

» working hard to try to relocate these crocodiles, they have only succeeded in relocating a few and it has cost them a lot of money. So I think this will be a very difficult undertaking and most likely impossible.”

Headman Kum Chae expressed dismay that on March 27 outsiders caught a crocodile and took it away without seeking permission from locals and he attributed the death of another to a similar removal effort.

Ang Pau, deputy head of Chum Noab commune, believes eight people — from the FFI, the Forestry Administration and police — were involved in the operation to move the crocodile.

In response to the allegations, FFI spokesman Ally Catterick said: “Our team did inform the local authorities and the community representatives before the work began.”

Ang Pau disagrees: “No they didn’t say anything” and the first he knew of the operation was when local fishermen said they had stumbled upon the team’s camp and four crocodile traps were found along the river.

Ang Pau says he followed the team including two foreigners as they drove away with the crocodile in a local hire truck. Shortly afterwards he said commune council officials and police from the village entered the camp, confiscated equipment and dismantled traps.

Ms Catterick says that the two foreigners were: “crocodile experts from overseas . . . providing training in the safe capture and handling of wild crocodiles and assisting them in the first transportation of one of the crocodiles to its new location”.

The following day fishermen found a dead crocodile floating in the river just downstream from where the traps were found. Commune council officials and FFI staff examined the crocodile and found no marks on it.

Locals suspect it may have been caught in one of FFI’s traps.

FFI, however, is adamant that its traps are, “non-lethal and do not harm the crocodiles” and were located two kilometres away from where the dead crocodile was found.

Ang Pau demanded the other crocodile’s return. “Everyone in the commune of Chum Noab is asking for that crocodile to be returned because it is parts of our beliefs.”

FFI Flagship species coordinator Sarah Brook

stated: “We have full permission” to relocate the crocodile which “was an adult male, of reproductive age”.

Closer to home, a man called Malar of Ta Tay village, downriver of the Stung Tatay dam site, said that since blasting for the construction started he has “seen no more crocodiles and fish stocks have dwindled”.

Reports such as these have conservationists worried. The announcement to clear that reservoir site led to a feverish stampede of hunting and logging as outsiders flocked for rich pickings and inevitably the exploitation spilled into neighbouring forested areas.

In February, Cambodia’s student movement and the Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Communities teamed up with a group of Buddhist monks. Together with local people they held a ceremony to ordain old growth trees in the neighbouring community of Ta Tay Leu.

Attracting the support of many local women and children their entourage wound its way through the ruins of giant smouldering trees that had until recently been towering rainforest. As we tramped through the smoke and ashes a tree crashed to the ground not 20m away, its ancient roots having succumbed to the fire.

Chanting a blessing at each tree, the monks tied orange sashes around their trunks intended to highlight their spiritual value to deter people from cutting them down. In this case they wanted to halt deforestation planned for the expansion of a banana plantation.

Local monk Meas Korng sees ecotourism as another way to protect the area. “When nature is plentiful, we can then protect the environment, and income from nature tourism can come into our commune, and improve villagers’ lives,” he said.

Members of this new alliance said they plan to continue their tree blessing activities in other areas of the Cardamom mountains.

Ironically, banana plantation owner Som Kim had the forested land measured as part of the land-titling scheme in January and was eagerly awaiting his land title document. Keen to confirm his ownership, he had set about clearing the forest. “I’ll be increasing the plantation area on a yearly basis,” he said.

Som Kim is not alone, as forest clearance to demonstrate ownership has accelerated since



UNITED FRONT: Fears over the expansion of a nearby banana plantation and illegal loggers have brought students, farmers, monks and the local community closer together.

the government land-titling programme began. Four farmers in the Areng valley explained that they had cleared their forested plots to prepare for the surveyor’s visit.

It is unclear why Som Kim could claim protected forest, as the provincial department of land management concerned could not be reached. He said that it didn’t matter that he had cleared the forest because in any case “it might catch fire naturally”.

Nationwide, reports of the adverse consequences of the hurried land scheme are mounting, suggesting that it may backfire as a vote winner. Many people have complained of being left out altogether, while their neighbours and officials receive lucrative ownership papers, sometimes to the very land that those excluded from the scheme farm for survival.

Fearing the worst, locals are keen to be included in the scheme so they can demonstrate what property they have lost and claim compensation, should the waters start to rise.

Whatever the outcome of this struggle of development over tradition, widow Meuk Pa says she will not be moved from her ancestral home in the valley. “I will not be moving elsewhere, I’m living here until I die. Now I’m old so maybe just my son and daughter will move and follow the others, but I will stay.” ■

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**MEAS KORNG
MONK**



HELP FROM ON HIGH: Villagers swathe trees in orange to highlight their spiritual value and to deter efforts to clear the land for development.