

Social Assessment for Mother Nature Project Empowering Khmer Daeum Communities in the Areng Valley

Indigenous Peoples in the project area;

The people living in the target communes of Chumnoab and Prolay, in the Areng Valley of Koh Kong, are members of the indigenous group self identified as 'Khmer Daeum'. Some researchers have referred to these communities as *Jong* or *Khmer Jong*, although this denomination is not generally used by the local communities themselves. Khmer Daeum can be translated as Indigenous Khmers or Original Khmers. The Khmer Daeum can be found in isolated communities living in or near the Cardamom Mountains, such as in the communes of Veal Veng, Ou Som, Ta Tay Leu, Chi Kho Leu, etc.

Mother Nature's project consists of a multi-strategy approach :

- 1) **Community outreach:** both the staff of Mother Nature and members from partnering organizations will be conducting on-going community outreach in order to inform communities about the impacts of hydropower projects and their right to participate in the decision making process of development projects. The role of Mother Nature's staff will be to inform local community members about how development projects like hydropower dams are implemented and to describe the resources are available for community members to voice their opinions and ideas about the project. In addition members from other NGOs will be invited to the community offer consultations and workshops on the legal rights of people who are impacted by a development project. In this way, Mother Nature will be closely interacting with villagers from Chumnoab and Prolay communes as well as connecting these communities to individuals from outside of the region.

We anticipate that the presence of Mother Nature staff and members from other organizations to have a largely positive impact to the people of Chumnoab and Prolay. Access to information in the region is extremely difficult with little access to electricity and no phone or internet connection available. Direct interaction is the only viable way of communicating information about the social and ecological impacts the Areng River hydropower dam will have on the local communities. Additionally, resources for people who want more information about the planning and implementation of the dam are virtually absent in the communities that will be impacted. Mother Nature's community outreach is a crucial way that people can obtain information as well as understand how to engage the decision-making processes surrounding the implementation of the hydropower project.

While Mother Nature's outreach campaign will be an important part of disseminating information about Areng River hydropower project, we do expect that some people will feel uneasy about the presence of outsiders in their communities. Community members have expressed concerns about outside individuals entering their communities for the purpose of a political campaign or economic exploitation. Mother Nature will work to mitigate these concerns by ensuring that all outreach activities are conducted with the approval of community members. House to house meetings and public forums will be conducted after Mother Nature and any partnering organization has clearly explained the intent of the outreach program and the community members being addressed have agreed to continue

with the meeting or forum. If anyone requests that an outsider not be invited to the community for an outreach program, Mother Nature will ensure that such requests are honoured. We will always prioritize the wellbeing and desires of the community over any outreach event.

- 2) Empowering existing community groups: another important role of Mother Nature is to empower the existing community group, the Committee for the Protection of Natural Resources. The Committee consists of a number of locally elected community members who are tasked with identifying ways of managing locally based natural resources. Independent of any political institution, the Committee offers an important way for communities to make decisions that directly relate to improving livelihoods and community wellbeing. Part of Mother Nature's strategy will involve mentoring Committee members and helping them become better organizers and community leaders. We will not only make sure that the Committee has access to community organization, environmental, and leadership experts, but that the group will have access to funding for projects proposed by the Committee and approved by the larger community.

Mother Nature expects that the empowerment of the Committee for the Protection of Natural Resources will translate into improved capacity for communal decision-making processes in Chumnoab and Prolay. This will allow the communities to better form their own decisions and strategies for addressing the issue of the Areng hydropower project. Improved capacity for decision-making is especially critical in these communities because of the systematic neglect and disempowerment that has been enacted by governing institutions such as the police, military, and commune and district chiefs.

Although communal decision-making and action are integral part of the cultures of Chumnoab and Prolay (i.e.: village chiefs are communally elected, rice harvests are conducted communally, etc.) the empowerment of community organizations may be seen as a challenge to traditional centres of power. For example, the tradition of relying primarily on male elders (such as the commune chief) of the community to make decisions on behalf of the whole population will be affected. Mother Nature will address this concern by making sure that the community organizations are supported by the broader community and that their decisions help existing leaders achieve their duties: mainly the maintenance and improvement of community wellbeing. If the communities collectively decide that the actions of Mother Nature or their own community organization are not consistent with the mandates of the commune chief, then our organization will immediately cease such actions and support.

- 3) Community based eco-tourism: Mother Nature has started to take very small groups of visitors into the Areng valley, with the aim of building up the foundation of what will be one of Cambodia's top niche destinations for quality nature tourism. Another of the reasons behind the community-based tourism project is to empower the local communities through interaction with outsiders, make them proud of their natural and cultural heritage, and help publicize the rare biodiversity of the area and of course the threats the area is under. Once the project is firmly in place, the communities will be able to use as an example of how

alternative ways to sustainably develop the valley, create jobs and reduce poverty are possible.

Although Mother Nature will limit the number of tour groups to a maximum of two per week, with no more than 8 guests per group, there will be potentially negative outcomes out of the project. The cultural erosion of such a fragile and isolated community due to the unmanaged presence of outsiders is something Mother Nature will strive to minimize by, as mentioned above, minimizing the number of tour groups. We shall also make sure that the communities themselves are able to place a fixed set of rules and regulations concerning visitors (e.g., dress code, behaviours frowned upon, sites off-limits due to religious beliefs, etc); ensuring that all guests are reminded in advance about these rules and regulations; and of course by ensuring that all tour groups are accompanied at all times by not just one member of the community but also by one Mother Nature coordinator;

Jealousy among communities due to disparities in terms of income from tourism will be minimized by having a clear and fair rotation system in which different community members get to be involved in tourism services, such as guiding and cooking.

Civil society groups independent of Mother Nature, will play an important role in not just monitoring the activities and the effects of the community-based eco tourism project, but also in acting as an arbitrary body in case grievances occur or negative impacts on the communities are caused by the project.

- 4) Empowerment of women: Mother Nature strongly believes that the empowerment of women is a strategy with immense potential that has to be fulfilled in order to have communities stand up for themselves and defend their livelihoods, culture, and ancestral lands from the proposed hydroelectric dam. We intend to help raise the status and voices of women by organizing the development of women's group. The group will consist of any women interested in meeting together and discussing the future trajectory of their communities. As the gatherings gain momentum, Mother Nature hopes to transition the group from a forum-based gathering to a committee that mirrors other community organizations such as the Committee for the Protection of Natural Resources. Our intent is to provide a space where women can equally participate in the decision making processes, which are currently dominated by men.

Although to most people the empowerment of women denotes only a positive connotation, community members in an area as remote and unchanged as that of the Areng Valley might see things differently, as the communities in the area have relied for centuries on male members of the community to make common decisions, speak out for the rest of the community, etc.

Since Mother Nature operates out of the Areng Valley itself, and as members of the community themselves are NGO staff members, we are able to closely monitor the impacts of our activities. Our presence in the valley ensures that we can regularly hold consultations with the community members. Through community meetings as well as individual consultations during house-to-house

visits, Mother Nature will clearly explain the purpose of each project being implemented and collect feedback from community members by asking them their thoughts and ideas about each project.

All of our initiatives are predicated on the support and involvement community members themselves; therefore, Mother Nature will evaluate the success of each strategy based on the level of community participation. The effectiveness of our support for community organizations like the women's group and the Committee for the Protection of Natural Resources, for example, will be judged on the level of participation and projects implemented by each group. If such groups are found to be lacking in community support, we will assess how Mother Nature's assistance can be modified to enhance community participation. Similar assessments will be made for our outreach and ecotourism initiatives. Both of these strategies also rely on the participation of community members. Successful implementation will be judged based on the community management of ecotourism projects independent of Mother Nature's oversight as well as self initiated outreach conducted by community members themselves.

Ultimately we seek to have the communities of Chumnoab and Prolay empowered enough to implement their own community campaigns, projects, and initiatives. To ensure that this overall objective is met, Mother Nature will regularly hold meetings with community members to formulate specific strategies for gradually transitioning responsibility to community members. In addition, we will hold meetings among staff and board members to evaluate the effects and success of each of our four initiatives. Using the input from the community as well as the members of Mother Nature, we will ensure that our organizations activities are consistent with the community's own vision and that the communities of Chumnoab and Prolay are actively engaging with such activities.

While Mother Nature will actively work to minimize community concerns and negative impacts of our initiatives by holding regular meetings and continually consulting community members one-on-one, we anticipate there will be situations where some community members will be uncomfortable or unhappy with Mother Nature's activities. In order to address such concerns we will clearly communicate to the communities that anyone can, at any time voice their objections to Mother Nature. Grievances can be reported to any staff member or brought up during any community meeting.

If the issue cannot be resolved immediately between both parties, Mother Nature will cease the project under question and will schedule a communal meeting solely for the purpose of resolving the dispute. The meeting will be open to the community and will also consist of a community leader who can monitor and arbitrate the dispute. Under such a circumstance, Mother Nature will either modify the project to meet the requests of the community member, or will suspend the project if no agreement can be reached.

The design of each of Mother Nature's four initiatives is based on the ideas and input of community members. These initiatives are being developed after numerous meetings with individual community members as well after several community meetings. We are only pursuing projects that have a reasonable amount of community backing. Throughout all stages of implementation we continually seek to keep the community informed about our efforts.

The same transparent process that led to the development of our initiatives has also been used to inform community members about our application for funding from IUCN. We have informed both community members currently involved in Mother Nature's projects as well as those still not connected about the prospects of expanding our activities with the support from IUCN. Through community meetings we have also determined specific initiatives to develop further and therefore included in the proposal. To the best of our ability, we have made sure that as many community members understand the nature of Mother Nature's projects and that we are seeking to increase both our capacity to offer assistance and to improve the community's prospects of achieving meaningful empowerment.