



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

I've been losing sleep over whether funding should continue for a tiger project in Cambodia.

I've just been there and it's a model project. Professionally-run, complete with paramilitary-trained anti-poaching patrols, it even has a community programme that ticks all the right boxes, with everything from fuel-efficient stoves to employment for ex-poachers. But here's the catch: despite everyone's best efforts, the few surviving tigers have virtually no chance of survival.

The project is in Bokor National Park, home to clouded leopards, palm civets, the cattle-like gaur, a handful of elephants and perhaps half a dozen Indo-Chinese tigers.

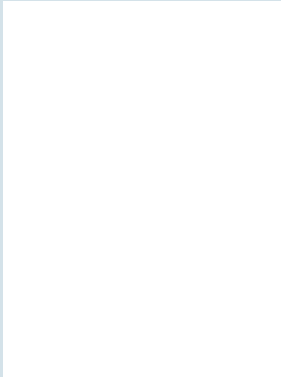
Bokor's 1,600km² of jungle is being attacked from all sides. There are 50 villages surrounding the park, with 100,000 impoverished people in need of food, fuelwood and medicinal plants.

Commercial logging and poaching are rife. Local government officials issue illegal permits for farms and plantations within park boundaries. Work on a hydro-electric dam inside the park has just begun, and there is a proposal to build a \$600 million resort on the central plateau. Plus, after years of war and civil strife, the place is littered with landmines.

Just 55 rangers risk their lives to protect Bokor

(though several are in hospital at any one time with cerebral malaria) and they have an annual government budget of less than \$20,000. Every time they go on patrol, they run a gauntlet of armed poachers – indeed, several of their colleagues were murdered recently. Yet they are highly motivated and undoubtedly slowing the degradation of the park – albeit too little too late.

Bokor wouldn't survive without international funding, so withdrawal would be a disaster for the park and demoralising for its staff. Worst of all, it would send the wrong message to Cambodia. But throwing severely limited funds – raised specifically for tigers – into a project with little hope of success means less money for viable tiger populations elsewhere. And it's the kind of dilemma facing conservationists all over the world.



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