

Savannakhet Unveils Statues Of Endangered Eld's Deer

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(KPL) In a recent ceremony held in Kaysone Phomvihane, the capital of Savannakhet Province, the SAFE Ecosystem Project – a joint project of the Department of Forestry of the Government of the Lao PDR and UNDP – handed over several statues of Eld's Deer to the municipality.

The statues have been placed in a busy roundabout in the city centre to raise awareness for the protection of the endangered species.

Known to local populations as the Ong Mang, the Eld's Deer is an endangered species found in Laos and Cambodia.

In the Lao PDR, they live in the dry dipterocarp forest of Savannakhet. The forest has suffered from excessive logging over past decades.

This logging as well as illegal hunting have put increasing pressure on the rich biodiversity of the forest and the deer population.

In addition to the Eld's Deer, this natural habitat includes many other endangered species, such as the silvered leaf monkey and the Asian elephant.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry with funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and in partnership with UNDP, is implementing the *SAFE Ecosystems Project* to protect the forest and conserve biodiversity and wildlife.

One of the main project activities completed earlier in this Visit Laos 2018 Year, was the opening of the Ong Mang Eco-centre and Visitor Lodge in the dry dipterocarp forest. In this

eco-centre local villagers work with the provincial and district authorities to ensure that the forest ecosystem is treated with the care it deserves.

“Through the SAFE Ecosystems Project, the Eld’s Deer has become the symbol of the conservation of the dry dipterocarp forest in Savannakhet Province. We hope these statues continue to raise awareness for the conservation of the critically endangered Eld’s Deer as well as the dry dipterocarp forest among the people of Savannakhet and the Lao PDR for many years to come,” said UNDP Deputy Resident Representative in the Lao PDR, Mr. Balasubramaniam Murali in his opening remarks at the hand-over ceremony.

In his address, the Deputy Governor of Savannakhet Thonekeo Phouthakayalath said: “The Eld’s Deer are not just an endangered species, but animals of luck for the Lao people.

Through this important project, we want to increase the number of them so that some of them can move to areas outside the dry dipterocarp forest as well.”

Local people who had come to see the unveiling seemed happy about the newest addition to their city. “Eld’s Deer live only in Laos and Cambodia, and we need to protect our forests to save them for the future generations,” said Mrs. Vathsana Ekalatd, an onlooker.

Another guest at the ceremony, Mrs. Malilamone Thanthathep wants Lao people to remember how important it is to live in harmony with nature: “I believe the protection of our forests is extremely important, because we all depend on them for our survival - from the air we breathe to the food we eat. Forests are a home for Lao people. To protect forests means to protect ourselves.”

This sentiment is also reflected in the government’s efforts to increase the forest cover of the Lao PDR to 70% by 2020, which the SAFE Ecosystems Project contributes to.

Preserving the dry dipterocarp forest is not only crucial for the conservation of the wildlife that live in it, but also to combat climate change and to build the area’s resilience to climate-related disasters, such as floods and droughts.

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