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“ONE-HANDED, FULL-HEARTED”: HOW SREYYA FINDS STRENGTH TO PROTECT HER FOREST HOME

In the remote forest community of O’Kreang, nestled within Sambo Wildlife Sanctuary, red dirt roads weave through the dense, towering tree canopy. Far from the ranger stations, a quiet but powerful conservation effort is taking shape. Here, community members have risen to defend their forests against illegal logging and threats to wildlife. Among them is Sreyya, a community patrol member (CPM) and a woman whose disability has never defined her. Her dedication has redefined what it truly means to be a guardian of the forest.



Sreyya's journey into conservation began not with ambition, but with resilience. At the age of 13, she lost her left hand in a devastating accident while helping her mother at a brickmaking site.

“ I wasn't born disabled, but life changed overnight. ”

Forced to leave school and stay home, Sreyya's early adult years were spent tending pigs and selling groceries alongside her mother.



With no formal employment experience or knowledge of forest patrols, Sreyya never imagined she'd one day be on the frontlines protecting her community's most precious resources: the forest and its wildlife. That changed in 2018 when her godfather, also a CPM, encouraged her to join the team.

“ He told me they needed a woman on the patrol team, especially to help in sensitive situations. I said yes immediately. ”

“The forest is part of our life. If we lose it, we lose everything,” she said.



Like many wildlife sanctuaries in Cambodia, Prek Prasob is under pressure from illegal logging, wildlife poaching and land encroachment. Patrol teams are often the first and sometimes the only line of defence. But limited resources, lack of formal training and exposure to danger make the job incredibly challenging, especially for women and people with disabilities. When Sreyya became a CPM, she had to overcome scepticism not only from fellow villagers but also within herself.

“I was scared on my first day. I thought, ‘What if someone attacks me?’ But I found strength in my team and in the belief that we're doing something important,” she said.



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Sreyya quickly proved herself through her dedication to learning by doing. With just one hand, she skilfully rides a motorbike deep into the forest – crossing streams, carrying patrol gear and navigating slippery, muddy paths. She documents illegal activity by recording GPS points, photographing evidence and submitting reports, just like official rangers do.

“We patrol from early morning until afternoon, sometimes overnight if needed. If we’re alerted about forest crimes, we go day or night,” she said. “It’s not a fixed schedule; it’s a commitment.”

Her presence as a woman has made a difference. “When we encounter women and men involved in illegal activities, I can step in and speak with them. It helps avoid conflict. Sometimes, a woman can calm a situation better than a man,” she explained.

Sreyya is also instrumental during community outreach, helping lead village meetings and educating others on the difference between sustainable harvesting of non-timber forest products and illegal forest destruction.



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I explain that if we just take what the forest can give, like fruits or resin, it's okay. But cutting trees and hunting wildlife is different – that harms us all.

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Despite her growing skills and experience, Sreyya faces resistance. Some community members criticize her for reporting illegal activities, accusing her of betraying her neighbours.

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People talk behind my back. At first, it hurt. But I remind myself, I'm not doing this for praise. I'm doing this because I care.

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She believes her actions will speak louder than words. “One day, they will understand. If we don't protect this forest now, there will be nothing left for future generations.”

Sreyya's story is a powerful example of how community members, especially women and people with disabilities, can take on roles as wildlife guardians, even without formal titles as rangers. What she lacks in official credentials, she makes up for in lived experience, courage and unwavering commitment.

Her patrol team praises her for her discipline and teamwork.

“ They call me ‘the one-handed ranger.’ ”

She laughed, explaining: “But I never feel left out. I'm treated like any other team member, maybe even more respected because I never back down.”

Sreyya's leadership is a reminder that everyone has a role to play in conservation work. The duty to protect nature belongs to everyone with a heart strong enough to fight for what matters. Seila is not just a community patrol member – she's also a protector, a role model and a symbol of hope. She demonstrates that strength is not defined by physical ability, but by courage and purpose.



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