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RECONNECTING WITH FORGOTTEN NATURE: HOW A YOUNG WOMAN RECLAIMED HER FOREST

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In the quiet village of Kampong Chen, nestled in Cambodia's coastal province of Kampot, the community forestry once stood as a shadow of what it used to be. Years of deforestation, land encroachment and illegal activity had stripped the land of its biodiversity and value. For villagers like Mrs Lo Khmeun, a 26-year-old resident and member of Phnom Torteung Community Forestry (CF), the forest seemed irrelevant to her daily life.

“It didn't help me, so I didn't find it useful,” she said.

This began to change with the arrival of the Leading the Change project, which provided subgrants to five local organizations to implement environmental and livelihood interventions across three landscapes, including in Kampot. The Kampot Community Forestry Network (KCFN), a collective representing 50 community forests like Phnom Torteung CF, received direct support from the project. This support included equipment, patrolling budgets and capacity-building on forest law enforcement, all aimed at strengthening each management committee's ability to safeguard and restore the forest.



© Lo Khmeun

Since beginning regular patrols in 2023, Phnom Torteung CF has successfully curbed illegal activity, controlling land clearance and even removing deadly snares. With it, the landscape has shown signs of recovery, and the forest cover has grown significantly. In addition, non-timber forest products, such as wild vegetables, mushrooms, and traditional medicinal plants, have re-emerged. What had once been a dwindling and disconnected patch of forest transformed into a source of opportunity.

For Mrs Khmeun, the forest's renewal brought real economic benefits and supplied her with household needs. By harvesting and selling wild fruits, vegetables and other goods from the forest, she earned approximately US\$150 annually. This provided a meaningful supplement to her family's income. More importantly, the forest was no longer a

forgotten place; community members now embraced it as a valuable resource that deserved care and protection.

Today, Mrs Khmeun is not only a beneficiary of forest restoration but also a vocal advocate for conservation in her community. In meetings, she speaks up to ensure sustainable forest management, and she always keeps a close eye on the land's conditions while harvesting products. As the forest grows stronger, so has Mrs Khmeun's commitment to protecting it.

Her story reflects a larger shift that is happening across Kampot and other targeted provinces through the Leading the Change project. People and nature are gradually reconnecting, with sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity conservation thriving side-by-side.

“I didn't help protect the forest before because it didn't help me. Now, things are different. Without the forest, there wouldn't be non-timber forest products.”



© Lo Khmeun

Leading the Change 2 is a global civil society programme beginning in July 2023, which aims to support thriving biodiversity and ecosystems where all people can enjoy a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. In Cambodia, the programme has provided subgrants to five organizations that promote civil society rights in biodiversity protection, demonstrate best practices in livelihood development and influencing policies in natural resource development.



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