

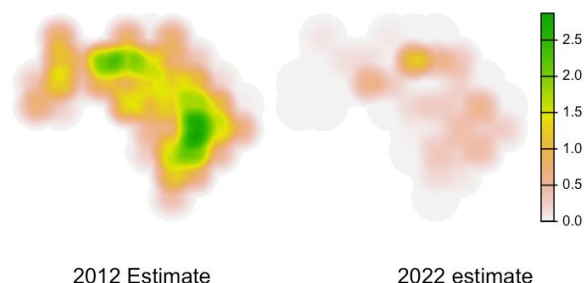


## Cash transfers in support of biodiversity conservation

**In Cambodia, hunting and consumption of wild meat by people living close to protected areas is caused, at least partially, by low income. Cash transfers, such as basic income payments, may therefore be an effective way to reduce unsustainable harvesting of wild meat while supporting poor households who depend on wild meat. Rigorous evidence is required to support their use at scale.**

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Cambodia is a biodiversity hotspot and home to many threatened species. Wildlife populations have undergone severe declines, mainly due to unsustainable levels of hunting, especially by indiscriminate snaring<sup>1</sup>.



*Scaled encounter rates for 13 key species from transects conducted in 2012 and 2022 in Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary, show declining wildlife populations. Credit: Ben Smith.*

### Wildlife Hunting and Income

Analysis of data from the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey<sup>2</sup>, a nationally representative survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics, shows that wildlife hunting is an important activity for

many rural households, particularly those living close to protected areas. Within 20km of a protected area, 9% of households reported hunting<sup>3</sup>.

According to this data, most hunting is for household consumption, not for trade. For 90% of the households that reported hunting, the value of the meat they consumed was greater than what they sold, and wild meat was an important part of their diet, comprising about 15% of meat consumption by value<sup>3</sup>.

Households that hunt are poorer than other households on average and are more dependent on agriculture. However, their agricultural productivity is lower, and they are more vulnerable to climate shocks. When poor rainfall reduces crop yields, hunting increases because such temporary reductions in income are not well insured by existing social safety nets<sup>3</sup>.

### Cash transfer programs

When hunting is a coping strategy for poorer households, campaigns to reduce demand for wildlife products are unlikely to be effective, while enforcement of

protected area laws without economic support is likely to cause further deprivation. New and more equitable approaches to conservation are needed.

Cash transfer programs (CTPs) are implemented in over 130 countries, and there is strong evidence showing they can improve development outcomes including monetary poverty, education, health, savings, employment, and gender equity<sup>4</sup>.

#### **Conservation Basic Income (CBI)**

Globally, key areas for biodiversity often coincide with populations experiencing poverty, and there is evidence that inequality and poverty drive biodiversity loss. Therefore, CBI has been proposed to support Indigenous peoples and local communities' stewardship of nature.

CBI is a form of regular and unconditional cash transfer to individuals residing in important conservation areas. It aims to help them support their basic needs. Building on evidence of the impacts of CTPs, it is expected that recipients will use CBI payments to reduce their reliance on activities such as unsustainable wildlife hunting or deforestation<sup>5</sup>.

There are multiple design considerations that will influence the effectiveness and cost of CTPs. CTPs can be universal or targeted, conditional or unconditional, one-off or regular. Payment values and modes of administration can also vary.

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cambodian government

made monthly transfers to 700,000 poor and vulnerable families through Wing bank, totaling approximately \$400 million. This helped families to increase their monthly income and maintain food consumption at 93% of pre-pandemic expenditure<sup>6</sup>.

#### **Testing cash transfers at Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary (KSWS)**

KSWS, in Mondulkiri province, is Cambodia's most biodiverse protected area and is the ancestral home of many Indigenous Bunong communities as well as more recent migrants. Like elsewhere in Cambodia, overhunting has led to declining wildlife populations. At the same time, many households experience poverty. In Keo Seima district, 28% of households are classified as 'poor' by the government<sup>7</sup>.

In May 2024, joint research between the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Royal University of Agriculture, and Monash University collected primary data on income and livelihood activities, including wildlife hunting, among a non-random sample of 405 households living in 28 settlements close to forest areas in KSWS. Because hunting wildlife can be a sensitive topic, we used indirect approaches (vignettes) to question the motives for hunting<sup>8</sup>.

Our data show that hunting is widely practiced, with approximately 40% of interviewed households consuming wild meat not bought in the market. Hunting is more important for households with male and younger household heads, with lower incomes, living closer to the

forest and in settlements without access to markets. However, respondents often explain hunting because of engaging in other cash generating extractive activities in the forest (e.g., collecting non-timber forest products), rather than something they do to explicitly cope with cash constraints.

Because of the effect of low income on wild meat consumption in KSWs, cash transfers may be effective at reducing reliance on unsustainable hunting. Furthermore, as the site of Cambodia's flagship REDD+ project, communities in KSWs have the capacity and experience to receive and use outside funding to support their own development plans<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, Keo Seima is an ideal location to pilot cash transfer programs.

Designing a trial CTP intended to support biodiversity conservation requires us to consider several design options:

- What is the appropriate value and timing of the transfer?
- Should the transfer be targeted? If so, how?
- Should the transfers be conditional? If so, what should the conditions be and how can these be monitored?
- How can the outcomes of the trial be evaluated?

## References

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