Research Article

The Bearing of the Less: Fulfilling Carbon Neutrality and the National Political Economy in Virachey National Park, Cambodia

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This paper examines the ways of life of two groups of Indigenous peoples living in the vicinity of a northeastern Cambodian national park. It juxtaposes their livelihood practices with state-led conservation policies shaped by the financialization of nature. The paper argues that Indigenous communities, through their capacity to sustain life in close relation to their natural environment, embody an adaptive form of subsistence that effectively shoulders the burdens of global and national climate policies. This dynamic gives rise to what we term the "bearing of the less", whereby marginalised communities disproportionately absorb the costs of environmental governance. Contributing to political ecology scholarship, the analysis demonstrates that Indigenous peoples are inseparable from their surrounding ecosystems, continuously adapting their livelihoods within increasingly constrained forest territories they have traditionally inhabited.

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Introduction

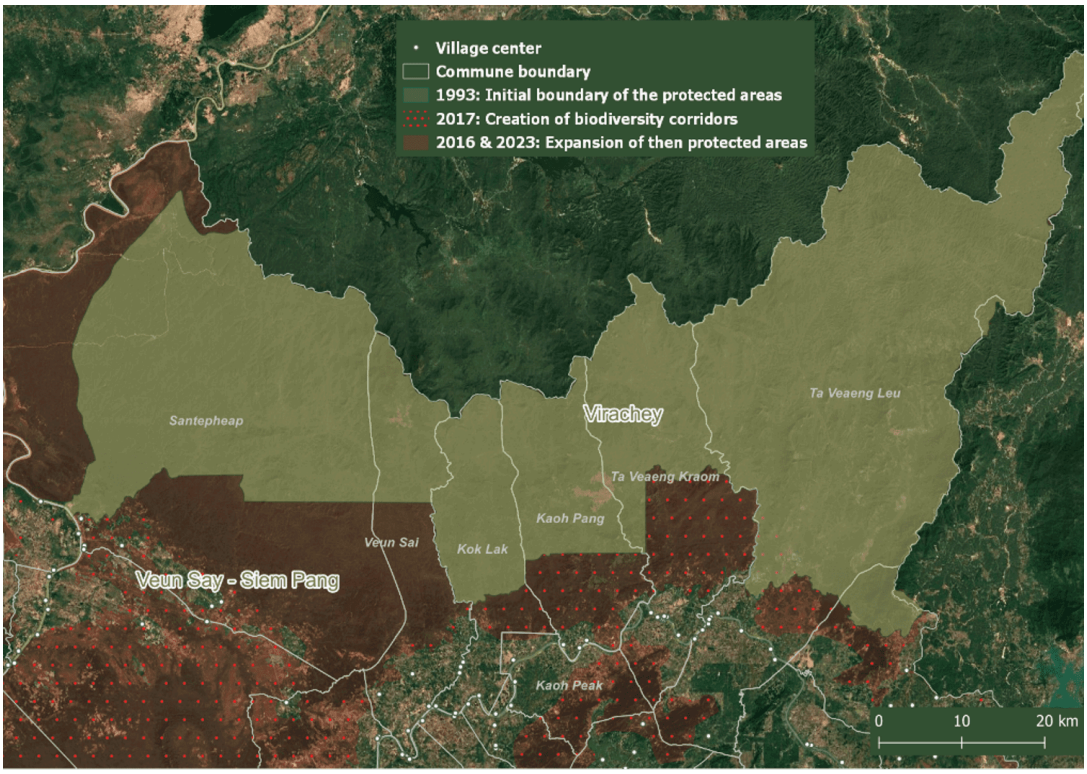
Setting the Scene

At the top of the northeastern Ratanakiri Province, bordering Laos and Vietnam, stands one of the largest protected areas (PA) in Cambodia, called Virachey National Park (VNP). Most of the described events occurred in March 2025, when the investigation took place. These events provide grounds for discussion and debate rooted in political ecology and agrarian studies as to how global and local policies, combined

with a political economy of climate change, exert a strain on the subsistence groups of Indigenous peoples who are de facto minimal consumers emitting almost zero carbon. On the contrary, they help sequestrate carbon as part of their swidden agriculture practices and community forest protection. The paper contends that the subjection of the agency of small groups to the national/global political economy in response to the global ecological crisis gives rise to a phenomenon we call the "bearing of the less".

Let us first look at what happened: about a hundred highlanders[1] living in the two districts of Veunsai and Taveng, adjacent to the VNP, underwent a court procedure. Without any prior warning, they received a court summons sent directly by the Provincial Department of Justice. Each of these Indigenous farmers was summoned to the provincial courthouse at the provincial capital Ban Lung for his alleged crime of illegally grabbing the VNP by clearing a part of the protected forest (in fact, already used for a long time) for cultivation purposes.[2]

No one in the villages established in the periphery of the park understood the underlying reasons for such structural violence.[3] Speculations were ruled out. Most forest dwellers—the Brao and the Kavet ethnic groups—including the local authorities (village chiefs and commune chiefs)—associated this unexpected accusation with a 'massacre killing' in the sense that it deprived the accused farmers of an essential means of livelihood. Moreover, it was unilaterally implemented by the Provincial Department of Environment (PDoE)—*Parikthan* in Khmer—which had received an order from the Ministry of Environment, without any local consultation, to expand the size of the VNP from its 1993 original territory of 332,500 ha to 405,766 ha in 2023, therefore absorbing farmlands cultivating subsistence farming and cash crops (see Map 1).



Map 1. Extension of the Virachey National Park. *Source: Courtesy Jean-Christophe Diépart, May 2026.*

In fact the expansion of protected area, enacted in 2023, was done on basis of the so-called Biodiversity Corridors initiative of the Government. Back in 2017, a Biodiversity Corridor was created without consultation with local population in the southern part of VNP. The MoE justified the creation of various Biodiversity Corridors in the country because of the need to connect all protected areas to reduce their fragmentation for biodiversity conservation leading to 'conservation islands'. These corridors were considered important for maintaining genetic biodiversity conservation by allowing wildlife movements. Later in July 2023, the government of Cambodia issued a series of sub-decrees formally incorporating 0.7 million hectares of land previously classified as Biodiversity Conservation Corridors into the Protected Area system[1]). This sudden expansion of VNP was immediately followed by the creation of a new protected area (Veun Sai- Siem Pang) located in the vicinity of the VNP in 2023. It bordered Kok Lak commune and impacted the traditional territory of the Kok Lak villagers. Such two-fold MoE-driven process created resentment, resistance and complaint, among the Brao people as well as in Kok Lak commune inhabited by Kavet people, caught in a trap between two newly demarcated protected areas.

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Few actors supported the Indigenous farmers, with limited voices and influence. A long-term westerner from a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) attributed the retention of the original park boundary to the fact that a large area had already been ceded by the government to an investor operating within the VNP. Such a measure, the foreign worker contends, was achieved by constructing a sphere of fear and coercion imposed upon the limited capacity of minority groups in manoeuvring the 'colonial Khmer language'. Such a power imbalance mixed with widespread structural violence reflects a recurrent way of doing 'conservation' whenever investments, welcomed by the national government, are dominated by Chinese companies representing a community of valuable enterprises in Cambodia[2].

Other critics from Human Rights groups, Indigenous NGOs and Indigenous networks vocally challenged the government, but not that much. They classified the case as violating Indigenous peoples' fundamental rights. Deep down, when it came to effective interventions with emancipation outcomes, they could hardly avoid attributing their failure to the limited capacity of Indigenous peoples to navigate the legality of the park, even when the borders were unilaterally (re)demarcated by a Royal Government sub-decree promulgating the park expansion in 2023. An Indigenous respondent claimed, "one may wonder what roles these NGOs are in a position to play regarding the social injustice [faced by the Indigenous peoples]".

One answer can be found in the rhetoric provided by the head of the provincial environment department (PDoE). As if accused of wrongdoing, the provincial government responsible for the park opted for a defensive discourse when one of the authors interviewed him. Moreover, some civil servants stated that the conservation area as a whole *must* be strictly protected from anthropic interventions. Another version comes from the MoE, explaining that the cultivated land that fall into protected area boundary after expansion would be classify as 'community zone' so that the people would not lose their right on land. Besides this public narrative, the reality is often quite different, as it is the case here: in Ratanakiri one of the environment officers accused the Indigenous peoples of being land grabbers, claiming that considerable areas of forest had been cleared wherever possible, including within the community protected areas (CPA) that have been turned into a *chamkar* (a small plot of secondary forest converted to swidden agriculture). The administrator went on to associate the Economic Land Concession (ELC) with enabling job creation[4] while simultaneously attacking NGOs for their duplicity and their business strategies. An environment officer declared: '[...] the NGOs select some communities according to one criterion: with existing intensive involvement and for the success to be easily claimed [...]. Common intervention is training and capacity building. And their workers are ready to switch from one NGO to

another when there is no more funding. Unlike the government staff who are more patriotic for their perseverance, instead of a low payment'.

The local authorities (village and commune chiefs) living in the localities where court attacks took place were also furious with the '*parikthan*' litigation. This shared desperation led the villagers to be eager to cooperate with whoever could eventually bring the abuse to the attention of the top decision-makers, those above the PDoE in charge. However, facing such 'licensed exclusions'[3], social resentment occurred at the village level. Worse, social friction occurred in a few Brao villages: local authorities—mostly the commune chiefs—came to be untrusted by some fellow villagers, who blamed the hapless local authorities for not having been informed about the threat of the pending court cases and, worse, suspected them of being government complicit.

Another comment against the unilateral pronouncement to increase the size of the park comes from a young Indigenous female lawyer. Half puzzled, half disappointed at being limited to providing legal consultation, she pointed to the irony of the criminalisation of Indigenous peoples on the basis of land grabbing while another form of grab-by-law by an *okhna*[5] was published and circulated in a local outlet. About 500 hectares of land in a nearby national park were legally granted with proof of ownership and titles issued by the Department of Land Management and Urbanisation, to which the representative of the MoE based in Ratanakiri Province denied providing comments and referred the question for clarification to the Ministry of Land Management and Urbanisation[4].

Drawing from the above discourses and practices, the legal action against highlanders, along with the timid reactions of local NGOs and Human Rights groups towards local State actors, leads to a preliminary conclusion specifying that the expansion of a national park by the 'State's absolute power' badly affects the life conditions of Indigenous groups and transforms the accused families into conservation criminals. It further reflects the limited roles of NGOs in emancipating the marginalised communities from the State violence exacerbating 'carbon colonialism'[5]. Conversely, a different spectrum can be drawn by examining the ways of life of Indigenous peoples and their agency.

Scope of the research

By examining the ways of life of two groups of Indigenous peoples living in the vicinity of a northeastern Cambodian national park, the paper juxtaposes livelihood practices with state-led conservation policies shaped by the financialization of nature. It intends to show that Indigenous groups, with their agency of sustaining life with their natural environment, constitute a subsistence mode of life shouldering the

global and national policies on climate change, therefore giving rise to a phenomenon which can be termed “the bearing of the less” whereby marginalised communities disproportionately absorb the costs of environmental governance. After setting out the research methodology, the text addresses the numerous and dispersed conservation policies followed by the country, while pointing out scholarly observations and critiques insisting on the need to take into consideration the worldwide context and the global green governance. Conservation ideologies and practices cannot be disconnected from the peoples living inside or nearby protected areas. That is why the following section constitutes an attempt to understand, through complementary angles (elusiveness of the term ‘Indigenous peoples’, historical incertitude of their origin, legacy of Indigenous life before and after the park creation, imposition of a top-down model of conservation), how forest dwellers living nearby the VNP are nowadays considered by the public authorities in charge of a green economy associated with non-negotiable environment prescriptions. The third section chooses some elements of the way of life (means of livelihood, cultural practices, way of being ‘Indigenous’, interaction with outsiders, debates with park regulations) of these two Indigenous peoples facing State conservation policies in order to demonstrate that they are inseparable from their surrounding ecosystems, continuously adapting their livelihoods within increasingly constrained forest territories they have traditionally inhabited. In conclusion, we highlight the equivocal park’s official mode of conservation unwilling to recognize any form of leadership of the local communities who are paradoxically expected to ‘make a sacrifice’ (land restriction, human right abuses, submission to the provincial authorities, rejection of their cosmovision) for the future of the planet.

Research Methodology

The research journey traced a path from the epicentre of decision-making—the Ministry of Environment (MoE)—to the lowest levels of social and political organisation, namely villages surrounding VNP. The aim was to understand both the circumstances under which biodiversity conservation policies are formulated and the ways in which they are implemented on the ground.

This study prioritises an exploration of how elite capture is institutionalised and how it shapes MoE mandates in addressing ecological change. Key questions include: How are decisions made? What principles guide these decisions? How is Khmer State apparatus, as embedded in this institutional context, characterised? The research was informed by one author’s three-month volunteer placement within a MoE department, following a learning-through-doing ethnographic approach.[6]

A mixed-methods approach was employed to uncover the underlying logics of policy formulation and practice. Data collection combined an insider perspective, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and classical ethnographic fieldwork. Interviews were conducted in Khmer with the precious contribution of a Kavet (requesting anonymity). More than 20 'official' interlocutors were interviewed, including provincial government officers, local NGO staff, and members of Indigenous organisations, recruited through a snowball sampling method.

The ethnographic component in the communities was conducted in two stages. The first involved trekking—a "transect walk"—in the outer layer of VNP, guided by a Brao community member from a village adjacent to the park. The second stage consisted of a two-week stay in two districts bordering the park, encompassing Rok, O'Lalay, and Ntrak villages (Koklak commune) and Phav, Tampuan Reoung Thom, and Tampuan Reoung Touch villages (Taveng Krom commune), inhabited by Kavet and Brao ethnic groups. During this period, one of the authors participated in two local weddings and a cultural festival bringing together Brao, Kavet, Kreung, and Lun communities. These interactions facilitated contact with Indigenous activists and villagers affected by legal cases, providing insight into local responses to State policies.

Field immersion involved residing with host families, which allowed observation of daily routines, such as early morning gatherings around fires for coffee and conversation. Afternoons were spent walking around the village or visiting key event sites, engaging with villagers curious or willing to share their experiences. Village hubs such as local groceries served as additional spaces for informal conversation and observation.

The study's ethnographic approach draws on Anna Tsing's conceptualisation of ethnography as "thinking along with" informants, emphasising engagement with research subjects in ways that depart from conventional, predetermined scientific protocols[6]. Conversations were conducted in a non-colonial, non-interrogative manner to encourage informants' perspectives and narratives. Sharing comparable experiences from other contexts often facilitated discussion of sensitive topics. Ethnography here was not merely a method of data collection but a practice of immersion in the social, cultural, and political life of the communities. This included participation in daily activities, domestic work, food preparation, ritual practices, and sociocultural routines, as well as adopting local attire and norms to blend in as fully as possible.

Local Governance on Conservation versus the Culture of Growth

Going one step back—prior to the criminalisation of forest dwellers and toward the current policy horizon—Cambodia has reoriented its environmental policy toward achieving a carbon-neutral economy by 2050. The expansion of the VNP, along with the creation/expansion of other parks in the Kingdom, partly reflects the government strategy. This shift aims to address climate change while reflecting the country's commitment as a signatory to the Paris Agreement in 2017. Key national targets include forest sustainability and land-use management, the expansion of protected areas to 60% of the national territory, reforestation and afforestation, strengthened digital governance, and a 50% reduction in deforestation by 2030. These objectives are accompanied by full enforcement of environmental laws and intensified crackdowns on perceived violations. Taken together, this agenda reflects a broader move toward intensified conservation.

When it comes to paper-based national policies and action plans, Cambodia, as a modern bureaucratic state, may rank among the most proactive in mainland Southeast Asia, as reflected in its climate change policy[7]. Updated policies and legal frameworks are abundant. These include, among others, the Environmental Code and the relatively new technical guidelines (and policy) of protected area zonation (core, buffer, sustainable use and community zones), the Pentagon Strategy, the Circular Strategy on Environment (2023-2028), the Long-Term Strategy for Carbon Neutrality by 2050[8], the Cambodian Climate Change Strategic Plan (2024-2033), the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, the Green Growth Strategy (2013-2030), and the national strategy on the Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+).

Nonetheless, critics have raised significant concerns regarding the nature, intentions, and outcomes of these intensified conservation policies. The historian Mathieu Guérin[9] traces conservation programmes in Cambodia back to the colonial period, arguing that they have historically served colonial and imperial interests rather than genuine biodiversity protection. Such interventions often took the form of elite hunting privileges for tourists and well-connected individuals, while excluding local populations from traditional subsistence practices—a dynamic conceptualised as *fortress conservation*, exclusion, and enclosure[3]. The establishment of 23 protected areas in 1993, including Virachey National Park, has likewise been interpreted as aligning more closely with international conservation agendas than with immediate national needs (ibid.).

More recent analyses reinforce these critiques. The anthropologist Frédéric Bourdier[10], examining contemporary carbon projects in conservation areas—a growing trend across the Global South—highlights the co-optation of international conservation NGOs by the state. These actors are implicated in pacifying and managing local populations living near REDD+ project sites, often to secure substantial funding from carbon markets. According to Bourdier, this process involves persuading villagers to participate rather than ensuring genuine free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC). Furthermore, the dominant role of international NGOs in managing and distributing carbon revenues raises concerns about the erosion of Indigenous sovereignty. The validation and certification processes that underpin carbon credit systems—essentially mechanisms of commodification—further constrain the rights of Indigenous communities. These dynamics have been described by Sarah Milne and Sango Mahanty[11] as forms of *bureaucratic violence*. Investigative reporting also points to contradictions within conservation governance. Drawing on long-term fieldwork, Gerald Flynn[12] documents how protected areas have at times been partially reallocated for concessions benefiting politically connected elites, suggesting that conservation boundaries remain flexible when aligned with powerful interests.

A brief step back allows us to examine the shift in Cambodia's policy direction alongside practices on the ground. Conservation practices are temporally and spatially uneven and often contradict official policy orientations set by the ministry, which themselves are shaped by the prevailing political regime and the leadership of the environment minister. It is well documented that prior to 2014, despite policy rhetoric promoting green growth and strengthening the Ministry of Environment, Cambodia experienced some of the highest deforestation rates in the world[13][14]. In this sense, there has been little "green" about an economy that has grown at an average annual rate of 7 per cent since 1993[15]. Timber extraction and mining licences within protected areas have generated both formal and informal revenues, with the Ministry of Environment (MoE) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) often implicated[16][17]. In addition, land acquisitions through Economic Land Concessions and Forest Concessions contributed to a decline in forest cover from 62.3% in 1990 to 43.9% in 2022[18]. With the recent policy shift toward intensified conservation, MoE officials increasingly portray themselves as forest protectors, while Indigenous peoples are recast as potential conservation offenders.

Academic literature on State formation and governance offers insight from a relatively neglected angle. It helps explain why global environmental policies aimed at restructuring ecological governance often overlook shifting cultivators and forest-dependent communities. Cambodia's political regime has increasingly been characterised as a form of dynastic autocracy, despite strong continuities between the

current government and its predecessor under the former prime minister[17]. The de facto State retains inherited features shaped by post-conflict and post-colonial legacies, giving rise to what has been described as a *shadow State*[15]. Within this framework, illicit resource extraction and elite capture are often tolerated under the guise of formal laws and policies and are further enabled by international actors reluctant to challenge entrenched systems of kleptocracy and dynastic rule[19] [20]. Authoritarianism, combined with patrimonial governance, remains central to regime stability, operating through elite management, patron–client relations, and intensifying repression. This system creates what some authors called 'opportunities for rent-seeking' among State officials[21][15] but more fundamentally, it is designed for and it is reproduced through rent-seeking. At the institutional level, limited public funding, hierarchical bureaucratic structures, and a culture shaped by patron–client relationships—reinforced by the disciplinary mechanisms of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP)—undermine accountability[22]. Consequently, responses to conservation interventions are often ad hoc and contingent, shaped by resource constraints, personal incentives, profit attraction, and directives from higher authorities rather than coherent policy implementation.

Nevertheless, responses and policies addressing ecological change cannot be understood solely at the level of national political economy; they must also be situated within broader frameworks of global governance. Concepts such as friction, assemblage, flawed governmentality, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism highlight the instability and contestation underlying dominant notions of value and order[23][24][5][25].

Put simply, the global system appears to be organised around a dominant logic of capital accumulation and economic growth, which in turn reshapes national political agendas to align with responses to ecological crises[25][26]. This process resonates with Marx's notion of primitive accumulation, which produces a *metabolic rift*—a disconnection between consumers and the conditions of production that once characterised agrarian societies[27]. Combined with the assemblage-based approaches promoted by international development organisations, this dynamic contributes to forms of governmentality in which structurally disadvantaged countries adopt standardised policy models without fully anticipating their outcomes. These processes are often marked by friction—manifested in unclear objectives, contested interests, and ambiguous benefits—among heterogeneous actors operating across different scales[23].

Global green governance, often shaped by predatory ideologies, gives rise to new forms of colonialism[28]. As the political ecologists Richard Peet and Michael Watts[25] contend, this form of

“theatre governance” operates through market mechanisms rooted in capitalism, where environmental regulation is largely driven by deregulated State policies and voluntary standards. Such approaches have been widely criticised as forms of greenwashing[29], carbon fraud[30], carbon colonialism[5]. Concepts like sustainability standards and zonation have also been questioned[1]. While mechanisms such as carbon trading, payment for ecosystem services, and conservation enclosures contribute to the commodification and financialization of nature[31][32], frequently to the detriment of forest dwellers In this context, an important question emerges: are communities living in close relationships with nature being gradually transformed into wage labourers and market consumers, with little regard for their ontology, cultural practices and subsistence livelihoods?

To sum up, Cambodia's environmental official policies have emphasised proclaimed goals in response to external pressures. As such, they tend to comply with global agendas[28]. These procedures might perhaps serve a functional role as guidance in a modern, top-down bureaucratic State, but their effects in its enforcement and implementation are biased in favour of elite groups. This raises the question of their real intentions. In other words, what about the peoples whose lives depend on natural resources and, most of all, whose world vision is totally neglected? The global instruments dealing with ecological change are shaped and negotiated by various actors with contested interests (world politicians, international organisations, conglomerates) while local communities, either Indigenous or non-Indigenous, are absent from any decisions affecting them.

The Agonised Reality: the VNP as a Space of Struggle for Indigenous Peoples?

The ambiguous definition of Indigenous peoples

Scholars interested in the cultural way of life employ various terms to describe minority groups. For instance, ‘tribal’ often refers to their political structure, equivalent to the lowest administrative unit of the dominant state, led by a tribal head trained in local cultural and environmental knowledge[33]. When the focus is on livelihood, these groups are often described as hunters and gatherers, forest dwellers, foragers, or subsistence farmers (ibid). Swiddeners (farmers who practice swidden agriculture) reflects a form of labor intensive agricultural production that is resilient and well adapted to local socio-ecological conditions. The term “autochthonous peoples” is considered the most neutral or apolitical by many

anthropologists[34][35], whereas designations such as 'Aboriginal' in Australia, 'First Nation/First People' in North America, and 'Indigenous People' in South America carry explicit political connotations, despite referencing an ancestral origin that cannot be forgotten.

The Cambodian State, in the aftermath of internal conflict, recognised the rights of Indigenous peoples through the 2001 Land Law and 2002 Forestry Law, a development widely praised by the international community. Yet, critics argue that such legal recognition—both in Cambodia and elsewhere—can inadvertently limit the diversity of Indigenous cultures by defining them strictly within the boundaries of statutory law. From the perspective of Indigenous peoples themselves, terms such as *Khmer Doeum*, meaning 'earliest Khmer' or 'original Khmer', are occasionally preferred. Indigenous proverbs like 'the Chinese chase the Khmer away from the central areas" or "the Khmer pushes the tribals who then invade the spirit territory' reflect long-standing interethnic dynamics in Cambodia. Ian Baird[36] notes that Cambodia has also adopted the term *Chon Chiet Doeum Pheak Tik*, literally 'original minority ethnic group', colloquially shortened to *Chon Chiet*, referring to groups who are not ethnic Khmer. Such terminology raises the question: does it imply recognition of these peoples' existence prior to the formation of the modern Cambodian State?

Apparently, the general narratives among ordinary Khmers reveal a lack of acceptance toward minority ethnic groups. The irony is that most of the ethnic groups (Khmer included, with the notable exception of the Cham and the Jarai who are Austronesians) are Austro-Asiatic and they all migrated circa 4000-4500 years ago from South China to populate present-day Cambodia. The Khmer controlled lowland and paddy production which gave them power over other groups. But historically, there are no major ethnic group, let alone civilizational differences between the Khmer and who they call 'Original Minority Groups'. As Baird[36] notes, derogatory terms intended to assert Khmer superiority—such as *'savage'* (referring to the Phnong, instead of Bunong) and 'Samrê' (literally 'country pumpkin people')—remain prevalent. Despite demographic shifts encouraging Khmers to settle in areas once considered isolated forest islands and to intermingle with ethnic minorities, some Indigenous peoples continue to experience persistent othering, leading some to express a strong desire to be left alone[10]. Moreover, government land policies associated with Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) have triggered numerous evictions and clashes with Indigenous communities[37]. The consideration and respect for long-standing settlements prior to such investments are largely absent.

On top of the persistent Khmer perceptions toward Indigenous peoples, coupled with government policies and practices, the Ministry of Environment (MoE) recently moved to replace the term *'Indigenous'*

with *'local communities'* in its new environmental code. This change was perceived by some activists and Indigenous groups as a retrogressive step that weakens the recognition of ethnic groups' rights, particularly concerning ancestral lands adjacent to or within protected areas covered by the environmental code[38], also stipulating in the article 384, paragraph 2, that shifting cultivation is associated with nomadic agriculture and is strictly prohibited due to its negative impact on natural resources. Moreover, the justification from the MoE is that the label '*local community*' is more appropriate because the lifestyles of the Indigenous peoples are increasingly similar to those of the Khmer. Furthermore, from the perspective of some MoE officers we interviewed, the term *'Indigenous peoples'* is considered a Western construct, primarily instrumental for securing international funding.[7]

In fact, encounters between the Indigenous peoples and the Khmer administration date back to pre-colonial times, as early as the 1st century CE[39] and the recent discovery in 2026 of pre-angkorian temples in Koh Nheaek district[40] (located in Mundolkiri Province, just south of Ratanakiri Province) emphasizes this theory, which reflect both hierarchical and reciprocal relationships depending on ethnic background. Indigenous peoples were involved in the slave trade under the Khmer Empire and the Siamese kingdoms prior to the French arrival. The Jarai, established in northern Cambodia and central Vietnam, participated in wars against the Khmer's powerful neighbours[36], while the Kuy, in their cooperative relationship with the Khmer Kingdom, served as suppliers of iron weapons. During the colonial period, the French recognised a distinct population called the *montagnards*—not to acknowledge their presence per se, but to designate them as 'others', thereby justifying colonial authority[36]. Finally, during the Sihanouk regime, the term *'Indigenous peoples'* evolved into *'brother and sister Khmer Loeu [northern Khmer]'*, reflecting the prince's concerted efforts to assimilate minority groups in the 1960s.

Notwithstanding the political dimensions already discussed, there is widespread recognition of Indigenous peoples outside the government sphere. The United Nations, for instance, recognises a group as Indigenous based on self-identification and several key determinants, including historical continuity with pre-colonial societies, strong connections to territories and natural resources, distinct social, economic, and political systems, and unique languages, cultures, and beliefs. In line with this approach, the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), in collaboration with local partners, produces an annual report on Cambodian Indigenous peoples. Their 2022 report identifies 24 Indigenous groups, with a total population estimated between 170,000 and 400,000 individuals, spatially dispersed across the country but with a higher concentration in the northern regions[41].

A pertinent question arises: what does the designation ‘Indigenous’ truly refer to? Historically, the Khmers and Mon have been considered Indigenous entities in mainland Southeast Asia, with archaeological evidence suggesting their territorial presence extended into northern Vietnam and northern Thailand[39][42]. This raises a complex issue: do the Khmers have the right to claim or access lands that are now sovereign territories of the Thais and the Kinh who are the dominant Vietnamese group? In other words, while definitions of Indigenous peoples proposed by international organisations aim to recognise the rights of marginalised groups, they also reflect the intentions of political regimes and the agency of these peoples in asserting their identity and seeking recognition.

The national park as a space of struggle, culture and life for the autochthonous people?

Let us turn to the question of whether the newly demarcated park area corresponds to the mainstream conservation model promoted worldwide[26], or whether it can still be considered a territory of struggle, life, and culture for ethnic minorities. This question is not posed with the intention of inflaming tensions; rather, it seeks to interrogate the extent to which Cambodian policies account for the way of life of subsistence groups in a context of intensified conservation aimed at addressing climate change[32]. It is a legitimate inquiry, especially in light of the growing number of protected areas in the Global South that tend to adopt a ‘fortress conservation’ model—territories devoid of human presence, where armed militias, mercenaries, or military forces expel autochthonous peoples from their ancestral lands[43]. In Cambodia such conservation paradigm is a return to the model prevailing in the 1960-70s, after a decade of promoting Community-Based Natural Resources management[44]. This issue is crucial to debates over the State versus some of its peoples: the former asserts its power of exclusion by claiming access to newly declared ‘pristine forests’ while monopolising the primitive capture and financialization of the ‘saved’ nature[11]. The latter are left with the nominal role of ‘guardians of the forest’ inhabiting an asepticized space in which they can no longer access natural resources to sustain their livelihoods.

Historical Uncertainty

An important indicator for the Ministry of Environment (MoE) is the question of land ownership and sovereignty—but from which point in time? Today in 2026, the REDD+ project is the horizon of the MoE for VNP management. The question of land ownership is a central issue because it is a necessary condition for REDD+ to go ahead not for the benefit of the local people but in favor of the government. Being a ‘Public State Land’, the PA is legally the ownership of the State. And to maximize cash flow from

selling carbon credit, the MoE has to keep the Virachey park as large, untouched and unfragmented as possible.

Returning to the notion of primary settlers, it is impossible, given the current state of scientific knowledge, to identify definitively who first inhabited a landscape that was transformed into a national park in 1993. Was it Indigenous groups, or earlier states such as the Angkor Empire or the Champa Kingdom in the 12th century? Historical testimonies are largely lost, and many may never have been recorded in any archives. For some government officials, this absence of historical evidence is sufficient justification to deny Indigenous inhabitants full rights to a given natural environment, given the scarcity of records about the diverse ethnic groups of Khmer prehistory and mainland Southeast Asia as a whole.

A less partial look into the recent past can illuminate how the dominant Khmers and ethnic minorities came into contact and separation. Prior to French colonisation, most of inland Southeast Asia's history was recorded primarily in Chinese chronicles dating back only to the second century CE, supplemented by a series of epigraphy[39][42]. Recent archaeological breakthroughs[39] have challenged the traditional understanding and provided a clearer picture of early settlement patterns. Yet Cambodia's turbulent history, marked by successive wars and the decline from a regional empire to a post-conflict state, makes it difficult to trace the precise relational origins between the Khmers and Indigenous peoples.

Historians and archaeologists suggest that by around 68 CE, early Khmer history began to be recorded with the emergence of the Khok Thlok or Funan civilisation—sometimes described as part of an Indianisation phase—while earlier societies, often identified as Neolithic tribes existing for approximately 2,000 years, already occupied the Mekong basin, speaking pre-Khmer Austroasiatic languages. The capital of this early society was Ba Phnom, located in what is today Prey Veng Province in southeastern Cambodia[45][39][42]. These Indigenous groups often relied on subsistence agriculture, using metallurgical tools, and in certain areas had developed complex irrigated systems[39]. The period also saw migration from the upper Mekong, South India, and Southeastern China, which facilitated trade and regional prosperity[42]. The development concentrated around the Mekong basin raises enduring questions about the status and origins of Indigenous peoples in a vast area encompassing parts of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam—a 'hinterland' historically populated primarily by Austroasiatic and Austronesian groups.

Linguistic classification offers insight into the complex relationship between the Khmers and non-Khmers. The two main language families in Southeast Asia—Austroasiatic in the mainland and

Austronesian in the coastal regions—are widely believed to have originated in southern China and Taiwan and all the islands that stretch from pacific ocean, respectively[42][39][46]. Both the Khmer and Brao/Kavet languages belong to the Austroasiatic family, specifically the Mon-Khmer branch, a connection occasionally reflected in Brao/Kavet mythology we came across during our investigations. This shared linguistic heritage suggests a common ancestral origin, in contrast to the Jarai and the Cham, who belong to the Austronesian stock.

Regardless of ancestral histories, it has never been demonstrated that both Khmers and ethnic minorities shared the same sovereign State; the latter often occupied a subordinate position. Some scholars describe this dynamic as a form of colonisation of Indigenous peoples by the Khmers[47]. By the late 13th century, the Chinese ambassador Zhou Daguan noted that labour provided by slaves captured from the mountains was crucial for the construction of the Angkor temples (quoted in [48]). During wartime in the Angkor period, particularly during successive conflicts between the Khmer and Champa, the territory that would later become the Virachey National Park (VNP) served as an escape route for Cham forces[49]. At that time, and continuing until French colonisation, no clear borders existed between Cambodia and its neighbours. Peripheral regions were frequently contested, conquered, or fragmented by warrior groups seeking territorial expansion[42][48]. Up to the early twentieth century, the slave trade further strained peaceful relations among Indigenous groups; for example, some Jarai mercenaries captured Brao and Tampuan families and sold them to the Siamese during their long-term conflicts with the Burmese.

The later period of the French protectorate witnessed physical violence between French soldiers and ethnic groups, as the colonisers increasingly perceived the latter as a threat to imperial security[35] and territorial expansion[36]. Some authors characterised the highlanders as wild and belligerent, with nomadic and rudimentary cultures. The reorganisation of provinces inhabited by highlanders, however, was interactive to some extent: newly demarcated villages, communes, and districts often appointed highlanders as local leaders, and their names became the official names of the administrative divisions[36]. Nevertheless, the integration of forest peoples during the colonial period—and even more so in subsequent periods—rarely took their cultural ways of life into account; when it did, the aim was alignment with the national State's assimilationist agenda. From 1965 onwards, future Khmer Rouge leaders, taking refuge in the region, recruited some highlanders before coercing them into implementing their utopian policies[50]. During the subsequent Vietnamese occupation, while dismantling the remaining Khmer Rouge, the authorities resettled Kavet, Brao, and other subgroups far from the forests that would eventually become Virachey National Park.

Park against Peoples

The designation of 332,500 hectares as Virachey National Park (VNP) in 1993 by King Sihanouk occurred within the broader historical, social, and political dynamics described above. This period followed Cambodia's attainment of a peace agreement—with the1991 Paris Agreement, the 1991-92 United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and the new 1993 constitution—after more than two decades of extreme internal and external violence, marking the Kingdom's emergence as a post-conflict State[51]. Yet, this raises a critical question: were Indigenous peoples merely subjects of the State's sociocultural and political frameworks, or did they, to some extent, retain agency over their own destiny?

Despite being labelled as highlanders or ethnic minorities, the Brao and Kavet exercised their own forms of (temporary) agency in the post-colonial period. When the area that would later become VNP was still densely inhabited, matrilocality prevailed among small, dispersed hamlets, whose names were closely linked to nearby streams providing water to households. Even today, in 2026, residents of Rok and Pav villages, when referring to the park, continue to invoke the names of streams (e.g., the Rok stream), mountains, or distinctive local features, such as a particular stone. These vernacular names, each carrying its own legend, stand in contrast to the official designation of Virachey National Park, which was created without local knowledge or consultation. It is this intimate connection with the living environment that geographer Ian Baird emphasised—advocating for the incorporation of ethnic taboos into the park's zoning during its establishment[47]—yet such recommendations largely went unheeded.

Extended kinship networks extended beyond Cambodia's borders into Laos (Attapeu Province), facilitating long-term interactions that enabled many Brao and Kavet to escape the Khmer Rouge regime during the harsh years of 1974-1978. Most refugees returned following a repatriation agreement between the neighbouring countries in 1984. By that time, many Indigenous men had already joined the Cambodian or Vietnamese military to fight remaining Khmer Rouge forces hiding in the forests. Far from being mere intruders in the park, they were valued fighters against the ultra-Maoist rebels. As one interlocutor recalled: "When I was in Laos, I enrolled in the Vietnamese army upon being called to help oust the Khmer Rouge, which would otherwise diminish the Khmer people."[8]

Until the late 1980s, the government expected that not a single village should remain within the area that would become Virachey National Park, due to recent war-related traumas, 'security' concerns, and the State's desire to regroup former residents for better access to public services ('assemblage' development). Yet Indigenous peoples were not left entirely isolated. In one of the two districts adjacent to the park,

former soldiers—mainly Brao—intermingled with Khmer migrants from overpopulated lowland areas[52]. In the other district, a substantial Lao population had long been settled along the riverside.

The current Ministry of Environment's perception of Indigenous peoples as mere intruders in Virachey National Park contradicts historical and contemporary realities. Many Brao and Kavet men living on the park's fringes have served—and continue to serve—as rangers or soldiers for the government. Their contributions are locally recognised, rooted in their hunting and gathering skills and deep territorial knowledge. Historically, the area that is now VNP was a space of struggle in which Indigenous peoples were subjected to colonial rule and successive assimilation policies by Khmer States, from the Angkor period to the present-day Cambodian People's Party (CPP) regime. Today, the State goes as far as designating some Indigenous peoples as 'forest protectors', providing employment as park rangers, albeit in subordinate positions[9]. This occurs alongside their continued subsistence livelihoods, which will be examined in the following section. Before doing so, it is necessary to challenge the common assertion that Indigenous groups extensively exploited the park's vegetation and forest cover from the Vietnamese occupation up to the present.

The Exploitation of the Park: the Thnong Husband and the Military's Finances

One way to recover the recent oral history of exploitation in Virachey National Park is to examine the backgrounds of immigrants who remain in the area. While much discussion—particularly among the very few Indigenous lawyers—has focused on evidence presented in court, the experiences of men left behind after the extraction of rosewood and other luxury woods, as well as the fates of demobilised or resigned soldiers, have received little attention. Under such cicumstances, 'evidence' often refers to visible photographs capturing alleged illegal acts rather than personal testimonies, which are easily challenged or, in extreme cases, invite retaliation. Out-of-service soldiers from across the park—primarily Indigenous—as well as Khmer migrant men recruited by the Try Pheap Group (see below), provide accounts not only of timber extraction[53] but also of mining activities[12], revealing the full extent of the park's exploitation.

These men referred to themselves as the Thnong husbands—so named because they married Indigenous women and became part of the locality, and after the Thnong tree (*Pterocarpus angolensis*), a reddish hardwood highly valued for construction and interior design both within and beyond Cambodia. The Thnong men were recruited from dispossessed Khmer families in distant provinces. While many left after the logging operations were completed, a few remained, not only because of their marital ties but

also due to family conditions. Most have not seen their siblings since leaving roughly fifteen years ago. These contracted loggers were well aware that the work was hazardous, involving steep, uneven terrain and heavy loads. Yet they persevered, recognising their precarious position and fearing rejection by their families if they returned empty-handed.

The surge in local incomes created a phenomenon described as ‘frenzied expenditure’ or ‘hot money’, a term coined by Annah Lake Zhu[54] to describe the influx of cash from the rosewood trade in northern Madagascar. Similar trends were observed in parts of Ratanakiri Province, albeit in a different context and perhaps requiring distinct conceptual framing. Locally, the Khmers referred to it as ‘easy money’—‘easy to earn, easy to spend’. This cash influx came not only from the timber trade but also from the sale of land, flowing through villages like a gust of wind, sparking curiosity and desire for material possessions, such as modern cars, often used only within the confines of a single village. Logs were transported on locally modified motorbikes—reinforced with stronger suspensions and enlarged rear trays—which made the practice highly visible until logging was temporarily banned in 2002 and the sawn wood trade in 2012, though it came again, more intensively, in 2013 in Ratanakiri[53]. Simultaneously, local dwellers began stocking timber for house construction, replacing bamboo houses that required frequent maintenance and had shorter lifespans.

However, it was not timber for domestic use that drove forest depletion. Organised and systematic illegal logging occurred with total impunity under the supervision of well-connected actors[53]. Within a few years, Virachey National Park was heavily exploited by managers working for the Try Pheap Group, with the complicity of various provincial departments, before the area was later subjected to a form of ‘fortress conservation’ aimed at biodiversity protection and carbon trading. Recall the Try Pheap Group responsible for recruiting the Thnong husbands? This private enterprise is widely believed in Cambodia to act as the financial arm of former prime minister Hun Sen, functioning almost as a money-printing mechanism fuelled by the logging trade, largely to support the everlasting ruling party. Two Global Witness reports *The Cost of Luxury* and *Cambodia’s Family Trees* highlight the links between the regime with its connected elites and this booming enterprise, as well as the massive volume of the trade. Initially, the Try Pheap company was granted licences to extract timber within economic land concessions (ELCs) and to clear reservoirs for areas intended for planned hydropower dams. This legal status facilitated a complex chain of operations—collection, transportation, and exportation. Unsurprisingly, the clearing often extended far beyond the boundaries outlined in any contractual agreements. Every precious and semi-precious wood was worth to be collected. Everywhere and by all available means.

The hegemony of the Try Pheap enterprise over VNP is well known to those living nearby, particularly individuals who have served the State or have worked with Indigenous communities. When the work of Philippe Le Billon[55] was cited orally—stating that "logging and mining in the country's northeastern part was a source of finance for the Khmer Rouge and later for the political party in power"—one government interlocutor readily corroborated the account, pointing to a road used by the Cambodian military in the 2000s to export logs in exchange for military supplies. This activity took place in the western part of VNP, in the northeastern region of Stung Treng Province, accessible via neighbouring Laos, and continues to be significant today.

Prior to the orchestrated involvement of the Try Pheap Group as a financial arm for the national political leadership, logging in VNP—and across the entire province—under a provincial governor in the 2000s exemplified the extortion of power by land, forest, and environmental administrators. The province was extensively logged, and the media reported a scandal at a time when the World Bank was investing millions of U.S. dollars to protect VNP. Allegedly, in an effort to restore order to the conflicted landscape following the mysterious shooting of a Ministry of Environment official sent from the capital to investigate, the governor, along with other high-ranking officials, was slated for arrest—but the former escaped to Laos and was never apprehended.[10]

Preceding these events, the Vietnamese occupation between 1979 and 1989 did not spare the future territory of the VNP from resource extraction. A road passing through Pav village (north of Sesan River, Taveng district), as indicated by demilitarised personnel (Brao) and confirmed by local authorities, served as a route for timber transportation to Vietnam. The commercialisation of timber was not incidental but part of a deliberate design by the socialist government, whose economic recovery strategy relied heavily on resource extraction. Pamela McElwee's book *Forests are Gold*[24], based on her investigations into Vietnamese governmental policies, illustrates the connection between trade and Cambodia's annexation. It reveals how the government simultaneously deployed resource extraction programmes and systematic reforestation efforts, largely without regard for ecological consequences.

In summary, today's VNP bears the imprint of successive histories of exploitation—not by accident, but through decisive interventions driven by war, State authorities, private enterprises, corrupt ministries, and external actors—before the area was ultimately subjected to enforced conservation. This territorial enclosure, now applauded by national policymakers and conservation NGOs, is a product of Cambodia's engagement with the green economy. Yet questions remain: what will become of the numerous villages bordering the park? In this context, the next section examines how the subsistence practices of the Kavet

and Brao surrounding VNP generate minimal ecological impacts and low carbon emissions, while their livelihoods simultaneously align with the broader objectives of global climate policy.

The nature of subsistence and non-market consumers of the Kavet and the Brao People

The brief mention of outsiders living near Virachey National Park—soldiers, rangers, Khmer migrants—does not intend to justify the *parithan* projection of a one-size-fits-all national park expansion or the imposition of 'fortress conservation'. The term *parithan*, meaning 'environment', is used by Indigenous peoples to refer to those involved in park organisation, discipline, and control: park managers, environmental officers, rangers, district offices, provincial departments, the Ministry of Environment, and conservation NGOs. Some Indigenous individuals are part of the *parithan*, and villagers recognise potential advantages in such cooperation. However, their main concern is maintaining their identity as Kavet and/or Brao while navigating the evolving regulations of VNP. A key priority in their way of being is to continue farming—not in isolation, but in ways that preserve social ties within extended kinship networks. Their subsistence practices are characterised by their methods of food production and collection, their attachment to their living environment, their preference not to become wage labourers, and the physical strength shaped by their daily labour.

One cannot help but be struck by the physique of both men and women in Koklak commune, Veunsai district. The men are slim, with broad, muscular chests, defined arms, and well-defined abdominal muscles, while the women display a similarly toned physique that could rival the gym-honed figures of urban residents. Highlanders often comment on the Khmer administrators' protruding bellies, attributing them to sedentary routines and excessive beer consumption. This contrast is evident in the village, particularly in the case of a police officer who sits for long hours running his small grocery shop located directly in front of the police office and commune hall—a practice seen as a way to maximise financial gain—while his wife continues managing the cashew nut harvest. Outsiders often bring their prior knowledge of market economies into Indigenous communities, but engage constructively rather than antagonistically. Grocery supplies sourced from across Southeast Asia, from Vietnam to Indonesia, are sold from a dusty wooden shack roofed with corrugated zinc plates—an incongruous addition to the local environment. The Kavet, however, negotiate these intrusions, preserving autonomy over their livelihoods while selectively engaging with the market economy.

The Kavet physique is the result of a life in which physicality, nourishment and sociability are inseparable. Both men and women proportionately use modest agricultural implements in their *chamkar.*

With some modest tools like axes, ploughs, and occasionally a chainsaw[11], the Kavet men and women spend most of their time clearing their *chamkar*, planting rice, weeding, and harvesting their produce. Men, more than women, also spend days in the remaining accessible forest foraging for wild foods and fishes which can only be found in the small, upper, far-out streams. With the novel conservation policies relieving pressure on Nature, some Kavet men have taken up roles as tour guides. This daily engagement with the landscape—what one might term a praxis of subsistence—sculpts not only the body but also the social fabric of the community, intertwining physical endurance, ecological knowledge, and collective identity.

Meanwhile, farming remains the main occupation. The traditional practice of swidden agriculture is passed down from one generation to the next[35][56]. With the reduction in cultivable land owing to the expansion of the VNP, some families have no other option than clearing unfertile sandy land in the valley, along the southern route to the Sesan River. Generally speaking, the Kavet and the Brao are not perceived as good farmers by the Khmers. In reality, most families still have a swidden field (*meour* in Brao/Kavet) producing up to ten varieties of rice plus a multitude of domestic plants.[12] In spite of this diversity and abundance, it is still not considered by outsiders to be productive, not only because of the required seasonal intensive labour and time, but because the time spent producing subsistence crops could be replaced by more advanced farming techniques. The *meour* corresponds to the *chamkar* of the Khmers. In fact, the *meour* is a plot of land of up to two hectares (20,000 square metres) with a mixture of rice crops, vegetables, sugarcane, bananas, corn, aesthetic shrubberies, flowers, medicinal plants and tobacco. In the olden days, the plot was cultivated for up to two years, until the land's fertility declined and invasive weeds spread. A new plot could not be randomly selected: the spirits of the land had to be consulted and their guidance was revealed in a dream[57]. Ritual practices dedicated to the spirits of the land continued through the cultivation period until the plot was eventually abandoned. A fallow period of at least ten years was then required before the land could be cultivated again, allowing sufficient time for forest regeneration in what was formerly Kavet territory (now incorporated into the VNP). The plot was relatively small as compared to that of modern times. A family usually cultivated one or two hectares, as compared to five hectares in the present day for rice cultivation alone. In normal conditions and with sufficient rain, the harvest in a *meour* could feed a family of ten for an entire year. Although labour demands were high, they were concentrated in specific periods such as land clearing and harvesting. The workload was further balanced by cultural practices in which newly married couples resided with the bride's family: the groom worked exclusively on his father-in-law's land and was traditionally prohibited

(taboo) from returning to work on his biological parents' land. Such rotational farming is nowadays hardly possible due to the lack of space, aggravated by the subsequent interdiction of the families to cultivate within and even nearby the boundaries of the VNP. An important dynamic is that when Kavet families started to face land tenure insecurity due to the presence and enforcement of the protected area, they started to plant perennial trees like cashew not because they fancy the life of petty commodity producers, but to make their claim on land visible. The unfortunate consequence has been a decrease of land available for fallow and therefore a decrease in swidden agricultural practices.

Few words suffice to challenge dominant narratives, overconfidently expressed by provincial administrators, that frame swidden agriculture as a driver of greenhouse gas emissions. Such claims are largely unfounded. Forest is part and parcel of a swidden agriculture system, it is not just an external environment. Forest regrowth are necessary for the reproduction of fertility in the soil. Accusing shifting cultivation of being a drivers of deforestation is like suggesting the Indigenous communities would commit collective suicide. Besides, a substantial body of scientific research has demonstrated the ecological value of this so-called 'archaic' practice, particularly when embedded in long fallow cycles that enable forest regeneration[58][59]. Among the Brao and Kavet, these regenerative systems prevailed prior to repeated external land dispossession. Framing swidden as environmentally destructive thus obscures the real drivers of carbon emissions—namely large-scale deforestation, often carried out under state-sanctioned or commercial schemes, even within conservation areas[60][61].

Almost all daily items were traditionally made from various types of bamboo, including baskets, water storage equipment and cooking tools. Prior to a deeper permeation of Khmer lifestyles, Indigenous material life, including the houses themselves, was largely bamboo-based. The recent change in lifestyles has led to the 'modernisation' of these material practices. For instance, traditional gourd water containers have been replaced by plastic bottles and clay water filters, largely distributed by NGOs. Despite these transformations, certain traditional practices persist as markers of Indigenous identity and farmhouses outside the villages are still made with bamboos, specifically the small hut where women deliver. Another example of such is the bamboo basket. Crafted with two side straps resembling a Western backpack, the baskets are used by women to carry field tools and supplies. Although in decline, self-woven and tailor-made clothes are occasionally worn by some Indigenous activists at specific events to assert their identities. Meanwhile, bamboo craftsmanship endures: bamboo is collected from distant forests and hand-refined by extracting the outer part (skin) into thin strips ready to be woven into baskets.

Clothing is another key feature reflecting the modest, subsistence-oriented and non-consumerist lifestyle of highlanders who remain in their ancestral biosphere. Torn and old market-made garments are repeatedly worn for everyday purposes and across different occasions. In contrast to Khmer society—where special events such as weddings frequently involve the expenditure of thousands of dollars on elaborate costumes and professional makeup services—custom-made or rented attire for ceremonial use remains relatively uncommon among these highland groups. However, a shift is observed in some Indigenous villages located next to the provincial town. It is because of this shift of lifestyle that some Khmer administrators proudly pronounce the transformation of Indigenous peoples into Khmers. This assertion overlooks the multiple identities anchored in the many ways of life alluded to earlier. The growing emphasis on market-made garments is an illustration of a social change: cotton was once also cultivated in the *meour*, woven into fabric and finally fashioned into wrappers—typically lower-body wraps for men, and short skirts with sleeveless tops for women. Regrettably, many older Kavet individuals express discomfort wearing these traditional forms of dress in everyday contexts.

Some Khmers, including certain NGO workers, often describe the Kavet, the Brao, and other Indigenous groups as 'honest' people. This categorisation of 'honest' carries varied meanings. In this context, 'honest' refers to the moral virtue in which the Kavet and the Brao express a non-wealth-accumulative propensity. They adopt a non-deceptive, non-manipulative, and self-reliant attitude. For these Khmer administrators and NGO staffers—many of whom operate within the world market economy and are engaged in administrative or political institutions where financial pressure and informal practices are common—the comparatively low level of material accumulation in subsistence-based societies can appear striking, though not entirely unexpected. In fact, despite their relative isolation, there is a growing pressure for the Kavet and the Brao to 'fit' into mainstream Khmer society. This includes sending children to high school and universities, accommodating modern healthcare rather than traditional healing practices, and acquiring modern transportation like a small tractor for the *chamkar,* and a motorbike for school. Yet, even as these transformations unfold, their more sedentary and community-oriented way of life—marked by mutual aid, social solidarity, and open expressions of joy—continues to evoke a sense of quiet admiration, and at times even envy, among some Khmer observers.

Festive practices occupy a central place in the lives of the Kavet and the Brao, and may contribute to what is often perceived as a relatively low-stress way of life compared to other groups. For a wedding, the Kavet spend an entire week celebrating. First, at the bride's side for three days, where relatives are invited to eat and drink the self-made jar wines and commercial beers available at the market. As an exchange of

hospitality, the guests bring gifts in the form of wine and beer that keep the celebration going until it gradually subsides. Another two to three days are spent celebrating at the groom's family. The practices are, nevertheless, neither unknown nor unstudied. One conservationist reminded us that the Kavet and the Brao devoted egregious time to killing domestic animals and making jar wines to appease territorial spirits (*arak*). These rituals are typically followed by communal gatherings, where participants consume the remaining food and drink offered during the ceremonies, often extending into prolonged periods of socialising and leisure.

The presence of cash crops—particularly cashew nuts—can lead to a misunderstanding that highlanders are transitioning away from a subsistence-based economy. Years before this study, the Cambodian author was an NGO worker and on a few occasions was tasked with identifying recurrent problems within forest communities. At the time, she expressed scepticism when she was told that cash income was mainly needed to buy salt and monosodium glutamate (MSG) for daily meals, in addition to rice. A simple daily meal made from resources collected from the *meour*, signalling a livelihood less dependent on the market economy, goes like this: a bamboo pot of cooked rice accompanied by salt pounded with spring-onion-like herbs and chilli, or mashed eggplants with salt and chilli, or mixed pumpkin-eggplant-bean soups. The cash crop, though, is a modest source of cash for this salt and MSG, as well as for gasoline for their motorbikes that transport their children to the government-run schools located about 20 km away. The journey to school involves crossing a river by a privately operated, fee-charging ferry-like boat and travelling along a dusty, poorly maintained road.

The subsistence mode of life of the Kavet and Brao is as much about the cosmological understanding of life and death as the above modest life of having rice and salt on the table. When reduced to life expectancy and income-based poverty in the human development index, these ways of life can be misinterpreted or, at best, only partially captured. Such metrics risk obscuring locally grounded notions of well-being and quality of life. In a dominant policy framework such as 'sustainable development', subsistence seems to have little place. As some scholars argue[5][31], the term invokes tensions: it fundamentally echoes economic growth while placing ecological resources at odds. Government statistics are, in turn, expected to show continuing economic growth, often premised on resource extraction without sufficient consideration of its ecological destruction. The Kavet and the Brao, left alone on the roadside, still rely on tangible and intangible values (partly governed by outsiders, living in good harmony, and in peace with non-human beings), though there is a slight change brought about by Christian conversion. It introduced governance through 'rationality': that is, prohibiting animistic

practices of sacrifices to appease angry spirits sickening the offspring and favouring better access to public health centres.

Life is perceived to be within the immediate surrounding environment, not elsewhere. For some Kavet, the furthest distance they have ever travelled is to the provincial town. Others expressed the desire to examine the Lower Sesan hydropower dam in Stung Treng Province and the Yali dam in Vietnam—both of which have diminished fish stocks—but such an aspiration is hindered by the material world they are facing. Those who have travelled to Phnom Penh when accompanying severely sick relatives were overwhelmed by towering concrete high-rises and the amount of cash needed for daily survival. “The forest provides much more [freedom, food, space, non-humans] than the busy streets, the concrete roads and building and stinking air,” asserted a Brao in a Taveng village.

In villages increasingly impacted by the presence of mobile Khmer sellers and noisy machinery, the Kavet prefer to stay in their farmhouse, close to the *meour*. This allows them not only to tend their crops but also to spend time contemplating the sense of peace by escaping the market that has been effectively brought to their doorstep. Staying in the forest does not mean living alone: one of the authors stayed one full day in a farmhouse: more than 35 visits occurred! With relatives, friends, fellow-farmers, sellers, etc., socialisation is regular and intense. This movement between their *meour* and the house in the village leads to the frequent misconception of townspeople that Indigenous peoples are inherently nomadic. In reality, most family members spend limited time in the village, preferring instead to stay on their farms. During the interval of three to four months following the rice harvest, the majority of Brao and Kavet families reside near cultivated land, favouring a life surrounded by trees, gardens, ponds, domestic animals, and friendly neighbours.

Subsistence does not imply that Indigenous people's lives are disconnected from the wider world. Nor does it suggest an absence of engagement with a minimal cash economy or a lack of concern over food security. Better mentioning semi-subsistence. Such economy means that livelihood balances (production/consumption, drudgery/utility, etc.) are coordinated by market and non-market mechanisms. It encompasses a less accumulative economy and reduced consumption of global market produce. Non-timber forest products (NTFPs), particularly malva nuts, resins and mushrooms, have become an important source of cash income in response to growing demand nationally and regionally. The price of malva nuts, which has skyrocketed to about 30 USD/kg, has attracted many actors seeking to regulate the trade and oversee harvesting practices. Collecting nuts generates cash income for almost every involved actor, including State actors like military police and the rangers who guard the entry

points to the community protected area (CPA) in the southwestern part of the VNP. Within this context, the community department of the PDoE, in its agenda to relieve people's pressure on the wild, perceived this regular cash income as an alternative to expanded rice growth into *newly cleared* lands, framing it as both a livelihood strategy and a mechanism for forest conservation.

Rice surpluses were common in the past[47] and, as our field observations suggest, continue to occur today. These surpluses enable farmers to barter for goods that cannot be self-produced, such as salt, clothes, and tools (jars, knives, mechanical materials). Notably, it is surplus production—both rice and cash crops—that historically saved endemic starvation caused by drought in the nearby regions inhabited by Lao and Khmers (Ibid.). With the recent VNP becoming a trekking destination, some of the Kavet and Brao have taken on roles as tourist guides, drawing from their deep knowledge of the biotope and the narratives they convey about it. On a more ambivalent note, one Kavet informant humorously observed that "tourist cash enables me to purchase meat and fish that have been lost due to development and conservation."

Briefly speaking, the subsistence livelihood of the Kavet and the Brao revolves largely around farming. Equally important, however, is their concentration on social and cultural life: nurturing kinship, transmitting myths of origin and epic legends, joking and gossiping, playing with kids while teaching them mysteries of nature, admiring the harmonisation with their surrounding environment, manually producing household appliances and tools, collecting non-timber-forest products, practising cultural rites, and earning a modest amount of cash, *constituting a largely carbon-neutral ecological system.* This approach of life remains intimately entangled with the forest landscape of the VNP, albeit its managers increasingly circumscribe its access—paradoxically favouring 'Nature commodification' over those whose lives have been rooted there. From the perspectives of many villagers, their practices are neutral in ecological terms, positioning them as the protectors and maintainers of a forest ecosystem. In this light, the prevailing conservation paradigm appears deeply ironic: those who consume less, emitting almost zero carbon, bear the burden of a warming planet as well as the policies designed elsewhere in its name. What emerges then is the disjuncture between the global narratives of a so-called sustainable development and the life reality of the Indigenous people, where nature-based solutions that lead to strict forest conservation are eroding the material and cultural way of life of the Indigenous peoples, not to mention their rights to live decently, without any scientific justification.

Conclusion: The Bearing of the Less

An assertion of power was exercised through the State's instrumentalization of legal mechanisms to discipline groups of Indigenous people whose livelihood is mainly harmonised with nature. This took place under the guise of conservation for global warming, resulting in the imposition of limited access to a traditional territory that is supposed to reduce the anthropogenic activities. But the anthropogenic activities not made by them, but by the real polluters. Ironically, it allows, in compensation, the continuous emissions made by international conglomerates and the State's biases. This is why we postulate the concept of 'the bearing of the less'. It is the 'bearing' because the agency to prevail in a harsher living environment persists, whereas 'the less' signifies the consumption of self-produced goods with the emission of very limited carbon dioxide. The decision to sacrifice Indigenous peoples by preventing access to the VNP and reinforced by a zonation process for avoiding further anthropic degradation has been made by administrators and park managers without regard to their mode of livelihood and culture. Worse, it has been legitimised by global narratives like 'net zero' or 'sustainable development' without regard to the sovereignty of those on the periphery. The park enclosure exempts a cluster of extracting groups such as organised logging entities, mining companies and other polluting enterprises operating within the park who are in a position to circumvent the State architecture owing to their connections, exposing a double standard in conservation.

Scientists have unanimously demonstrated that climate change is the result of an increased emission of carbon, mostly by industrial extractive production[25][31][5] and consumerist lifestyles. Instead of a concentrated effort to reduce these main drivers, by adopting accountable, lower-carbon production with reduced environmental impact, extractive producers are permitted to offset their emissions by purchasing carbon sequestered by trees, usually in conservation areas in developing countries, as is the case in Cambodia. Such rampant commodification and financialization of nature are driven by marketing strategies aligned with green development policies (including exporting pollution). It inevitably leads to a greenwashing effect[30] and carbon colonialism[5]. 'The bearing of the less' contributes to this scholarship, with an emphasis on the agency of non-polluting people still remaining autonomous insofar as local food production, eco-cultural practices, and capability to adapt. As a re-emphasis, the lesser consumers like the Indigenous Kavet and Brao, basing their lives and consumption on self-made produce and ecological products, bear not only the burden of the world's changing weather conditions but also the global policies intended to mitigate climate change. The question of what kind of human and natural

world order we are shaping can then be examined through the friction of global policies when in contact with the social, political, cultural and economic relations of the locals.

Globalisation is not merely an abstract concept confined to worldwide agendas (for instance, on climate change). It interacts with national politics, which are vertically adjusted and implemented. These top-down policies and politics have been enthusiastically, and very opportunistically, received by Cambodian decision-makers from various ministries not for the sake of purely addressing the world climate catastrophe but for the State's political economy. Under two interlinked imperatives: increasing the size of conservation areas (with a fortress conservation optic), made possible by available international funding for forest protection. Sarah Milne has already questioned the international conservation NGOs based in Cambodia for their co-opted roles with the State by thoughtlessly adhering to the REDD+ projects as well as to the payment for ecosystem services[62]. These two nature-based solutions, as they are technically called, are considered a means to finance conservation and to shoulder some of the cost by excluding the Indigenous communities and other undesirable peoples living too close to pristine nature. What should follow? We infer that the agency of the Indigenous peoples, along with their partners, to resist or adapt to State intervention in a repressive context will contribute to important debates in political ecology.

The social life of the Brao and the Kavet is progressively shifting from a non-cash-based economy to a micro-market economy. Such an evolution is likely to be intensified in the future, even if their current lifestyles constitute a certain form of subsistence, with less accumulation. As noted above, this is largely due to green economy policy rhetoric and the State's territorialisation reshaping their interactions with their restricted living places. Previous livelihood practices were, until recently, far less accumulative, with very limited resource extraction, and therefore far lower emissions than those of urban dwellers and other average Cambodian citizens. A careful examination of possible new behaviours and attitudes towards their biotope will shed light on an evolving society increasingly getting into contact with the social and political world.

Acronyms

- CPA Community Protected Area
- CPP Cambodian People's Party
- ELC Economic Land Concession
- FPIC Free and Prior Informed Consent

- IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature
- MaFF Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests
- MoE Ministry of Environment
- NGO Non-governmental Organisation
- NTFP Non-timber-forest products
- PDoE Provincial Department of Environment
- PA Protected area
- REDD+ Reduction of Emission through Deforestation and Forest Degradation
- VNP Virachey National Park

Statements and Declarations

Ethics Statement and Data Availability Statement

Informed consent, but not written insofar most indigenous interviewees could not read, for participation was obtained from all participants involved in this study. Participants were orally informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of the research and the vulnerability of the study population, particular care was taken to ensure comprehension and voluntariness during the consent process. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants have been maintained throughout the research process and in this publication.

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study primarily consist of qualitative interview transcripts and field notes. Due to the sensitive nature of the information shared by participants and the ethical commitments made to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality, the raw data are not publicly available. Anonymized excerpts relevant to the findings are included within the article. Further inquiries regarding the data can be directed to the corresponding author, subject to ethical considerations and participant privacy.

Authors Contributions: Sophea KONG and Frédéric BOURDIER conceptualized the study, conducted the fieldwork and data collection, analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

Footnotes

[1] A term that will be used interchangeably with forest dwellers, Indigenous peoples, ethnic or minority groups.

[2] Personal enquiry, March 2025. A year later, March 2026, the number had drastically increased to hundreds of families being prosecuted (information: commune chiefs).

[3] We use the term 'structural violence' as coined by Paul Farmer (2004).

[4] A recurrent claim whenever land is provided by a company, but one which is exceptionally followed by facts and figures.

[5] A title given to a business person, dubbed by the king's sub-decree, upon having retroceded a substantial amount of cash.

[6] The discussion is part of a bigger research question from the Cambodian author to understand the political culture of a Cambodian institution responsible for environmental protection (the Ministry of Environment). It embraces a mixture of investigation methods: interviews and ethnography, precisely volunteering in a government institution, conversing with NGO actors in the studied conservation location, and the enmeshment with Indigenous villages surrounding the VNP. Findings emerging after the internship in the MoE go beyond the scope of the paper and will not be presented here: only comments from discussions with environment employees will be mentioned in the text.

[7] Investigation within the Ministry of Environment, Jan–Feb 2025.

[8] Brao man, former Vietnamese soldier. Pav Village, March 2025.

[9] They are proved to be traditional protectors of the forest by their way of life as hunters and gatherers (Bourdier, 2018; MacCan, 2014).

[10] He returned a few years ago and is currently appointed as a provincial council member.

[11] Chainsaws have been a subject of serious discussion among conservationists. In some REDD+ projects in the Kingdom, they are not allowed to be used by farmers for their rapid effect on felling trees in conservation areas.

[12] The impressive diversity of plants grown in a swidden field among the Brao and the Kavet has been extensively studied by Ian Baird (2011).

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