

National

Grasslands present dilemma

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A WEEK after British researchers released a study warning that the nation's grasslands would soon be lost if drastic action was not taken to protect them, some agricultural experts have called for moderation, noting that the intensive rice cultivation blamed for the grasslands' destruction is critical to the nation's developing commercial rice sector.

Found around the Tonle Sap lake, the seasonally flooded habitat is the last of its kind in Southeast Asia and considered by conservationists to be an ecological treasure – home to at least 11 endangered bird species. But the area is one of the most important to Cambodia's rice sector and prime land for rice cultivation.

"There are many conditions that make it good for growing rice," said Sok Sarang, a program officer at the Cambodian Institute for Research and Rural Development. "It is close to a source of water, and the quality of the soil is very good for rice."

Much of the Kingdom's fragrant rice export comes from this area, said Sarang, and continued intensive cultivation of the area would be key to reaching the government's stated goal of exporting one million tonnes of milled rice by 2015.

But as intensive cultivation increases, so too does the damage to the environment. The numbers in the UK's University of East Anglia study are startling. In 1995, the grasslands spanned some 3,349 square kilometres – by 2005, that area had shrunk to a whopping 46 per cent to 1,817 square kilometres.



A member of the community management committee stands in a field in the Stoung Bengal Florican Conservation Area, which stretches from Kampong Thom province to Siem Reap province. A Bengal florican can be seen flying overhead. ROB MARTIN/THE SAM VEASNA CENTRE

Published in collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the study blames commercial rice cultivation for the rapid loss of the habitat.

The issue at hand is intensive rice cultivation, in which an additional crop is grown during the dry season.

"Rather than lying fallow during the dry season, the land is irrigated during that season to allow [an additional rice crop] to grow," said Simon Mahood, a technical adviser with the WCS.

Conservation experts argue that the "permanent flooding" creates conditions unsuitable for birdlife and reduces the yield of fisheries.

The loss of the habitat could potentially cause critically endangered birds like the Bengal florican to go extinct within the next eight years.

But agriculture experts point out that the region's fertility is critical to developing the rice sector.

Dr Volker Kleinhenz, an agricultural consultant who has researched rice cultivation in the Kingdom extensively, called the area around the Tonle Sap, "exceptional" because of the readily available source of water for irrigation.

"Double-cropping can double annual yields. Furthermore, the yields and quality of dry-season

rice are usually better than that of wet-season rice, predisposing this crop for export," he said.

Historically, said Kleinhenz, the area around the Tonle Sap basin has been used to grow rice during the dry season, relying on receding floodwaters for irrigation.

By mirroring that natural process in the extreme, commercial rice farmers can produce far higher than average yields. Farms in the area that rely on intensive rice cultivation can reach 3.5 tonnes per hectare, compared with an average of 2.8 tonnes per hectare, said Hun Lak, general director of Mekong Oryza Trading.

"I would say cultivating rice here is more important to the industry of Cambodia than protecting the environment," Lak argued.

Since 2005, the year researchers say intensive rice cultivation became the leading cause of destruction of the grasslands, rice exports have increased exponentially – from 5,971 tonnes in 2005 to 192,666 tonnes last year – according to statistics from the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

But if rice exports have seen a staggering increase, individual farmers are not the ones reaping the benefits.

The emergence of commercial rice farms has "usurped customary land-use rights of grazing and tradition rice cultivation at the expense of the poorest local communities," the study's lead researcher, Dr Charlotte Packman, told the *Post*.

Other agriculture experts also point out that there are other ways to increase yields.

"In Kampong Thom, there are many private companies who have the money to build irrigation canals and [other infrastructure] to grow dry-season rice, but I think it is not profitable in the long term," said Yang Saing Koma, president of the Cambodian Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture.

Because of the damage to the environment, Koma feels farmers should focus on growing their one wet-season crop better first, as there are greater gains to be made there.

"We must also think about the environment. If we are not careful [with the environment], it can cause a lot of problems in the future," he said. ■

POLICE BLOTTER

Police official suspected in cow-ruption incident

A POLICE official was arrested for cow-stealing in Kampong Speu's Oral district on Friday after villagers found a meaty body of evidence against him. The disgraced official's police colleagues said that a villager who was searching for his lost cow found its carcass in pieces near other villagers, who pointed to the cop as the culprit. When the cow-owner confronted the cop at his house, the villagers said, he found heaps of beef there. The predatory policeman admitted to stealing the cow, saying he'd hoped to sell the meat, and was sent to court. KOH SANTEPHEAP

Guesthouse raid reveals HQ for alleged dealers

POLICE seized four packages of drugs but only managed to arrest one of four suspected drug deliverers when they raided a guesthouse in Kampong Thom's Stung Sen town on Friday. Cops said they had long suspected the group of dealing drugs from a room in the guesthouse. When they raided it, they arrested one 20-year-old, who admitted to dealing, and they're now looking for the three that escaped. KAMPUCHEA THMEY

Home invasion stabbing baffles police and victim

A 19-YEAR-OLD man in Phnom Penh's Por Sen Chey district was the subject of a mysterious but nearly deadly attack on Saturday night, when an intruder slipped into his room and stabbed him. The motives behind the attack are unclear, police said, adding that the suspect failed in his murder attempt because the victim woke up and shouted for help. The stabber escaped, and police are searching for him. KAMPUCHEA THMEY

Police break into illegal cockfight, arrest three

POLICE in Kampong Thom's Baray district swooped in on an illegal cockfighting ring and arrested three gamblers, while several others fled the coop on Friday. Acting on complaints from neighbours, cops said they caught the men in the middle of a cockfight and also seized the four roosters and three motorcycles. Police made the three arrested bettors sign a contract promising to cease participating in the fights and then released them. RASMEY KAMPUCHEA

Duo accused of beating and auto theft arrested

TWO men were arrested for violent theft in Battambang town on Saturday after they escaped from Poipet town in a stolen car. Police said the duo beat up a couple and then stole their car and skipped town in it. The couple was sent to hospital and the suspects, who confessed to the theft, were sent to court. RASMEY KAMPUCHEA

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