

# Villagers turn from hunting to ecotourism

A Siem Reap-based group has helped transform the village of Tmatboey into a model of community-based conservation

BY AYE SAPAY PHYU  
SIEM REAP

AS biodiversity in Southeast Asia suffers from an onslaught of habitat loss, climate change and overexploitation, a few organisations are determined to develop strategies aimed at helping people live in better harmony with nature.

In Cambodia, one of these groups is the Siem Reap-based Sam Veasna Centre (SVC), which manages bird-watching day trips and itineraries to eight Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) conservation projects across Cambodia.

Nick Butler, the coordinator of the centre, said one of their main strategies for saving Cambodia's wilderness areas was the promotion of ecotourism.

"Ecotourism works by providing local communities with alternative and sustainable livelihoods, linking education, as well as no-hunting and land use agreements, with the conservation of their local environment," he said.

He said the involvement of local communities at a very early stage in the development of ecotourism projects was crucial. "We do two things. The first is that we manage the ecotourism business by trying to get international bird watchers to visit the WCS project sites across Cambodia," he said.

"The second part of our business is to train villagers who live near the conservation area in the provision of ecotourism services. The result is that villagers are able to make an income by providing accommodation, food and guiding services for visitors. In return, they sign agreements not to hunt animals, not to cut down the forest and not to harm their environment."

Environmental conservation is a global concern, and the United Nations has declared 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity, with the aim of reducing the rate of habitat loss around the world.

An article released by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Culture Organi-

sation at the beginning of the year said the rate of biodiversity was accelerating mainly due to habitat loss, climate change, invasive species, over-exploitation and pollution.

The article said underlying causes for this loss included poor governance and poor understanding of the importance of biodiversity conservation for society's well-being and

**VILLAGERS ARE ABLE TO MAKE AN INCOME BY PROVIDING ACCOMMODATION, FOOD AND GUIDING SERVICES FOR VISITORS.**

prosperity in the long term.

As part of their effort to help maintain biodiversity in Cambodia, SVC has developed a flagship project in Tmatboey village in Preah Vihear province, where the signing of successful no-hunting and land conservation agreements between the WCS and the village committee has made it a model of community-based ecotourism.

Mr Butler said the main objective of the project was to conserve critically endangered bird species breeding in the area.

"At first the villagers didn't understand why tourists would want to come and see the birds and forest," he said. "But now the visitors keep coming, and the income from the tourists benefits their community. This helps them to understand why they shouldn't hunt or cut down their forest."

In 2007 Tmatboey village, which consists of 220 families, won the Wild Asia Responsible Tourism Award, a Malaysia-based social enterprise working to support environmental and social initiatives in Asia.

Tmatboey was also the joint winner in 2008 of the Equator Prize, awarded to projects that link poverty reduction to biodiversity, and last year it won the Prestigious Ecotourism Project Award from the Cambodian Ministry of Environment.

From 2003, when the project started, to 2008, the local population of critically endangered white-shouldered ibises has

increased from one nest and two adults, to six nests and 23 adults. The same period saw the doubling of the number of giant ibis nests.

Another WCS conservation site where SVC manages ecotourism services is the Prek Toal core area of the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve in Battambang province. Seven water bird species of "global significance" have been found breeding in the area.

Nick Butler said the project – in which the WCS has assisted efforts by the Cambodian government to conserve local bird colonies – has given villagers greater awareness of the environment.

"This has resulted in a spectacular increase in the population of a water bird called the Oriental darter, which has increased 20 times since the project started in 2002 to approximately 20,000 adults," he said.

"As long as the community maintains the area's biodiversity and environment, the tourists will continue to come," he added. ■