

Cambodian EHRDs campaign against environmental damage to mangrove ecosystems

Cambodia

2015 – present

In 2015, an NGO, Mother Nature Cambodia, working with local communities from the Koh Kong region of the country, began a campaign to protect the area's mangrove ecosystems from the effects of sand dredging. Using information campaigns, peaceful protests and direct action (including boarding the sand-dredging boats), the EHRDs called upon the authorities and private companies to stop dredging until a full investigation had been undertaken into the activity's impacts on the local environment. The campaign was also designed to raise local awareness about the implications of dredging for the natural environment and for local customs and livelihoods; and to insist on inclusive consultations with local communities.

In August 2015, three EHRDs, San Mala, Sim Samnang and Try Sovikea, were arrested and arbitrarily detained on the grounds of 'threatening to cause destruction.' Two months later, in a further act of intimidation, local authorities banned a planned two-day human rights training session organised by Mother Nature Cambodia for Ta Meak community members.

Then in early 2016, charges were levelled against Mother Nature Cambodia co-founder, Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson. Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson was previously been deported from Cambodia in February 2015 following a successful Mother Nature Cambodia campaign to stop the construction of a hydroelectric dam.

Urgent appeals about the cases of the detained EHRDs have been issued by, *inter alia*, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Cambodia, and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; but to no avail.

In 2016, Mother Nature Cambodia requested and received urgent support from several NGOs, including Civil Rights Defenders, Frontline Defenders, Freedom House and FIDH. Funds helped Mother Nature Cambodia cover the on-going costs of supporting the activists in jail, including by organising family visits, facilitating communications and providing food. In February 2016, a joint statement by 22 human rights organisations was issued declaring support for the organisation and condemning the crackdown against its activists. The Mother Nature media team and the NGO Not1More (N1M) also produced campaign videos calling for the activists' release.

In July 2016, this international and local campaign began to bear fruit, when San Mala, Sim Samnang and Try Sovikea were released from jail (though they were ordered to pay fines of \$500 each as well as \$25,000 in compensation to the dredging company). Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson remains in detention, though the latest indications are the case against him may be dropped.