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Cambodian Activist Wins Goldman Prize for Exposing Illegal Logging

Leng Ouch has risked his life to go undercover and gather evidence of collusion between timber companies and government officials.

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Leng Ouch in Cambodia. (Photo: Goldman Environmental Prize)

YOUR REACH



APR 20, 2016



Erica Gies' work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Scientific American*, *The Economist*, and other outlets.

Bio



Cambodian activist Leng Ouch spent years working undercover, posing as a laborer at a timber company while collecting GPS and photographic evidence of illegal logging. Once, when he was caught and arrested, he managed to escape by motorbike en route to prison.

The episode was just one in a series of dangerous encounters showing how driven Ouch is to help [830,000 poor people](#) who have been forcibly evicted from their land in Cambodia in favor of corporate interests. Ouch, the founder of [Cambodia Human Rights Task Forces](#), has [published reports](#) documenting bribery and collusion between timber barons and the government. Among them was Try Pheap, a Cambodian logging tycoon with close ties to Prime Minister Hun Sen.

On Monday, Ouch, 39, won the Goldman Environmental Prize for Asia for his work.

The [Goldman Environmental Prize](#)—often called the “Nobel of grassroots environmental activism”—is awarded to six people each year, one from each of the world’s inhabited continents. Created by San Francisco philanthropists Richard and Rhoda Goldman in 1989, it recognizes individuals who overcome strong corporate and government resistance to win environmental and social victories for their communities.

Eighty percent of Cambodians depend upon the land for their livelihoods, including subsistence harvesting from forests. But a 2001 law that authorized economic land concessions, ostensibly to aid development, has allowed the government to seize farmers’ properties and issue long-term leases to foreign investors. Many displaced people have been forced into resettlement camps, where they withstand hunger and disease, according to Global Diligence, a public-interest legal service in the United Kingdom. Also, endangered wildlife [are losing](#)

their forest homes.



Leng Ouch posts a sign warning that logging is banned in this forest. (Photo: Goldman Environmental Prize)

Timber barons are looking for [rosewood](#), a now-rare tree used to make luxury furniture for markets in China and the United States. With the species nearly extinct, loggers are harvesting other hardwoods. Ouch said after timber companies take the trees they want, they raze the remaining forest with bulldozers and burn the land to clear it for industrial agriculture and projects. Cambodia lost 22 percent of its forest cover between 1973 and 2009, according to a [2013 World Wildlife Fund report](#). If business continues as usual, just 14 percent of forest capable of sustaining wildlife will remain by 2030.

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This practice is part of a worldwide [land-grabbing trend](#) prevalent in countries, like Cambodia, where corrupt governments aid international corporations. According to the [Land Matrix](#), an international initiative that tracks the phenomenon, [Cambodia ranks second](#) in the world, after

Indonesia, for number of land grabs. Of the 104 documented cases in Cambodia, 26 involve deals with China and 35 with Vietnam.

The key difference between a land grab and legitimate international investment is whether residents have the power to agree to the deal. In a land grab, they do not. In many places in the developing world, people who have worked land for generations don't own it. "The land might be owned by the state or government and used by the communities and has been like that for centuries," said Paolo D'Odorico, a professor of environmental sciences at the University of Virginia who studies land and water grabbing.

With growing discontent among Cambodians and increasing international scrutiny, the government in 2014 canceled 23 land concessions covering 220,000 acres of forest. Among those were two concessions covering nearly 50,000 acres granted to Try Pheap Group inside Virachey National Park, a supposedly federally protected area and home to sun bears, small-clawed otters, and dholes, an endangered species of wild dog.

More recently, in January 2016, the prime minister ordered a commission to investigate illegal logging. "On paper there's been a sudden shift in the government's position toward placing basically all remaining natural forests in Cambodia under protection status," said Kerstin Canby, director of the forest trade and finance program at Forest Trends, an international organization that promotes sustainable forestry. Although she is based in Washington, D.C., Canby works closely with people in the Mekong region.

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She is skeptical that anything will come of the government's moves. "We still haven't seen tangible results from this so-called crackdown," she said. "Investigations are ongoing, and a handful of cases have been brought to court, but there haven't yet been any measureable results."

The problem is that government officials "don't care about the law," said Ouch. "They only care about the money."

Ouch is risking his life for his work. A former colleague, [Chut Wutty, was murdered](#) in 2012. Last November, [a park ranger and police officer were gunned down](#) while patrolling forests for illegal logging and poaching. Ouch has gone into hiding at various times, and his family has been intimidated by military police, he said.

The personal risk undertaken by environmental activists was further underscored in March when masked [gunmen killed one of last year's Goldman Prize winners, Berta Cáceres](#), in her home in Honduras. Cáceres, an indigenous rights activist, won the award for her work in pressuring Chinese-owned Sinohydro to pull out of the Agua Zarca dam project. The dam

would have cut off the indigenous Lenca people from the Gualcarque River, which has long been their source of water, food, and medicine.

“I worry about my security and also my family,” said Ouch. Despite the danger, he is committed to the fight. He was born to a poor family of farmers, and during the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime’s rule in the 1970s, they moved from forest to forest, foraging off the land to survive. Afterward, the family settled in the capital, where Ouch earned an education and committed himself to fight for poor people’s rights. “The forests are treasures that our ancestors have left for us,” he said.

Now he is calling on the Cambodian government to revoke all land concessions and ban timber exports to Vietnam and China. He is asking people around the world to stop purchasing furniture from China and Vietnam because so much of it is [made with timber illegally harvested from Southeast Asia](#). He’s also urging the U.S. to enforce the Lacey Act, which bans trade in illegally sourced wood products.

“Activists like Ouch are at the front line of forest destruction,” said a person who works on forestry issues in Cambodia and who asked not to be identified for fear of retaliation. “Forest activists often operate without a support network because the [nonprofit] community fears to confront the cartels. These gangsters often have military ties and are well connected with high-ranking people in Phnom Penh.”

It is a discouraging reality, said Ouch. “Sometimes I feel like I’m fighting a brick wall. But I keep going, because creating a movement of the people is the only way to win the forest back.”

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