

OUT OF THE WOODS

A project has been balancing the conservation of wild rattan and biodiversity with local wellbeing and prosperity for 15 years.

Rattan landscapes, rattan livelihoods

It has long been used as a material for furniture, handicrafts and construction in the tropical regions of Africa and Asia. Rattan, the spiky palm, is a particularly high-value non-timber forest product, offering a critical source of income for some forest-dependent communities in the tropics and subtropics: young shoots provide a source of food and more mature fibres are used to build furniture and make handicrafts, such as baskets.

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos), sustainable management of natural rattan is critical if this way of life is to continue and forests are to remain viable habitats for wildlife.

Because it is usually a climbing palm, rattan's fate is quite literally interwoven with the trees along which it grows. Unfortunately, like many other places, Laos' forests and the wildlife that inhabit them are

threatened by illegal and commercial logging, and the expansion of agricultural land. According to Global Forest Watch, Laos lost 773,000 ha of humid primary forest between 2002 and 2019, and has seen an 18% decrease in tree cover since 2000.

Unsustainable rattan harvesting practices are also threatening natural rattan forests in Laos. In some areas, people cut down the tree on which the rattan palm is climbing to access the stem, harvest all of the palms in one area, or cut palms only to find they cannot be extracted from the plant on which they are growing. These practices lead to a reduction in the long-term availability of natural rattan, on which people's livelihoods depend. Locals report having to go further and further from the village to harvest rattan every year.

Inevitably, unsustainable harvesting of rattan has a negative impact on the ecosystem services provided by forest landscapes, and results in a loss of wildlife habitats and, by extension, of biodiversity.

The sustainable rattan project in Laos

As part of its forest conservation efforts in the Greater Mekong region, particularly Cambodia, Laos and Viet



Rattan can be a fast-growing alternative to timber, if managed well and harvested sustainably. Credit: WWF-Laos.



A community in Thaveng village, Khamkeut district, Bolikhamxay province creates handicrafts from sustainably harvested rattan. Credit: WWF-Laos.

Nam, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has been working to establish sustainable rattan supply chains and improved systems for rattan forest management.

WWF-Laos has been working with around 1500 households, as well as government officials, in Bolikhamxay province since 2006, and Sekong and Salavan provinces in southern Laos since 2009. The project aims to develop a viable and sustainable management and supply chain model that ensures the forest is protected while also contributing to local livelihoods and the protection of wildlife.

Creating value

With support from international furniture retailer IKEA, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, WWF trains local villagers and authorities to sustainably harvest natural rattan, grow rattan for production purposes, manage rattan forests and produce value-added goods.

At the start of the project, WWF-Laos realised that the communities had only been selling rattan as a raw material to external producers, thereby missing out on opportunities to produce more lucrative value-added products. In order to give them control of the entire supply chain, the project ran training

programmes to teach communities how to properly process rattan, by boiling and splitting palm fibres, as well as how to weave and create finished products. These products were then sold to distributors in Laos, for further sale domestically or export to countries like France, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand and the USA.

Improving forest management

The project team, in collaboration with local authorities and communities, has also created and implemented a rattan forest management plan, which includes a system for classifying rattan based on length and type, and provides guidance on sustainable harvesting practices: only rattan stems more than 5 m long should be harvested; only 20% of commercially viable stems occurring in natural forested areas can be harvested at any one time; and the plant on which the rattan stem is growing must not be cut.

To increase the density of rattan in forested areas, as well as in individual gardens, the project established rattan nurseries, in which rattan seedlings are grown and transplanted into natural forests, reducing the need to harvest natural rattan. Communities are trained to take inventory of the rattan plants in the forests, in order to improve overall forest management and understanding of

what to harvest for commercial purposes. The extra seeds, seedlings and shoots can also be sold to generate additional income, either for future production of rattan products or as food.

Finally, the project has promoted Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification as a way to ensure forest management standards are upheld. Using this certification process, the project has been able to enhance the environmental conservation of rattan forests: in 2020, some 11,000 ha of rattan forest were certified in Bolikhan District, Bolikhamxay province.

Branching out

More sustainable rattan stewardship is reaping rewards. From August 2019 to July 2020, communities' expanded range of rattan livelihood activities—producing handicrafts, harvesting rattan cane, selling rattan seeds and seedlings, and selling rattan shoots for food—generated LAK 726,358,000 (about USD 78,000) in income across 365 households: a significant boost in incomes. Of these households, the 222 specifically engaged in making handicrafts earned LAK 675,796,000 (USD 73,075).

Currently, the rattan project is focusing its efforts on supporting the creation of an enabling policy environment for the development of rattan and bamboo value chains that have both sustainable forest use and fair distribution of profits at their core.

In collaboration with the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and other government agencies, WWF-Laos has been working to improve forest patrols and enforcement of wildlife law which would prohibit unsustainable rattan harvesting, as well as illegal wildlife poaching and logging. It is also working with NAFRI to establish biodiversity surveys so that the impact of improving forest management on wildlife populations can be better understood.

“It is our hope that the rattan project can act as a model for sustainable development,” says Bouavanh Phachomphonh, Rattan & Bamboo Project Manager for WWF-Laos. “By sustainable use of locally available non-timber forest products, like bamboo, tea or forest honey, the current “get rich quick” mentality can be changed and replaced with one that considers the long-term benefits of maintaining forest landscapes: for the benefit of people and nature.”

BOUAVANH PHACHOMPHONH

Bouavanh is a conservationist and leader of the Laos Rattan and Bamboo Project Team in WWF-Laos. She works closely with government staff and villagers on sustainable rattan forest management, rattan forest certification, and improved livelihoods for forest-dependent communities.



Mr. Khensy Milatid's household earns income from the project, both by growing rattan seedlings, and by participating in the production of handicrafts. His family earned around LAK 41,000,000 this year from handicraft production alone.

Credit: WWF-Laos.