

CHAPTER 3

What are the perceptions and awareness of forest crime in the Lower Mekong?

This chapter looks at the ways that rural communities across the Lower Mekong region depend on forests, their current forest practices and their perceptions and awareness of illegal logging and illegal forest trade.

KEY MESSAGES

- In rural communities across the Lower Mekong region, people report that their livelihoods are dependent on the forests; mainly for firewood and non-timber forest products. People are aware of logging and deforestation, but most respondents reported that they are not involved (although in some cases they may be consciously avoiding acknowledging their own involvement). Many respondents used the term illegal logging, indicating that they are aware of and have respect for the law, and would likely follow it if current loopholes were closed.
- The illegality of illegal logging was one of the most prevalent reasons given for not doing it, alongside the awareness that illegal logging is damaging to the natural environment. Very few people reported that they would be likely to cut down a protected tree.
- The survey findings also show that in the Lower Mekong region the concept of “illegal” is often associated with the logging part of the supply chain rather than the trading and manufacturing of illegally sourced wood. The term “illegal logging” itself may be a factor contributing to this perception, as the framing highlights that the illegal loggers are the bad guys not the traders, manufacturers or wood product retailers.

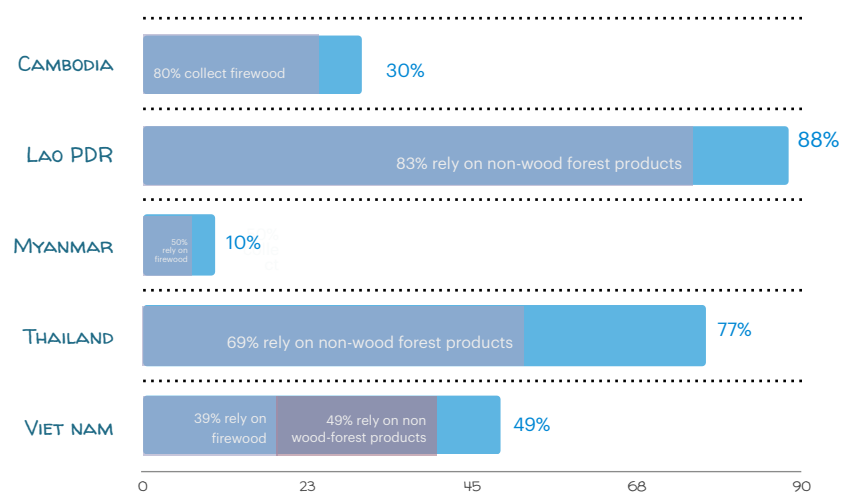
LOCAL PEOPLE DEPEND ON THE FORESTS FOR THEIR LIVELIHOODS

In many parts of the Lower Mekong, local people depend on the forests for their livelihoods. Forests provide people with firewood for cooking and timber for constructing their houses. Non-timber forest products provide local people with food, medicine, and small-scale income generation opportunities.

"PEOPLE MOSTLY RELY ON THE FOREST FOR FOOD CONSUMPTION. THEY COLLECT PLANTS AND HUNT SOME ANIMALS (THAT ARE NOT CONSERVED) TO COOK AND EAT. THESE INCLUDE MUSHROOMS, BAMBOO SHOOTS, RATS, AND SQUIRRELS.

(FEMALE RESPONDENT, RURAL LAO PDR)

FIGURE 12. ABOUT 80% OF RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THAILAND AND LAO PDR DEPEND ON FORESTS*



*SMALL SAMPLE SIZE

Among the survey respondents reporting dependence on the forest, the main types of dependency were for the collection of firewood and non-wood forest products. Dependence on the forest as a source of firewood is particularly high in Cambodia. Dependence on non-timber forest products is high in Lao PDR, Thailand, and Viet Nam. Rural residents reporting dependence on the forest included both male and female at equal levels. Relatively low levels of dependence in Myanmar could be due to the fact the communities surveyed were not living near forest areas for security reasons.

RURAL PEOPLE HAVE A GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF COMMON TREE SPECIES INCLUDING VALUABLE ONES

People from rural areas reported good knowledge of a wide range of common tree species. Notably, Oak was only well known in Viet Nam. Regarding which species of tree produced valuable wood, the top species names given were Rosewood, Teak and Agarwood (Eaglewood). No respondents mentioned Ebony, which is a hardwood with global demand. Notably, a much wider variety of different tree species in addition to the ones popular for export were reported by rural residents.

RURAL PEOPLE PERCEIVE A DECLINE IN ILLEGAL TRADING OF WOOD OVER PAST THREE YEARS

The overwhelming perception among rural residents is that illegal timber trade has been in decline over the past three years. In Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam respondents reported a decline in the trade based on their own observations.

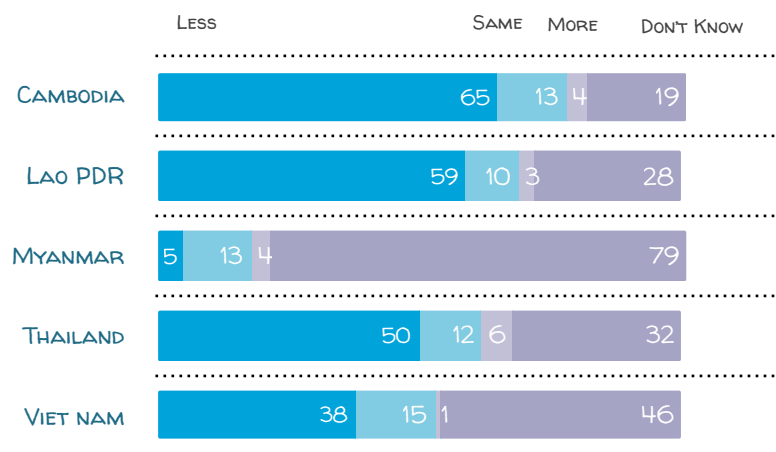
"If it was in the past, I have seen it when I entered the forest. I saw Lao people cutting down trees and smuggling.

Yet, it is not seen commonly anymore."

(Male respondent, rural Lao PDR)

In Myanmar, where illegal logging is said to have increased in the past years, the majority of respondents reported not knowing whether illegal timber trade had increased or declined in the past three years. Many rural respondents in Viet Nam, Thailand and Lao PDR also reported they did not know. This is significant as it indicates that just because people live near forests they are not necessarily aware of what is happening in the forest.

FIGURE 13. PEOPLE IN CAMBODIA, LAO PDR AND THAILAND PERCEIVE THAT THERE ARE LESS CASES OF ILLEGAL WOOD TRADING IN THE LAST THREE YEARS.



DECLINE IN ILLEGAL TIMBER TRADE IS LARGELY DUE TO THE DEPLETION OF VALUABLE TREES AND STRICTER REGULATIONS.

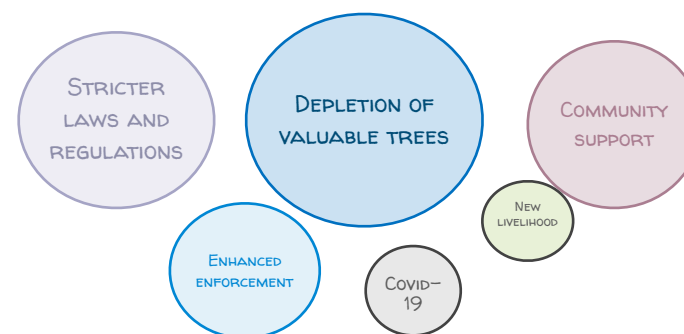
In all countries except Viet Nam, the main reason respondents attributed to the decline in illegal timber trade was that there are fewer trees now. Respondents in most countries also mentioned that the decline in trade was related to tighter regulations and difficulty in getting permission to cut trees, especially in Cambodia and Lao PDR. In Thailand and Myanmar, the protection of trees by rangers was reported as an important factor in the decline of illegal timber trade.

"Cutting down trees is not common anymore, there are no trees left in our community"

(Female respondent, rural Thailand)

Community support was reported to be an important factor for the decline in trade in tree species in all five countries. In Viet Nam people reported "community support" as the most important factor. COVID-19 was not found to be a major reason for the decline in trade of tree species. Only respondents in Viet Nam identified the pandemic as a reason for the decline.

FIGURE 14. DEPLETION OF VALUABLE TREES IS SEEN AS ONE OF THE MAIN REASONS FOR THE DECLINE OF WOOD TRADE.



ILLEGALITY AND STRICTER ENFORCEMENT ARE AMONG THE TOP REASONS FOR NOT CUTTING DOWN PROTECTED TREES

The top reasons given by rural respondents why they would not fell a protected tree were related to illegality and enforcement. The vast majority of respondents in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand Viet Nam reported “afraid of police” as a major reason why they would not fell a protected tree. This reported awareness of illegality and potential consequences for breaking laws prohibiting felling protected trees indicates that many local people are aware of and have respect for the law. The illegality of illegal logging was one of the most prevalent reasons given for not doing it.

“I WILL REPORT IT TO THE RANGERS BECAUSE IT IS ILLEGAL.”
(MALE RESPONDENT, RURAL VIET NAM)

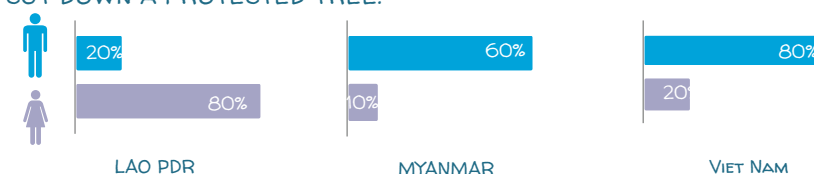
The awareness and concern that illegal logging is damaging to the natural environment was prevalent, although not universal across the Lower Mekong countries. Respondents in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam reported “bad for the environment” as one of the least important reasons for not felling a protected tree. Only respondents in Myanmar reported “bad for the environment” at high levels. Some respondents reported that they would not cut down a protected tree because they are happy with what they already have (Figure 15).

FIGURE 15. STRICTER ENFORCEMENT IS A TOP REASON FOR NOT FELLING PROTECTED TREES.



There were also some gendered aspects seen in the data on the likelihood of respondents to cut down protected trees. In Lao PDR, female respondents reported they were likely to cut down a protected tree at levels four times that of male respondents. In Myanmar and Viet Nam, male respondents reported their likelihood to cut down a protected tree at higher levels than female respondents (Figure 16).

FIGURE 16. IN LAO PDR, FEMALE RESPONDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO CUT DOWN A PROTECTED TREE.



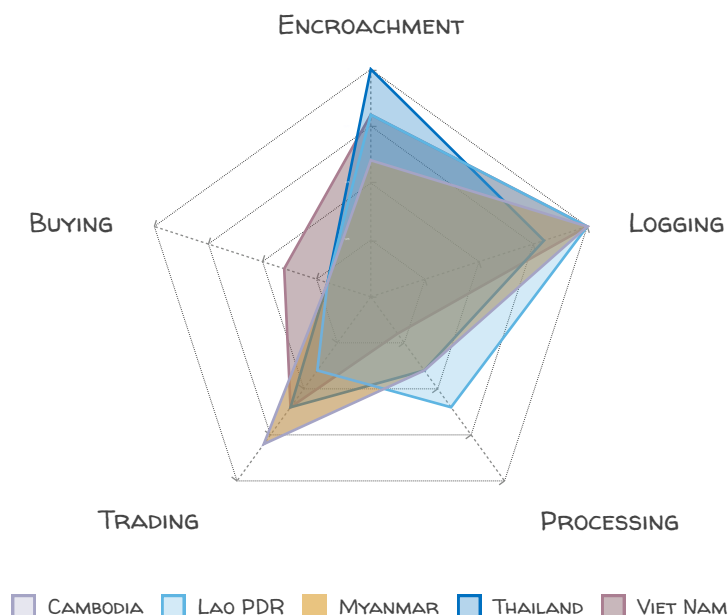
FOREST CRIME IS CONSISTENTLY ASSOCIATED WITH FOREST ENCROACHMENTS AND LOGGING RATHER THAN THE SELLING OF ILLEGAL WOOD

When discussing the severity of forest crime, respondents in all countries more strongly associated it with activities at the forest level such as logging of protected tree species, logging in protected areas and encroaching on forests (Figure 17). It should be noted that forest encroachments is a sensitive and complex issue as this also touches on access to land and land tenure especially for local and indigenous communities.

These findings highlight that in the Lower Mekong region the concept of “illegal” is often associated with the logging aspects of the supply chain rather than the trading of timber or the manufacturing and selling of wood products.

The term “illegal logging” itself may be a factor contributing to this perception; the framing highlights that the illegal loggers are the bad guys not the traders, manufacturers or wood product retailers.

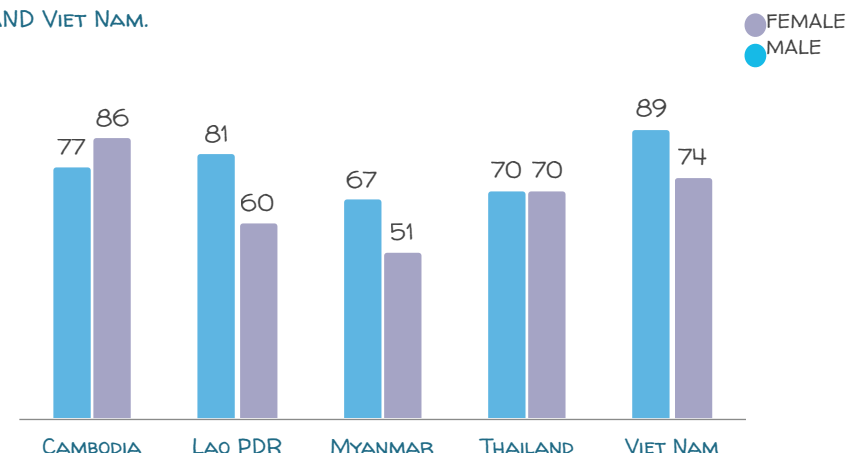
FIGURE 17. LOGGING IS MORE CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH FOREST CRIME, FOLLOWED BY ENCROACHMENT.



AWARENESS OF ILLEGAL LOGGING HIGH IN ALL COUNTRIES, GREATER FAMILIARITY HIGHEST IN VIET NAM

The majority of respondents from all five Lower Mekong countries reported having heard about illegal logging (Figure 15). In Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam men reported greater awareness of illegal logging than women. In Thailand, men and women reported awareness at equal levels. In Cambodia, women reported a greater awareness.

FIGURE 18. MALE RESPONDENTS REPORTED GREATER AWARENESS OF ILLEGAL LOGGING THAN FEMALE RESPONDENTS IN LAO PDR, MYANMAR AND VIET NAM.



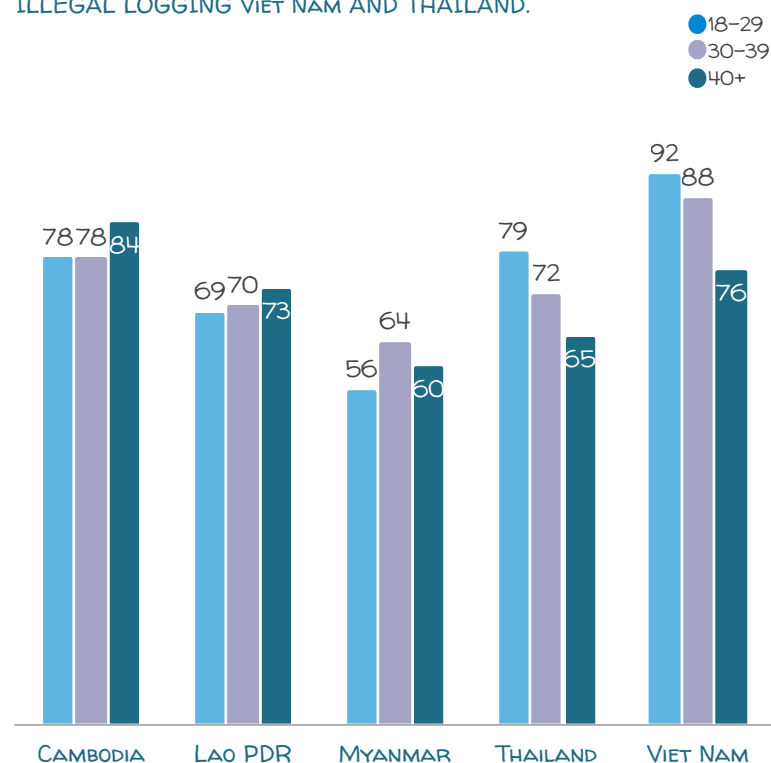
WHAT IS 'ILLEGAL' TRADE?

Wildlife and forest product trade laws vary from species to species, as well as country to country. Trade of some species may be legal in one country and illegal in another. “In addition, international trade legality is determined by international conventions and mechanisms such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which relies on the input of member countries, or parties.” (FAO 2007).

Verifying the origin and legality of CITES-listed timber species is at the core of the CITES trade processes. This is done in each country by national CITES Management Authorities who assess exports containing CITES species and issue what is called Legal Acquisition Findings (LAF) when an export consignment is found to be satisfactory. This is to ensure that the product was sourced and obtained in accordance with relevant laws and regulations throughout the value chain (Camarena and Inoguchi 2021).

In Viet Nam and Thailand, younger people reported greater awareness of illegal logging, especially those aged 18 to 29. In Cambodia and Lao PDR, people over 40 reported greater awareness. In Myanmar, people aged 30 to 39 reported greater awareness. Notably, in Viet Nam a quarter of respondent reported being “familiar” with illegal logging. This is likely due to the fairly widespread mobilisation on the issue at the community level through community action groups.

FIGURE 19. YOUNG PEOPLE REPORTED GREATER AWARENESS OF ILLEGAL LOGGING VIET NAM AND THAILAND.



NEWS AND MEDIA PLAY A ROLE IN SHAPING THE AWARENESS OF PEOPLE ON ILLEGAL LOGGING

Regarding the sources of awareness on illegal logging, respondents across all countries reported gaining awareness through word of mouth from friends and family. News and media were also reported as being important sources of awareness, although less so for social media.

In Thailand, news and media was by far the most important source of awareness. In Cambodia and Viet Nam, local government and the police were reported as important sources of information about illegal logging.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of survey data on the perceptions of Illegal logging and illegal wood trade in rural and urban communities provided important findings that have implications for future campaigns to prevent forest crime in China and in the Lower Mekong region. The next chapter will further explain the findings related to the knowledge, attitude and practices of respondents in regards to forest crime.

