



Environmental activism and indigenous issues in Cambodia – film-based advocacy with and for young people

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Film and filmmaking have proved to be critical avenues for raising awareness about environmental challenges. High profile screen releases have helped set and steer agendas around, for example, [An Inconvenient Truth](#) and global heating, [Blue Planet](#) and plastic usage, and most recently [Seaspiracy](#) and marine conservation. These examples represent a particular genre of “[Environmental Documentary](#)” that call attention to environmental challenges, often around or instigating campaigns for change and action. The proliferation of environmental documentaries in recent decades has coincided with greater recognition of the intergenerational politics at play around environmental harm (as explored in the 2019 documentary [2040](#)). Young people today will inherit the worsening impacts of multiple environmental crises and have increasingly taken the lead on [campaigns for climate awareness and justice](#).

In this wider landscape, our work with young filmmakers in Cambodia has sought to address what these global challenges mean for communities at a local level. Cambodia is currently facing significant and intersecting environmental challenges. Deforestation in Cambodia has led to the loss of [2.2 million hectares](#) of tree cover over the past two decades, with serious knock on effects for the loss of wildlife. Endangered species have suffered significant population decline, [even within designated sanctuaries](#), and Cambodia’s Asian elephant population in particular have suffered habitat loss. Fauna and Flora International estimate that just [400-600 wild elephants remain](#). The challenges facing Cambodia further illustrate the inseparability of environment from issues of social justice and politics. Environmental activists in Cambodia have faced [harassment and physical violence](#). Indigenous forest dwelling communities such as the Bunong – who already suffer widespread discrimination – are particularly affected by [land grabbing and the loss of forest resources](#). These harms are amplified given the Bunong people’s close relationships to elephants.

Our [AHRC-GCRF project](#), “Elephant conservation and indigenous experiences in Cambodia: Shaping environmental awareness through participatory filmmaking with young people” has sought to document and explore these intersecting challenges from the perspectives of Cambodia’s youth and the indigenous Bunong population of Monduliri. The project built on the methods used by Manning as part of the AHRC-GCRF project [Changing the Story](#), and involved collaboration between the University of Bath, the [Bophana Center](#), the [Elephant Livelihood Initiative Environment](#) (ELIE), the University of Leeds and Queens University Belfast. During the project, 12 young Cambodians were provided with an educational programme on environmental and indigenous issues in Cambodia and trained in filmmaking. Over the course of 2020, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis, the young people produced three films with and within Bunong indigenous communities that explore issues of deforestation, animal welfare, and gender inequality.

The films reflect the worldviews of the young people leading and shaping them, and their engagements with indigenous communities and Cambodia’s remaining forest habitats. The films mobilise the affective role of elephants (and other wildlife) on screen, convey the sense of precarity and vulnerability of Cambodia’s forests, and go further to demonstrate the connections Cambodia’s indigenous communities have with the forest environment. The films have been produced and edited in Khmer and Bunong languages to ensure that the films are accessible to Bunong indigenous groups; at a recent screening in Monduliri, indigenous community members spoke of the importance of seeing their stories and challenges represented in Bunong language. As the use of indigenous languages in Cambodia is declining, such concerns – and wider questions around the preservation of indigenous heritage and tradition – are particularly important.

The methods of participatory filmmaking adopted in the project provide important lessons for wider arts-led activism around environmental challenges. The recruitment of urban, rural, and indigenous young Cambodians and the process of producing films within the communities built relationships and empathy between filmmakers, members of the Bunong community and the elephants living in the forest. Destigmatising indigenous communities – who are often suffer discrimination and exclusion from other Khmer communities – is a necessary part of amplifying awareness of the environmental challenges that indigenous communities face. Similarly, increased empathy with non-human creatures has been [shown](#) to be an important facilitator of pro-environmental sentiments and behaviours. Further, recognising that these challenges affect not just *all* Cambodians but have regional and international salience is an important step in cultivating a shared sense of responsibility for environmental harms within and across communities. The process of participatory filmmaking is particularly well equipped to do this as both a tool for educators and a medium for advocacy and activism.

Film has become an increasingly dominant medium for shaping and steering the public imagination of environmental challenges and how they can be apprehended. The attendant challenge for filmmakers is to allow connections of these issues across local, national, regional and global scales, while retaining sensitivity to the necessarily intersecting ‘human’ and environmental injustices that surround them. Our project suggests that actively involving young people and impacted communities (human and non-human) in the production of film can play an important role in promoting engagement with these injustices. More broadly, recent UN agendas around “[Global Citizenship Education](#)” demonstrate growing recognition of the importance of engaging learners as promoters of peace, human rights, and sustainability. We would argue that participatory filmmaking has an important role to play in this agenda.

The three films are available here

Dull Trail

Blind in one eye and traumatized from years of war and American bombs, Mae Neng the elephant learns to accept the love of her kind caretaker Da Chroed in Mondulhiri province. Produced by Ricky David CHOHEY, Mono PEOU, Raksa KHON.

My Home

Chheol Thouk never wanted to be anything else but a mahout and he roams the forest tending to his elephants. But the natural habitat in Mondulhiri province shrinking due to deforestation — threatening the elephants, their ecosystem and Chheol’s way of life. Produced by Sopheana CHOUN, Choulay MECH, Sopheak YAM, Sochetra MEAN, Pisen CHHEAN.

Memories

As a matriarch in Mondulhiri province, Preng Chanthy strives to maintain the traditions of her indigenous community – including caring for the local elephants and brewing rice wine to offer to spirits – while passing her wisdom on to the next generation. Produced by Sonan SOUS, Sreytoch SAT, Theang PAOV.

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