei villages on Sesan River).

Activities that could affect indigenous peoples include the implementation of a direct-incentives scheme for bird nest protection. Conservation of key species and habitats will be attained through a participatory, community-based approach to conservation involving voluntary agreements linked to financial incentives for communities to protect nests. As discussed in the Process Framework for this project, participation in the nest protection activities will be through voluntary agreements. Financial incentives (payments for nest protection) will be made according to the voluntary protection agreements and may be made to participating individuals, as well as to village funds that will benefit communities more broadly. This project will not involve involuntary resettlement of people, and the amount of involuntary restriction of resources used by people will be very limited in scope, and will primarily limit livelihood activities in the immediate vicinities of nests. Although the project will work to prevent illegal and/or unsustainable natural resource use, the project will seek to preserve natural resource use that is legal and sustainable, as long as the activities do not cause undue harm or disturbance to nesting sandbar birds and softshell turtles.

To ensure that effects on indigenous people are identified, accounted for and mitigated during these activities, a number of measures will be taken. Meetings will be held in indigenous areas for which important bird and turtle nesting areas are identified, consultations will be held to explain the need for conservation, and broader benefits of protecting bird nesting sites. We will conduct comprehensive and participatory consultations with communities based on principles of free, prior, and informed consent to ensure communities can make informed decisions. Strategies to assist affected communities will be developed where necessary and will involve community participation to ensure site specific variables and needs are considered.

Identification of Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous ethnic groups inhabiting the project areas on the Sekong, and Sesan Rivers include Brao, Charay, Kavet, Kreung, Phnong, and Tampuan. Additionally, the area is inhabited by ethnic Khmer and lowland Lao, as well as Chinese and Vietnamese. The primary villages in which we will work, and their ethnicities, are listed in Table 1 below; these villages are located nearest to key breeding sites for sandbar-nesting bird species.

Table 1: Project focal villages.

River	Village	Province	Ethnic Group
Sekong	Nyang Som	Stung Treng	Lao
Sekong	Nyeun	Stung Treng	Khmer
Sesan	Koh Pong	Ratanakiri	Brao

Sesan	Hat Pok	Ratanakiri	Lao
Sesan	Voen Hoy	Ratanakiri	Lao
Sesan	Lumphoat	Stung Treng	Brao
Sesan	Svay Rieng	Stung Treng	Lao
Sesan	Ksach Thmei	Stung Treng	Khmer

Potential Negative Impacts on Indigenous Peoples

There are a variety of possible threats to Indigenous Peoples through conservation interventions that will be implemented through this project.

- Infringement on customary rights.** Through community consultations, the project will assess the level of infringement on customary rights. As described in the Process Framework, involuntary restriction on access to natural resources will be minimal and will primarily affect specific key breeding sites (in the immediate vicinity of nests during the peak breeding season), as well as resource uses that are illegal and/or unsustainable. The project will implement conservation activities through voluntary agreements with communities.
- Loss of culture and social cohesion.** Loss of culture and social cohesion is a threat of any type of development intervention with respect to indigenous communities and culture. By including culture and traditional resource use practices as part of the planning process the project is making every attempt to record and maintain culture and social cohesion.
- Dependency on external support.** Dependency on external support and financial incentives for nest protection is a potential threat, and people may have trouble readjusting in the event that funding dries up. However, as described in the Process Framework, restrictions on customary subsistence activities regarding use of natural resources will be very limited in scope. Therefore, even in the event of loss of financial support for nest production, livelihoods are not expected to be greatly impacted. The project will seek to ensure sustainability through awareness and education activities, and will also seek additional future funding to continue nest protection, as well as other expand into other potential activities such as developing alternative livelihood strategies. Additionally, we are collaborating with relevant NGOs and provincial government agencies to ensure long-term sustainability of project goals of supporting wildlife conservation and non-harmful livelihood activities by local communities, while reducing illegal or destructive commercial and subsistence activities within project areas.
- Inequitable participation.** RUPP recognizes that all members of society are involved in resource use and collection. The project seeks to include all levels of community membership (in particular women and lower income groups within a village) and will be designed to build upon local decision-making structures.

Positive Impacts on Indigenous Peoples

The project will have positive impacts Indigenous communities within the project area by providing benefits through conservation incentives for protecting bird nests. The financial incentives will provide livelihood support to Indigenous Peoples, who may be disadvantaged socioeconomically, and may experience greater poverty compared to non-indigenous peoples within the project area. Additionally, the project will benefit Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples by assisting communities to protect natural resources that support their livelihoods, and to prevent illegal and unsustainable activities that threaten natural resources and local livelihoods within the project area.

In recent years, local communities have experienced a significant loss of access and availability of natural resources. Natural forest and aquatic resources that communities have traditionally and customarily relied on have become scarcer; forests are disappearing due to illegal and commercial logging and agricultural expansion, and fisheries have been negatively impacted by upstream hydropower dams and overfishing. Indigenous communities in these areas are likely even more strongly impacted by these losses than non-Indigenous communities. There is a distinct need for alternative livelihood support to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in the project areas that have already experienced decreases in natural resources customarily relied on for their livelihoods. This project will provide communities with immediate livelihood benefits, while also empowering them to have a role in conservation decision-making regarding natural resources that support their livelihoods.

Free, Prior, and Informed Consultations

The primary focus of the project is to utilize participatory community-based approaches to conservation to protect bird nests on the Sekong River and Sesan Rivers that have been implemented by RUPP since 2011. All aspects of the project will maintain a participatory focus, through consultations with the communities and relevant stakeholders, so that communities can make informed decisions and can be empowered to have active roles in the decision-making processes regarding natural resource use and conservation. During the participatory consultations, in all of our interactions with communities, and throughout the project planning, design, and implementation, RUPP will operate under the guiding principles of free, prior, and informed consent.

The RUPP project team members have extensive experience with conducting community consultations and implementing participatory methodologies, as well as in education, awareness-raising, and capacity building. Community meetings will be held in priority areas for key sandbar-nesting bird and softshell turtle species following interview and field surveys to present information to local communities and seek input, support and suggestions on project developments. On the Sekong and Sesan Rivers, RUPP has already conducted some awareness-raising activities and participatory consultations with eight communities prior to and during bird nest protection program activities. The community meetings are structured to be informative and participatory with discussions on bird status and conservation context, local opinions regarding project goals and design, combined with a short presentations and/or video. We will further adapt and

develop these presentations for Indigenous communities in priority areas. If necessary these would include discussions on possible restrictions for local communities to explain clearly who and how our activities may negatively and positively impact local livelihoods. If necessary, community meetings will be translated into the local language.

RUPP will seek to ensure that opinions and input are sought from a diversity of groups (regarding age, gender, ethnicity, income level, etc.) during community consultations and during the participatory processes, and that the distinct priorities of each group, including the distinct priorities of Indigenous Peoples, are taken into account during project implementation.

Measures to Mitigate Impacts and Provide Culturally Appropriate Benefits

Although the project does not have provisions to provide direct compensation or “one-for-one” mitigation measures for involuntary restriction on livelihood activities. However, voluntary agreements for bird nest protection will be established with as many resource users as possible, and the accompanying financial incentives are expected to be equal or greater to the limited voluntary restrictions on livelihood activities in order to ensure protection of key nesting sites. If, through interviews and community consultations, the project finds that there are opportunity costs due to loss of access to resources at nest sites under protection, we will make every effort to include resource users who lost opportunities in the project so that they can participate in conservation activities and receive financial benefits for nest protection. The financial incentives for nest protection will provide alternative livelihood support and aid in poverty reduction, and will benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and mitigate the impacts of reduced access to the resources in the project area. We reiterate, as described in the Process Framework, that reduced access to resources will primarily be voluntary. Through interviews and community consultations we will seek to better understand whether project activities will cause any adverse impacts specific to Indigenous Peoples, and whether project benefits from the conservation incentives scheme are culturally appropriate to Indigenous Peoples. We will operate under an adaptive management approach, and will make any necessary adjustments to project design and implementation possible to reduce and mitigate any negative impacts to Indigenous Peoples and to ensure that benefits provided by the project are culturally appropriate to Indigenous communities within the project area.

Monitoring Safeguard Issues

Monitoring safeguard issues related to this Social Assessment and Indigenous Peoples’ Plan will be an ongoing process throughout the project, through interviews with project participants and non-participating resource users (e.g. fishermen), and through community consultations. We will ensure social safeguards through comprehensive and participatory consultation so that communities can make informed decisions. We will hold regular feedback sessions with community participants to assess the community response to the project, including encouraging community members to share any negative aspects of the project, such as regarding restrictions on access to natural resources.

Ensuring social safeguards, especially as they relate to Indigenous Peoples, are a high priority for RUPP and we will make assessments at least monthly, based on the ongoing monitoring of social safeguard issues.

Conflict Resolution and Grievance Mechanism

RUPP will ensure that community members receive contact information for all RUPP field personnel, as well as for key partner organization personnel and the CEPF Regional Implementation Team at IUCN. Community members will be encouraged to contact RUPP, our partner organizations or the RIT immediately if project-related conflicts or grievances arise. Likewise, we will encourage community members to contact RUPP field staff if any conflicts or grievances arise pertaining to our partner organizations. Before, during, and after project implementation, we will hold informal discussions with community members to discuss their suggestions, misgivings or concerns about the project. If necessary, we will translate discussions into the local language, to ensure that non-Khmer speaking Indigenous Peoples in the project area understand the grievance mechanism and know who to contact to issue grievances. We will use an adaptive management approach to project implementation to make adjustments as needed according to conservation needs of bird species, to incorporate community members' suggestions, and to reduce the likelihood of potential conflicts or grievances arising from the project. If grievances arise, we will work with the community members involved, with participation from other organizations where appropriate, to resolve conflicts and reach mutual agreements between all parties. Any grievances raised will be brought to the attention of CEPF and the RIT within 30 days, together with a plan for remedial action.