

Authorities Block Students From Holding Mangrove Forest Event

BY [BEN SOKHEAN](#) | MAY 15, 2017

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About 250 students and activists traveling from Phnom Penh to Koh Kong province to hold a “Mangrove Festival” to raise awareness of disappearing forests found themselves on the wrong side of local authorities.

Led by the environmental NGO Mother Nature, the 125 university students made the 272 km journey with prior written permission from acting provincial governor Say Socheat for a three-day trip to Koh Sralao island in Koh Kong district. But they were only allowed as tourists, with the provincial government warning them to “avoid any activity including political acts or attacks with words, pictures and leaflets against individuals, institutions and royal government.”

When the group arrived in Koh Kapi commune on Saturday afternoon, police and the local commune chief stopped them from erecting their tent at a school, according to Mot Kimry, a Mother Nature activist who organized the event. They were forced to stay the night at a church on Koh Sralao.

Police also barred them from holding an event at a nearby pagoda to highlight the plight of aquatic forests, which are threatened by clearing, sand dredging, and overfishing, he said.

Commune chief Khut Vanna, however, said that the pagoda had already been booked by the CPP, adding that the party needed several days to set up.

The group had breached the conditions of their stay, he said.

“You got permission to do your event on May 12, but you brought material to install the tent before informing me first,” Mr. Vanna said on Sunday. “Please don’t expect that because the provincial governor’s letter allows you to be here, you can do whatever you want.”

Mr. Kimry insisted that the authorities were overreacting to a harmless educational trip.

The group was allowed to boat out to the island on Sunday, he said, though they were forbidden from politicizing the event.

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