

NATIONAL

Budding scientists embrace nature

New master's program at the Royal University of Phnom Penh is creating generation of conservation-savvy scientists keen to help protect the Kingdom's natural resources

BY BRENDAN BRADY

CAMBODIA'S wildlife benefits from a new team of passionate, well-trained guardians, and a new generation of scientists who are advancing Cambodian biological research, thanks to a master's degree in conservation now on offer at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

"In the future, we will be included in the decision-making process for policies to conserve our resources," said student Kannitha Lim.

In 2005, the master's of science in biodiversity conservation course opened its doors as the first postgraduate program at the Royal University.

The program has been a runaway success. All current graduates have received jobs with the government or major local conservation groups, including Flora and Fauna International Conservation International, and the WWF.

Student Va Vuthy, who recently submitted a thesis on bat habitats in the province of Mondulkiri, said he loves the fact the program allows him to participate in his country's nascent scientific research

community.

For Kannitha Lim, the program "is more demanding and strict compared to other programs at the university", but it will, she says, allow her to advance Cambodian biological research.

"I would really like to be a scientist. If we don't have local researchers, it will be difficult to do good conservation work. This is the first time we had to do research on our own. It's a challenge but we enjoy it."

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It is not just aspiring scientists who are attracted to the course. In 2004, Danish government development agency DANIDA tested government conservation officials and found gaps in their fundamental knowledge of the field. The master's program is specifically shaped to address those gaps, and some old hands are showing humility by enrolling.

You Liang, who has already been a lecturer of undergraduate biology at the Royal University for more than a



Students from the Royal University's conservation master's program on a field trip last year. PHOTO SUPPLIED

decade, is in her first year. "My knowledge in some areas was still limited, and I wanted to improve my understanding," she said.

What makes it work?

Luise Ahrens, an American Maryknoll nun who arrived in Cambodia in 1991 as an adviser to the Ministry of Education and is now an administrator at the Royal University, said the program showed unusual disci-

pline in restricting its numbers.

"The best thing they are doing is controlling their numbers, so there isn't an oversupply of students. That's why they've all gotten jobs after graduating."

The program spans two years – a year of classes and a year to write a thesis in English – and currently has 35 students enrolled.

Australian Callum McColloch, an official from Cambo-

dia's Flora and Fauna International office who heads the program, said around 30 percent of the students drop out, mainly due to strict attendance policies and the requirement that all assignments and courses be conducted in English. But he says Royal University is an ideal home for the program given its higher academic and merit-based standards compared with most other universities in Cambodia.

"We try to educate not just on the subject but on critical thinking skills as well," said Callum.

Most instruction comes from guest lecturers from the US, Europe and Australia, typically PhD students doing research in Cambodia, such as two – from England's Cambridge University and Australia's University of Queensland – who are currently teaching.

"There is a strong focus on research in our program, and that attracts inquisitive minds," Callum said.

Field research includes overnight trips to various wildlife habitats in Cambodia.

At US\$250 a semester, tuition is heavily subsidised by a number of research and conservation organisations, including the Darwin Initiative and US Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as a private American donor.

For Ahrens, who is widely regarded as a pioneer for her role in resuscitating Cambodia's higher education, the program stands out due to the dedication of its students.

"They have to really want this because it's not easy. They see themselves as doing something good for the future of their country." ■