

# A bird in the bush equals money in the hand

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Tourists spot a deer during a Nam-Et-Phou Louey Safari. Credit: Leigh Vial

A new study by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Foundations of Success (FOS) finds that an ecotourism strategy based on "direct payments," where local people are compensated for the amount

of wildlife seen by tourists, has resulted in a reduction in illegal hunting and an increase in wildlife sightings.

In the study, the scientists tested a new model in Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR)'s Nam-Et-Phou Louey (NEPL) National Protected Area (NPA) that used a direct payment approach to encourage villagers to reduce illegal hunting and trade, which is driving [wildlife](#) decline. The model included a contractual payment to villages that was directly tied to the numbers of wildlife seen by eco-tourists as well as a reduction in payments for occurrences of hunting violations. The approach was designed to reduce [illegal hunting](#) pressure, increase wildlife sightings, and ultimately wildlife numbers, while generating ongoing economic incentives for conservation.

The scientists implemented and then monitored this approach for four years. Results indicated a three-fold increase in hunting signs in the non-tourism sector of the NPA as opposed to no increase in the ecotourism sector. Additionally, an overall increase in wildlife sightings was observed. A wide range of threatened species benefited from the program, including Sambar deer, barking deer, primates and small carnivores.

"If eco-tourism or nature tourism is going to help increase these wildlife populations, there must be a direct link between the incentives for communities and the wildlife itself, " said Bounpheng Phoomsavath, Director of Nam Et—Phou Louey National Protected Area. "Many projects claim to be benefiting wildlife but they often lack this direct link. Villagers get benefits but the wildlife populations continue to decline. The direct links are the key to our success."

In cases where ecotourism is used as a biodiversity conservation strategy, projects are often questioned for lack of resulting proof that threats to biodiversity have been averted or conditions for biodiversity have been

improved.

"This study illustrates the importance of monitoring along a theory of change to evaluate if and how a conservation strategy is leading to expected outcomes and to inform adaptive management," said WCS Lao PDR Deputy Country Director Dr. Santi (Joy) Saypanya.

The scientists say the case "provides key lessons on the design of a direct payments approach for an ecotourism strategy, including how to combine threat monitoring and data on wildlife sightings to evaluate strategy effectiveness, on setting rates for wildlife sightings and village fees, and the utility of the approach for protecting very rare species."

**More information:** Paul Frederick Eshoo et al, Design, monitoring and evaluation of a direct payments approach for an ecotourism strategy to reduce illegal hunting and trade of wildlife in Lao PDR, *PLOS ONE* (2018). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0186133](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0186133)

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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