

‘A Disgrace’: Luxury Housing Plans Threaten Cambodia’s Bokor National Park

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The planned construction of three luxury residential estates in vital wildlife refuge and popular tourist site Bokor National Park marks the latest update in a wider tale of loss for Cambodia’s native forests.

Also known as Preah Monivong Bokor National Park, the protected area in south-west Cambodia’s Cardamom Mountains region offers a refreshingly cool climate, spectacular ocean views, boulder-strewn waterfalls and poignant decay in a haunting, 1920s French hill station. In pre-pandemic times, these attractions brought in thousands of tourists each year to an area known for its abundant forests and varied wildlife.

Environmental activist group Mother Nature Cambodia says Bokor’s forests are already being destroyed. In [a video shared on their Facebook page](#), an activist – their identity hidden by a large black coat, sunglasses and mask to avoid detection and possible harassment – describes the project and its expected harm to the park’s primary forests before the video cuts away to clips of areas that have already been heavily deforested.



Drone image of alleged clearing for luxury residential estates in Bokor National Park. Image courtesy of Mother Nature Cambodia.

A master plan released by Cambodia's Ministry of Land Management details how the development will cover just under 19,000 hectares – equivalent to around 35,000 football fields – of the entire 154,000-hectare park.

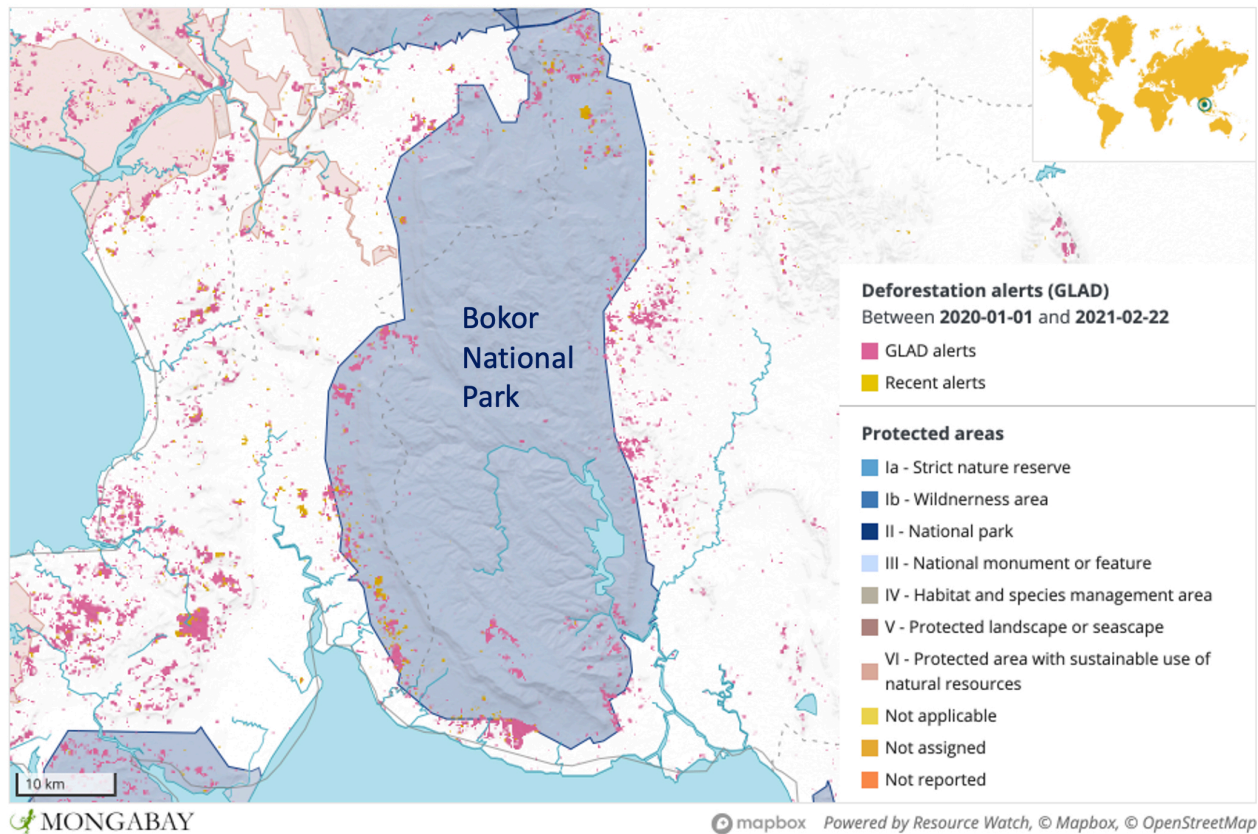
Once occupied by the Khmer Rouge, the park gained official protected status in 1993, yet [was awarded to Cambodian tycoon Sok Kong](#) in 2007 as a 99-year concession for \$1 billion. In the intervening years, Kong's company has developed an access road, luxury hotels and condominiums in Bokor.

According to the [ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity](#), Preah Monivong National Park harbors virgin lowland forest including dry dipterocarp, mixed deciduous and moist tropical evergreen tree species, while mangrove forests line its southern stretches. And within the park's entrancing mix of tumbling hills and sweeping plateaus, unique flora, such as *Burretiodendron hsienmu*, a valuable flowering plant threatened by habitat loss, finds a home.

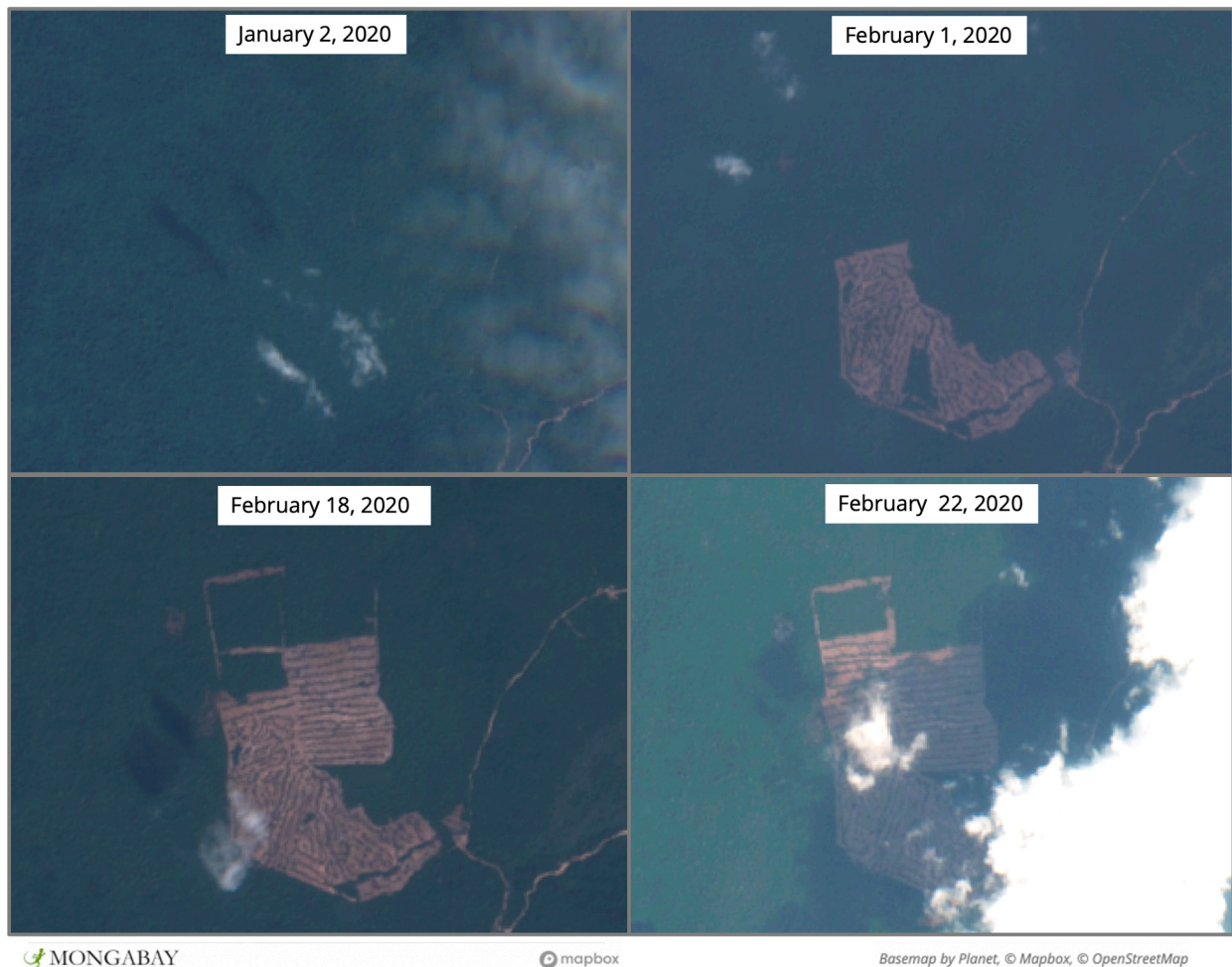
An abundance of wildlife also relies on the forest to survive. Pileated gibbons (*Hylobates pileatus*), green peafowls (*Pavo muticus*), chestnut-headed partridges (*Arborophila cambodiana*), Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), gaurs (*Bos gaurus*), Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), dhole (*Cuon alpinus*), large Indian civets (*Viverra zibetha*), and banteng (*Bos javanicus*) have all been sighted within the park. Bokor is also a catchment area for Touk Chhou, a major river flowing to Kampot.

The wider Cardamom Mountains region encompasses several protected areas, including four national parks (Central Cardamom, Southern Cardamom, Botum Sakor and Preah Monivong Bokor) and four wildlife sanctuaries (Phnom Samkos, Phnom Aural, Peam Krasaep and Tatai). Yet these official designations apparently offer little protection. Satellite data from the University of Maryland (UMD) visualized on [Global Forest Watch](#) show the Cardamoms' national parks and wildlife sanctuaries together lost some 148,000 hectares – more than 8.6% – of their tree cover between 2001 and 2019.

During that time, UMD data show Bokor National Park lost nearly 9% of its primary forest cover. Preliminary 2020 data from UMD show deforestation may have jumped further last year, with clearing expanding along the southern, northern, and western boundaries of the park as well as invading deeper inside. This trend appears to be continuing; so far in 2021, the dataset has registered three weeks of higher-than-average deforestation activity.



Satellite data from the University of Maryland show large areas of deforestation in Bokor National Park in 2020 and 2021. (Mongabay has not confirmed all areas of forest loss are attributable to residential development.)



Satellite imagery shows rapid, recent clearing in the northern portion of Bokor National Park.

An activist working with Mother Nature Cambodia, who asked to remain anonymous citing the sensitivity of the issue, told Mongabay that vast swathes of Bokor have been earmarked for construction and that developers have already begun clearing the forest, with a vision to complete the new residential areas by 2030.

“This plan provides almost 20,000 hectares of land concessions, where almost all of the land is forest, to Sokha Real Estate company, which belongs to Sok Kong, a tycoon close to Hun Sen,” the activist said.

The source added, however, that there’s another section of the plan that covers almost 9,000 hectares. Thus, the total amount of land that is earmarked for the plush residential estates encompasses just under 28,000 hectares.

“Though the plan was signed by the Prime Minister in 2019, Bokor Mountain’s forest has been cut down for years before that,” the activist said. “Therefore, it looks like the master plan is just something to legalize their acts.”

“The land concessions approved by this plan are mostly covered in forest, “the activist continued. “Although the trees are not that big compared to other forests, it is a significant shelter to wild animals, an oxygen tank to produce fresh air and a picturesque natural landscape for tourists.”

International and local NGOs ordinarily play a meaningful role in preventing widespread forest loss in Cambodia. However, it appears many have been muzzled through fear. A reporter in Cambodia, who asked to remain anonymous, said “deforestation” has become a dirty word. Speaking on record about the issue, he said, can lead to NGOs being shut down or at least harassed. Many activists working for Mother Nature Cambodia, he added, have been arrested in recent years.

On February 9, Cambodian human rights organization Licadho [released a statement](#) signed by 74 community groups calling on the Ministry of Environment to stop arresting forestry activists after local officials [arrested five individuals](#) who “were wrapping trees in Buddhist cloth and collecting evidence of widespread illegal logging occurring inside [Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary](#).”

Four major conservation organizations working in Cambodia contacted by Mongabay all said they were unable to comment on the developments in Bokor, while Sokha Real Estate Company did not respond to requests for comment.

Neth Pheaktra, a spokesperson for Cambodia’s Ministry of Environment, said in an email to Mongabay that the government pays “high attention” to environmental protections and biodiversity conservation, and that the Ministry of Environment is working to create zoned areas to conserve natural resources such as forests and wildlife.

“According to the master plan, officially known as the ‘Master Plan for Bokor City Development Project until 2035,’ around 8 percent of land (12.016 [thousand] hectares) of Preah Monivong Bokor National Park (154.458 [thousand] ha) has been earmarked by the Royal government of Cambodia for development into a smart city and a historical site,” Pheaktra said. “The master plan will look into the need for housing, relaxation, employment, study, and business, all within an eco-friendly environment ...”

Pheaktra said that the project has been planned in response to shifting demographics, land use requirements, and takes current and future needs into account. He added that the plan will ensure the protection of natural resources above and below ground, including delicate ecosystems.



Drone image of alleged clearing for luxury residential estates in Bokor National Park. Image courtesy of Mother Nature Cambodia.

Beyond the threat to natural life that depends on Bokor's forest, corruption concerns also remain. **Sophal Ear**, associate professor of Diplomacy & World Affairs at Occidental College, Los Angeles, said the developments in Bokor are "a disgrace."

"Even if there were by some miracle transparency on the money that should have gone to the state for this allegedly secret 99-year concession, there's no telling how that money would have been spent," Ear said. "The Prime Minister [Hun Sen] regularly has total discretion over more than a billion dollars from the national budget."

"Cambodia's forests have been decimated for decades in this same way," he added. "No surprise here, only the last vestiges of forestland, gone."

The Mother Nature Cambodia activist echoed Ear's concerns, saying what the government and Sokha Real Estate are doing in Bokor goes against the law.

"Based on land laws in Cambodia [[Article 16](#)], every mountain belongs to the state as public property and cannot be given to a private owner if it is still of benefit to the public. Moreover, Bokor is a national park, which should be protected by the law..."

"In this case, Bokor has not lost its public interest, so providing Bokor land as a concession to any private company is illegal," the activist added. "However, Hun Sen can do all of this, because deciding land concessions and transferring public state land to private state land depends solely on sub-decrees, for which Hun Sen alone is enough to do it."



Sokha Real Estate Company's estates aren't the first developments slated for Bokor National Park. Here, a man stands outside an entrance to the decaying Bokor Palace Hotel and Casino. Image by Chris Humphrey.

Bokor isn't the only Cambodian national park threatened by development. Ream City, a huge \$16 billion development comprising housing estates, hotels, family attractions, beachfront homes, shopping malls, hotels, resorts, and a yacht and marina club, was [recently approved in Ream Bay](#), a prominent feature of Ream National Park in Preah Sihanouk province.

Meas Nhim, former park director in [Beng Per](#) and Ream National Park, and a current deputy director of the Environment Ministry's protected area department, told Mongabay the Bokor development and the coastal city project in Ream will each have a "big impact" on the environment in the area and said the bay should be kept in a more natural state.

Deforestation and corruption issues have also crept up in the wider [Cardamom mountains region](#), with critics saying government-linked land grabs and infrastructure projects are particularly to blame. And there remains a fear that national parks like Bokor could be wiped out entirely. Rampant trafficking of Siamese rosewood in certain border areas with Vietnam grew so severe in recent years that two protected areas, including Snoul Wildlife Sanctuary, were dissolved in 2018 by royal decree after being [almost entirely stripped of forest](#).

“All of the land concessions on Bokor Mountain belong to Sok Kung,” the Mother Nature Cambodia activist said, before adding: “It looks like it is his private mountain now.”

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