

## **Jungle Guard**

*Jungle Guard*, a film by Makara Ouch, is a testament to the decidedly Asian belief that life flows in a circular manner. A site of trauma can become a retreat for spiritual learning; an area with a history of protracted warfare can become a place for reconciliation and remembrance.

But one thing remains consistent: the land is *itself*. It creates the conditions for life, and it holds that possibility even when human populations raze forests, hunt endangered species and wage wars in jungles that are the last vestiges of biodiversity on this planet.

This innate truth about the natural world undergirds the documentary, informing filmmaker Ouch's meditative shots and drone footage of the Monk Commune Forest in Anlong Veng district, Oddar Meanchey province. It is also what impelled Venerable Bun Saluth — the main focus of the documentary — to work together with Sun Tha, a former Khmer Rouge soldier and friend, to create a protected area in this part of Anlong Veng district. From 1979, when the Khmer Rouge was ousted, until at least 1998, the area was the final battleground between the regime's remaining soldiers, and the Cambodian government. Long known as the last Khmer Rouge stronghold, like much of Cambodia, the district is also riddled with the remnants of war — it took the monks living in this area close to a decade to clear all the landmines with the help of Halo Trust.

The Monk Commune Forest, or Sorng Rokavorn Community Forest, was initiated in 2001 and is one of thirteen such areas, located across five communes in two districts, overseen by the Oddar Meanchey Forestry Administration. Ouch intersperses drone footage of swathes of lush forest and the daily work of the monks and villagers (fishing with nets, kick-starting the engine of tractors, digging trenches), with narrative strands in which Venerable Bun details the journey he embarked on, to establish this remarkable biodiversity reserve that today totals 18,261 hectares.

But the road to achieving this was far from easy. From 2002-2008, he worked with over 90 monks and novices to patrol the area. But as early as 2003, people moved in and villages sprouted up. By 2006, there were about 8 villages in total. Where there are human establishments, roads, buildings and encroachment into forests inevitably follows. Recognising that human habitation in areas that are rich in biodiversity could pose risks for the conservation of at-risk species, he requested most of the villagers to leave, which they did, out of respect to a head monk.

From there, Venerable Bun did the requisite research to find out what it would take to have the area legally designated as a forest reserve. This involved getting a license, converting it into a “community forest”, and allowing the establishment of villages that would ultimately not encroach on the forest itself. The irony of this is not lost on Venerable Bun. But neither irony, nor significant setbacks have impeded him.

In the past decade, he has entered into a financial agreement with Carbon Finance Worldwide (in 2009), has witnessed villagers deliberately sabotage his efforts by removing sign posts and poles painstakingly placed to mark out the boundaries of the reserve, and has seen one segment of the forest illegally razed for timber, which was then sold to traders. Much of the tropical hardwoods found in this part of the province are listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and include species like *Afzelia xylocarpa* (*beng* in Khmer) and *Hopea helferi*. He has also seen poachers and hunters kill threatened wildlife in the area, from banteng to sambar deer. These threats are likely to continue. Prominent researchers, REDD+ and NGOs like Birdlife International have conducted surveys which show that a total of 174 bird species and 26 mammals can be found in the province and many of these are globally threatened.

Protecting such vast areas of forest is no mean feat. To accomplish this, Venerable Bun has also built trust with forestry officials, government ministries, and the military force, all of whom have worked with him and the monk community in Anlong Veng, to patrol and protect the forest, and prosecute people who illegal harvest wood or poach wildlife.

This is why calling Venerable Bun Saluth “visionary” is insufficient to capture all of who he is. In one interview segment, with almost a glint in his eye and his characteristically broad smile, he tells the filmmaker that he “never got angry”. Every setback merely presented a new challenge, for which he had to devise new strategies.

One such example is particularly poignant: after villagers encroached on a segment of the forest and razed it, he tasked the novices to dig ditches to act as a perimeter around the forest reserve. A trial run with a 5km ditch worked. The villagers didn’t cross it and they got the message. The perimeter was completed after that. In Cambodia, the act of “digging ditches” or “canals” is virtually synonymous with hard labour during the Khmer Rouge era. Today, it might be associated with low-wage labour in the country’s capital city, as infrastructure and development projects rapidly take root. So there is something powerful about bodies labouring to build ditches to protect the gaur, banteng, pileated gibbon, tiger, dhole and sun bear. Every one of these species can be found in the district and every one of them is at risk of becoming extinct if habitat loss, poaching and

hunting continues. Under Venerable Bun's tutelage, the sweat and toil here is about protecting life, and thereby nurturing the spirit.

In this regard, he is both a monk and a diplomat. A man not of this world, and yet very much a part of it. There is that old adage often quoted, about being like a lotus flower in a muddy pond, unaffected by the murkiness and striving for enlightenment. He is living proof of how a person may choose a spiritual path, but work tirelessly for the benefit of this world.

Ouch Makara's documentary celebrates this spirit. It also celebrates our planet and honours the quiet, humble work of Cambodia's novices and monks here in Anlong Veng, who are the guardians and stewards of its forests.

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