



Out At Sea: Protecting Cambodia's Marine Ecosystems

Cambodian environmental activists have long decried the destruction of the country's forests, natural resources and rivers. This activism has seeped into everyday Cambodian conversations where young people are emboldened to advocate against deforestation and its impact on communities.

However, environmental damage to Cambodia's seas is hidden from plain sight and receives far less attention. Destructive fishing techniques, industrial and chemical runoff, and indiscriminate development of the coastline are silently harming Cambodia's seas, marine ecosystems and coastal communities.

Phion Sopheanie | 30 | University of Pannasastra



tems and coastal communities.

In light of these underwater challenges, organizations like Marine Conservation Cambodia (MCC) are working to reduce marine destruction but also encouraging and providing opportunities for young Cambodians to participate in marine protection.

MCC is working with three young Cambodians at Koh Ach Seh off the coast of Kep province on tackling different aspects of marine conservation and sustainability.

Phion Sopheanie, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in environmental science and now works with the marine mammal project at MCC, looks out for the very rare pink dolphin during a survey to determine their numbers in the waters off Kep and Kampot provinces. After Sopheanie visited MCC as a student, she immediately knew she would return to the organization to do her thesis on pink dolphin identification. Through her work, she has gotten very close to local fishing communities, who were keen to help survey for the dolphins. This helped Sopheanie better understand how fishing communities interact with the sea and sea life.



While Sopheanie has been able to get local fishers to assist with identifying pink dolphins, it has been a lot harder to get help for conservation of the dugong, a marine animal that is called water pig in Khmer language. While there was an inclination to release dolphins caught in fishing nets, fishers were more likely to sell captured dugongs in markets, Sopheanie says.



Lor Samphors worked with MCC on a project for the cultivation of sea grapes, a type of seaweed that grows in the Asia-Pacific region. The project builds on Samphors prior experience researching and surveying 45 types of algae. As a student, most of her peers chose to study fresh-water bodies and she was one of six to study marine life. "Algae chose me, even before I had heard the word!"



Samphors wanted to cultivate seagrapes, a seaweed with a long spindly stalk and small grape-like nodules. She experimented with the best way to cultivate the seaweed in aquariums on the island and believes the produce can earn farmers up to \$10 a kilogram, which is currently how much Japanese restaurants pay for the seaweed.





Tai Chhen graduated with a major in the study of freshwater bodies but has since pivoted to marine conservation with MCC. Having grown up in a fishing community, Chhen is keenly aware of the significant drop in fish catch and the use of destructive trawling that destroys the seabed, drawing her to marine conservation and sustainability.



To supplement dropping incomes from fishing, Chhen has devised a prototype bamboo structure for sustainable oyster farming. Initial results are encouraging and show that oysters are spawning on ropes hanging from the bamboo poles. The project can provide fishers a sustainable and lucrative opportunity, avoiding more damaging practices such as using trawlers which scrape the ocean floor and valuable seagrass ecosystems.

