

# Impact Spotlight

## Keo Seima REDD+ Project Q1 2023



EVER  
LAND







# SPOTLIGHT SUMMARY

The Keo Seima REDD+ project's theory of change is built on the understanding that to achieve the project's goals, it must deliver positive benefits to local communities and Indigenous peoples. A vital component of this approach is the deep connection between the Indigenous Bunong people and the forest, which has thrived for generations under their stewardship. The Bunong people possess a unique and intimate bond with the forest, deeply rooted in their cultural and spiritual beliefs.

The Bunong people are the largest indigenous highland ethnic group in Cambodia, with their own language and cultural traditions distinct from the Khmer majority. They practice animism, which is the belief that everything in nature has a spirit, including animals, plants, and natural phenomena. The forest is seen as a sacred space by the Bunong people, inhabited by powerful spirits that control the natural world. In fact, forest spirits are seen as the most sacred among the spirits that inhabit the forest - Chok Marel. The Bunong people use various rituals and offerings to communicate with these spirits, seeking their guidance and protection.



TARGET 16.7



TARGET 10.2



16.7: ENSURE RESPONSIVE, INCLUSIVE AND REPRESENTATIVE DECISION-MAKING

10.2: PROMOTE UNIVERSAL SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INCLUSION

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The traditional practices of the Bunong people have allowed them to live in harmony with the forest and maintain its rich biodiversity and ecological balance. The forest, in turn, provides the Bunong people with essential resources, allowing them to sustain their way of life and preserve their beliefs. The project seeks to strengthen this bond through various activities, such as securing and managing Indigenous Communal Land Titles (ICTs), providing legal support, assisting in land demarcation, expanding heritage land, supporting land inventory, building community capacity building, and obtaining self-certification. These initiatives help empower the Bunong people to protect their ancestral lands and safeguard their rights and resources.







# KEY ACTIVITIES

The project activities outlined below focus on empowering the Indigenous Bunong people to continue protecting their ancestral lands and are crucial for directly and indirectly addressing the main drivers of deforestation.

*"We are trying to secure those rights and support the autonomy of Bunong people who traditionally have a conservation ethos."*

Emiel de Lange,  
Conservation Impact Technical Advisor



- Heritage Land Expansion:** To further safeguard the cultural and spiritual connection of the Indigenous Bunong people to their forest, the project has introduced a new project activity – the expansion of Heritage Land. This pilot initiative aims to extend ICTs to include Heritage Land. Heritage Land encompasses vital areas where the Bunong people conduct key cultural and religious ceremonies that define their identity and way of life.
- ICT Creation:** Securing ICTs for the Indigenous Bunong people involves extensive paperwork and numerous meetings. With eight titles underway, the project strives to expedite the process despite inherent challenges.
- ICT Strengthening:** The project works to ensure the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of the ICTs by providing support, resources, and capacity building to community leadership.
- ICT Management:** The project focuses on establishing bylaws and internal rules to prevent land selling and maintain communal ownership for the Indigenous Bunong people.
- Land Use Inventory:** The project assists villages in managing their lands by helping them plot various land use activities, such as agricultural production, residential development, and the conservation of spiritual forests.
- Land Demarcation:** To prevent land grabs and encroachment, the project supports the physical demarcation of land by installing signage and boundary markers.
- Ongoing Legal Support:** The project offers continuous legal support for conflict resolution and addressing issues related to in-migration, ensuring the long-term protection of Indigenous Bunong people's rights.



# MILESTONES

Supporting local and Indigenous communities, such as the Bunong people, lies at the heart of the project's long-term goal of achieving durable forest conservation. Forest conservation is inextricably linked to community-led efforts, as these communities hold a deep understanding, connection and respect for their environment. Some milestones to date are:

- ✓ Secured seven Indigenous Communal Land Titles (ICTs) and have eight more underway, providing legal protection and recognition for Indigenous lands.
- ✓ Accomplished self-certification for 6 Bunong villages, with the Ministry of Rural Development formally recognizing their unique Indigenous identity and bolstering the legal protections already in place through ICTs.
- ✓ Initiated the Heritage Land project, which holds significant cultural value and offers additional forest protection by expanding the recognized land areas.
- ✓ Pushed for demarcation of more ICT land ahead of the July national election, ensuring that even more Indigenous communities' are granted lasting legal rights to their lands.
- ✓ Conducted over 100 meetings on ICTs and invested hundreds of hours in educating Indigenous residents about their legal rights, land ownership, and conflict resolution mechanisms. This hands-on approach has armed the communities with the knowledge and tools needed to navigate complex legal processes and protect their lands, culture, and heritage.
- ✓ Installed hundreds of boundary markers around ICTs, including key areas such as Jahoo Gibbon Camp, to demarcate and protect the indigenous lands. These markers are a visible reminder of the Bunong people's rights and help prevent land grabs, encroachment, and unauthorized activities within their territories. This tangible activity contributes to these vital forest areas' long-term conservation and management.







## CURRENT NEWS

The Keo Seima REDD+ project's ICT team launched the Heritage Land initiative, which aims to expand ICTs to include areas of cultural and spiritual significance to the Indigenous Bunong people. The team also worked on developing community-led ecotourism plans for the Leng Kao waterfall in the Andoung Kraloeng (AK) ICT, which would directly support local communities if successful.

In addition, the project installed over thirty boundary poles around Jahoo Camp, an ecotourism site in Pu Klei in the AK ICT, to protect and conserve the area. The team also conducted land use inventory demarcation, verified land plots in the AK ICT, and organized internal general assemblies to disseminate draft rules to ICT members, neighboring ICTs, and nearby communities. Furthermore, the team provided training on the exercise of ownership and conflict resolution mechanisms with the help of the R&L law office. The training increased awareness and knowledge of ownership rights of ICTs and alternative dispute resolution tools for solving conflicts.

One of the main challenges the project faces in supporting Indigenous communities is the multi-step application process for obtaining ICTs. While well-established, the process can be time-consuming and require numerous approvals and community consultations. This can lead to meeting fatigue and slow progress as communities and project teams work through the paperwork and approvals needed to secure formal land titles. Additionally, the need for more definitive timelines from the Ministry of Rural Development can make it challenging to inform communities when they can expect to receive their land titles, adding to the frustration and uncertainty around the process. Despite these challenges, the project continues to work closely with communities to navigate the process and secure the necessary legal protections for their ancestral lands.







# THE FUTURE

In the short term, the project will continue their core project activities vis-à-vis Indigenous communities, including securing and managing ICTs, strengthening their management and governance, land demarcation, legal support, and heritage land expansion. Additionally, the project will focus on piloting the recently launched Heritage Land initiative in several more ICTs. The project team plans to bring officials out to survey the land and engage directly with communities who want to see their ICT land area expand. They will continue their efforts to educate and raise awareness among Indigenous communities about their legal rights, how to exercise them, and address any challenges that may arise in the approval process for ICTs.

The project's long-term ambition is to see all Bunong communities in the Keo Seima REDD+ project area secure formal land titles and ultimately improve their ability to manage their land sustainably. The project will continue working with communities to ensure they have the legal support and capacity to effectively manage their communal land titles while providing ongoing support for conflict resolution and in-migration challenges. Ultimately, the goal is to see the Bunong people thriving, and their forests protected for future generations. The project's partnership with the communities is essential to achieving durable forest conservation, and WCS remains fully committed to working alongside them for as long as it takes to make this a reality.

