

TREE ORDINATION IN CAMBODIA

By Alejandro Gonzales-Davidson 26/7/2013.

Photos by Luke Duggleby www.lukeduggleby.com

The sacred forests of Ta Tay Leu commune in Koh Kong province, SW Cambodia, as well as the forests on both sides of the 17km road linking this commune with the nearest town of Thmo Bang started being felled at an alarming rate in November 2012 when the Cambodian government began a demarcation program to allow villagers to get official title to their land.

Corruption at all levels of government ensured that villagers who felled pristine forests under the pretext that these were only fallow slash-and-burn regrowth plantations would be able to alienate this land and corruptly get title to it. This continued despite repeated protests by some members of the provincial department of Forestry until our NGO "Mother Nature" reported it to the media and to the opposition party. The Phnom Penh Post then published an article and one of the leaders of the opposition political party wrote a letter to the Prime Minister demanding an explanation behind this allegations.

Some of the destruction was of old growth forests with huge trees that protected an incredible array of fauna. In order to draw attention to what was going on, not only at the local level, but also to the outside world, we invited about 10 monks from other parts of the country who, together with the monks from the local "Prolay" temple, organized a tree ordination ceremony and ordained as monks, the few trees that were still standing and had somehow survived the latest destruction. Ven Dhammajat, the Abbot of Prolay, then visited the 'owners' of the 'plantations' where the giant trees were ordained and asked them to leave the monk-trees standing.



The ceremony was conducted on a Sunday at the start of the Chinese new year celebrations, a time in which young villagers traditionally gather at the temple. Ven Dhammajat gave a talk at the temple about the issue and invited those present to attend the ordination ceremony. We had also informed key local figures (teachers, local monks, commune and village chiefs etc.) about the event weeks beforehand and they helped gather support.



The effects of this ceremony were profoundly felt both by the local population and also in nearby villages. Together with the article in the media and the letter to the PM from the opposition party, the ordinations have had the desired effect, as it seems that no more than a third of the illegally felled forests will now be declared as private land and no official land titles will be issued. The monk-trees are still standing, which is particularly significant as some of them were ordained with the aim of them acting as 'demarcation posts' in order to stop further expansion of plantations. Mother Nature intends to eventually sign post the monk-trees with individual numbers and start building a database of threatened trees in the area to forestall similar scams taking place in the future.





Image by Luke Duggleby