

# Animism Disappears from Virachey National Park, Cambodia



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# Purpose of the Presentation

- Virachey National Park and the highlander villages of the Sesan River
- Animism and Bioregionalism
- Crossroads of sustainability and development-at-any-cost; Selling the land, selling the spirits
- Charting a way forward: Animistic Ecotourism

# Part 1

- Introduction of Virachey National Park and the highlander villages of the Sesan River
- Animism remains strong in this region until now

# Study site: in and around Virachey National Park, N.E. of Cambodia



Formed in 1993; 325,000 hectares

# Practice Animism

Highlander tribes who still practice animism, **viewing certain mountain trees, lakes and animals as being the abode of malevolent spirits**



# Jawbone of a sacrificial pig in a Brao village



This “spirit gate” is a portal to the world of  
Local resident spirits



# The sacred Veal Thom Grasslands in Virachey National Park





Fishing is prohibited in holy Yeak Loam Lake



Sacred Mera Mountain with a rich folklore. It is surrounded by the Yak Yeuk Grasslands.



# A local highlander prays at a sacred boulder Deep inside Virachey National Park



But change is being imposed on this region at a pace and too overwhelming for **animists** to negotiate effectively with.



# Part 2

What is Animism and  
Bioregionalism?



“**Animisms** are theories, discourses and practices of relationship, of living well, of realizing more fully what it means to be a person, and a human person, in the company of other persons, not all of whom are human but all of whom are worthy of respect” –Graham Harvey, *Animism*

“Cambodia’s minority people still practice **animism** which gives their relationship to the environment a religious underpinning that is composed of a nature-based spirituality.” (Bourdier, 2006).



Graham's notion of animism being about living respectfully and harmoniously with one's surroundings was most closely to the concept of **bioregionalism**

**Bioregionalism** refers to "ecosystem cultures" was defined "the economic base of support is a natural region, a watershed, a plant zone, a natural territory, within which people have to make their own living" (Snyder, 1995).

# Part 3

- Selling the land, selling the spirits
- VNP is at the Crossroads of sustainability and development-at-any-cost

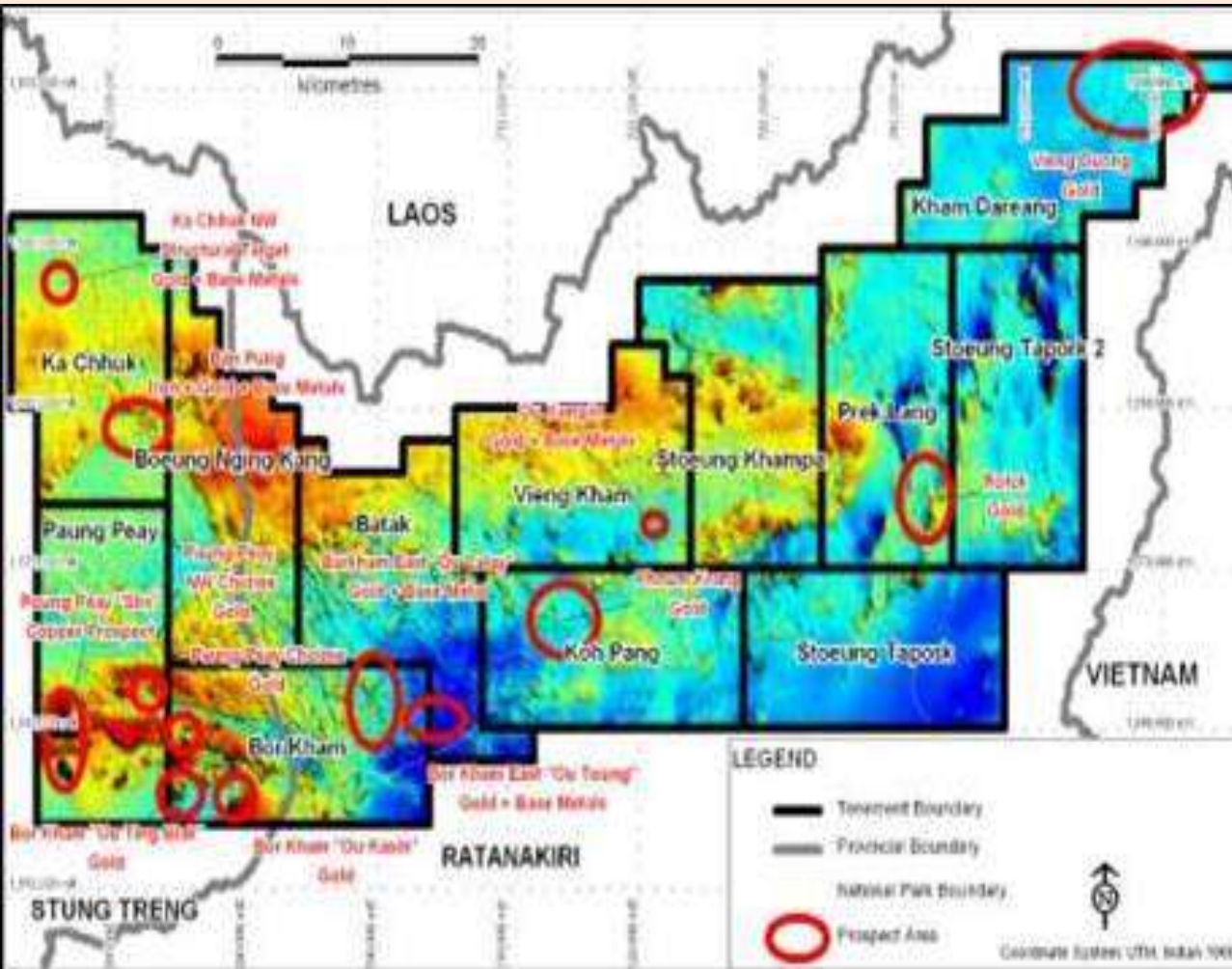


To the government and to developers, this landscape...



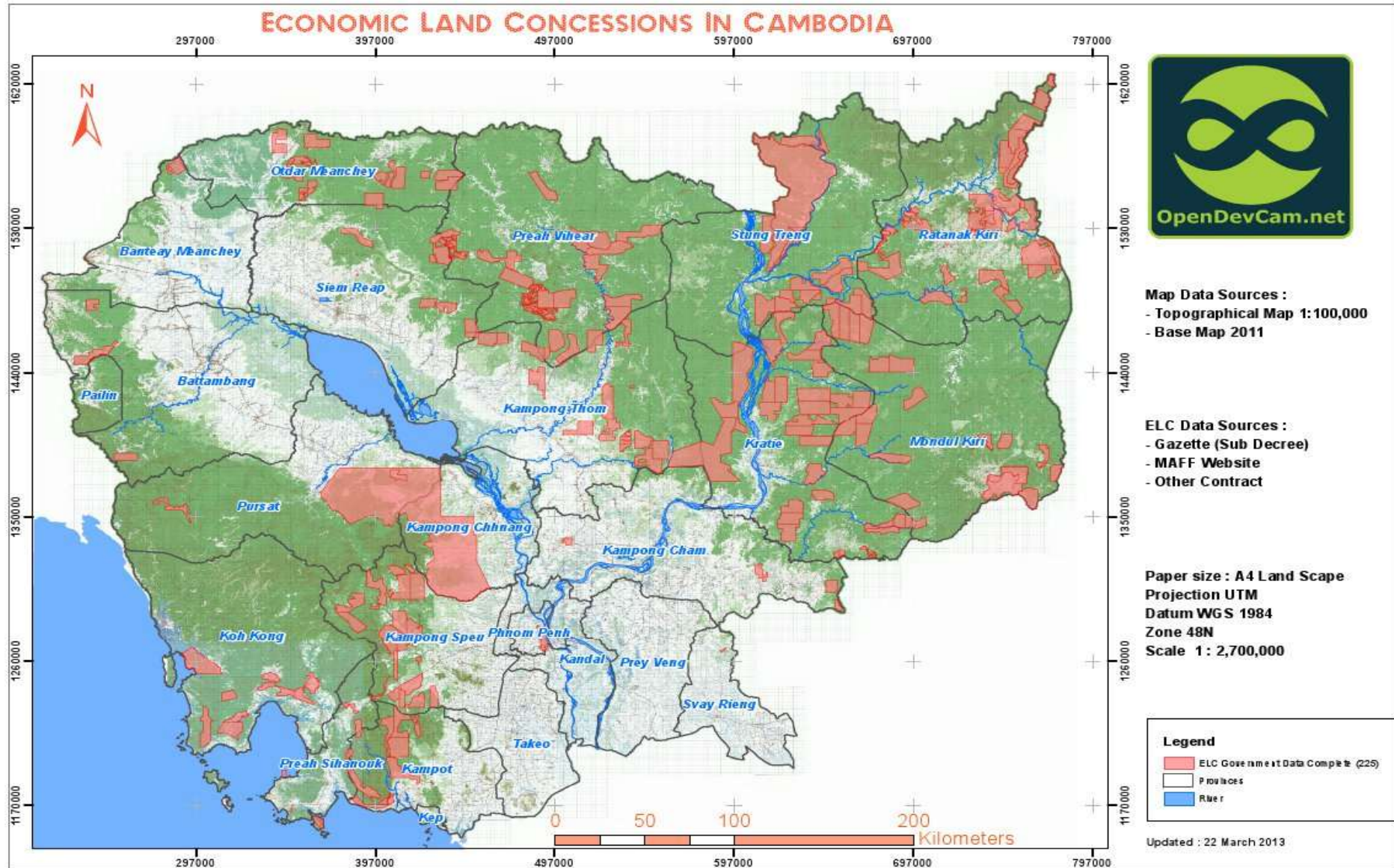
Virachey National Park in Ratanakiri, Cambodia

Looks like this:



Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) are a cancer devouring the last wild places of Cambodia, which also happen to be the last strongholds of indigenous culture and animist cosmology

# Or this: areas given to agriculture & logging interests



# The threats to the area

- The advent of a cash economy had led to an increase in violence, theft, and cheating in the villages.
- The situation is worsen by foreign companies setting up rubber, oil palm, or other plantations.
- Foreign religion, market economy, economic migrants, agricultural corporations, and large development projects, such as hydroelectric dams are all threats to the area.

The cash economy led to Illegal poaching and logging



# Development threaten the environment



# Development pays scant attention to traditional knowledge and Indigenous culture



# Part 4

- Charting a way forward
- Could animistic ecotourism a cure for preserving animism and regionalism?



Conservation is a never-ending battle; hopefully ecotourism can help protect traditional knowledge



# Ecotourism: ecology, environment, earth

- Benefits the local community (with \$ going back to them)
- Treads lightly on near-pristine nature
- Low “carbon footprint”
- Learn something about nature and culture
- Long-term sustainability

Indigenous knowledge of the forest is uncanny



Currently there is an ecotourism program in the park which includes hiring an indigenous guide



Guides can teach tourists “spirit places” of the park – one which government seemingly knows very little



A Kreung highlander who is also a “magic man” (or shaman) stops for a rest in Virachey NP

If Cambodian government could view things with a wider lens, it could see the economic potential in preserving animism in Virachey



Road to Nowhere: this is what the future of Ratanakiri and Virachey will look like if monoculture plantations replace forest, capitalism supplants animism



Animist cultures are not static, not museum pieces to be preserved, but dynamic societies that open to and in many cases eager for change.





**Animistic Ecotourism:** where visitors learn about the spirit places, the oral history and folk tales of animist tribes.



Animistic Ecotourists say their prayers to the spirits of Mera Mountain in Virachey NP before setting off on a trek to that mountain. A chicken was sacrificed for the occasion and the rice wine and the stories flowed!

Story Time! A Virachey sets the stage with the Kavet highlanders. **Animistic Ecotourism in action!**



Perhaps this *is* the solution to preserving animism: village homestays where the old legends are told in the presence of the youth



Injoy with local rice wine

# Our Animistic Ecotourism Studies

Based on information collected from Cambodia and Taiwan, **we argue that animistic ecotourism may offer the possibility of throwing a lifeline to an ancient life way that is being marginalized,** as well as offering ecotourists the chance.

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# Save Virachey National Park on Facebook

- Check us out at:  
<http://www.facebook.com/SaveViracheyNationalPark>

