

# Haunted Headwaters: Ecotourism, Animism, and the Blurry Line Between Science and Spirits

Gregory McCann<sup>1</sup>, Yi-Chung Hsu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of English Language Center, Chang Gung University, Taoyuan, Taiwan

<sup>2</sup>Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Leisure Studies, National Dong Hwa University, Hualien, Taiwan

**Abstract.** The highlanders of Ratanakiri, Cambodia believe that certain mountains cannot be hunted or logged because they are the abode of powerful spirits. They are convinced that mountain spirits will exact revenge on them in the form of serious injury or illness if they do not follow the animist behavioral etiquette regarding these sacred peaks. It may seem easy to dismiss these convictions as ancient superstitions, and many scientists do because biological explanations can explain the illnesses suffered in these remote locales: deep forests are home to more disease-carrying ticks, malaria-carrying mosquitoes, poisonous snakes, and dangerous microbes, parasites, and animals. However, scientific explanations do not disprove the animist beliefs; the illness are still happening, but for different reasons. In this sense, science proves the animist superstitions to be correct. We explore the blurry line between fact and fiction in the disappearing animist world of spirits, jungles, and highlander traditions in Ratanakiri, and also at how to maintain these ancient belief systems by teaching them to village youth and sharing them with ecotourists. A new type of ecotourism—what we call “Animistic Ecotourism”—might be the last chance to save what remains of highlander Animism.

## 1 Introduction

The majority of highlander people in Cambodia’s Ratanakiri province are Animists, meaning they believe that almost everything around them from trees to rocks to animals contains a spirit [1]. Taking a closer look, we know that the various tribal people of this region deem certain places such as “spirit mountains” to be off-limits to hunting and logging, with a stiff price to pay for those who bring guns and chainsaws to these places. Do the Animists and their “magic men” (shamans) of Ratanakiri know something outsiders don’t? After all, trips to sacred places such as the Haling-Halang massif and Mera Mountain seem more likely to result in serious injury, accident, or illness than visits to other places. Or could it be that Western scientists and Cambodian shamans are actually on the same page in evaluating the risk of going to these places? That is, are scientists and “magic men” saying in one way or another virtually the same thing? This paper will explore the surprising congruence and of modern biological science and ancient Animist beliefs, looking at exactly how these two disparate fields intersect, and it will also suggest a way in which Animistic Ecotourism (AE) can contribute to the preservation of Animist culture.



**Figure 1.** Map showing the position of VNP with a Park ranger pointing to the position of the sacred Haling-Halang Mountains

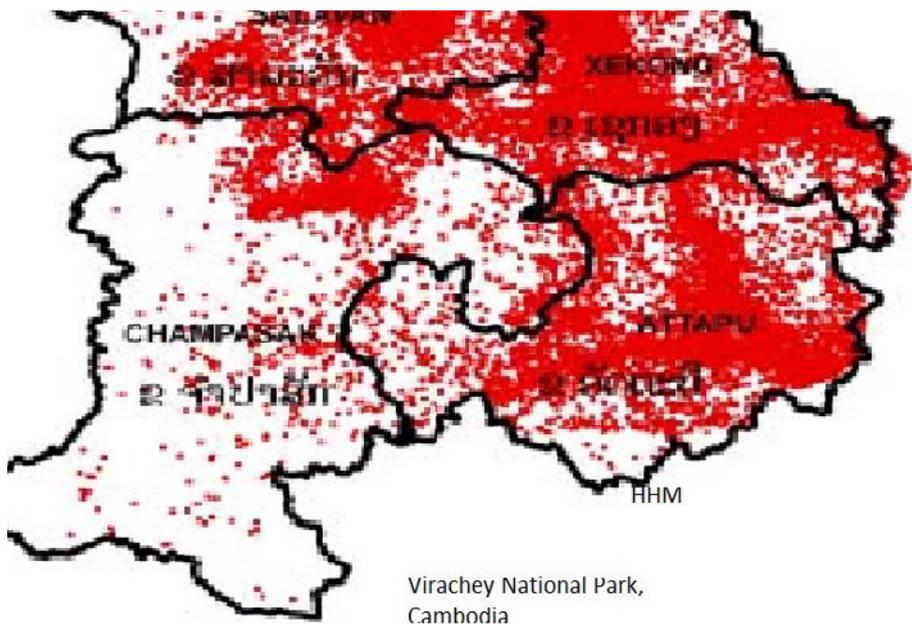
I have spent the past five winter breaks doing ethnographic research, ecotourism treks, and setting up motion-triggered camera-traps to survey wildlife in Virachey National Park (VNP), a 3,325 sq. kilometer wilderness that spans Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces in Cambodia, Laos to the north, and Vietnam to the east. The buffer zone of the park is inhabited by several different highlander tribes, with the vast majority of this particular populace being Animist [2]. My doctoral research involved trekking to spirit mountains in VNP in the company of highlander Animists who taught me about the spiritual significance of places such as Mera Mountain, Krang Mountain, and the Haling-Halang Mountains. In addition to being associated with intriguing legends and stories, I learned that the spirit mountains are places that are dangerous to visit because of the risk of angering the local deities who reside there. These stories might sound like colorful taboos and folklore retold for the benefit of a PhD student in need of information. However, a closer examination of these sites and the dangers connected with them reveals a strong connection between biological fact and Animist taboo, a connection which offers some heft to what might otherwise be dismissed as superstition.

My thesis is that science can clearly explain the illnesses, injuries, and—to an extent—the misfortunes suffered by intrepid travelers to these remote jungle locales: deep forests are home to more disease-carrying ticks, malaria-carrying mosquitoes, poisonous snakes, deadly hornets, and other dangerous microbes, parasites, and other animals. However, scientific explanations for illnesses incurred on excursions to sacred places do not disprove the animist beliefs; the illnesses and injuries are still happening, but for different perceived reasons. In this sense, scientific explanations basically prove the animist superstitions to be correct. When I informed my guides of the biological explanations for getting sick on spirit mountains, they replied that the scientific reasoning was just a technical explanation for something caused by the spirits. Sure, they said, something had to be happening in our bodies, but why are there so many malarial mosquitoes and disease-carrying ticks on

those mountains? Why are there more poisonous snakes and giant hornets? Why are there more dangerous animals such as bears and tigers? To protect the spirits, of course! In a nutshell, both biologists and Animists understand that there are greater risks in venturing to these rain forest locations; they differ only in the details. Overall, the consensus among my highlander informants was that the modern explanations proved the power and the reality of the spirit mountains to be true beyond a shadow of doubt. After all, they reminded me, wild animals and insects make the spirits stronger, making a journey to sacred mountains a very risky affair.

## 2 A Case In Point: The Haling-Halang Mountains

The Haling-Halang mountains are located in the most remote section of Cambodia right on the Lao border; they form a massif that reaches over 1,400 meters in height and they are revered by the Brao and Kavet people as a sacred place [2-3]. My Brao informants told me that Haling-Halang is the “big God” of the area, and so powerful is it that airplanes cannot fly over and fires cannot burn it. They point out that during the Vietnam War many areas along the Cambodia-Lao border were bombed by the US and became raging fires, but Haling-Halang remained untouched. Interestingly, a review of a detailed UXO (unexploded ordnance) map of the area shows that Haling-Halang was never hit by US aerial bombardment (see Figure 2 below). Furthermore, my informants told me that while a sacrificial offering of a pig or chickens is sufficient when asking for favors of Krang and Mera mountains, a human sacrifice is required of Haling-Halang, and this is another reason they rarely venture there. Highlanders are convinced that the spirits of Haling-Halang will either kill them outright at the mountain if they hunt or log there or even go there without seeking the spiritual mediation of a “magic man” first, or, at the very least, the spirits will follow them back to their village and wreak havoc among their family and neighbors.



**Figure 2.** A UXO contamination map; the red dots indicate where US bombs fell during the war. Haling-Halang (HMM), which extends to the north into Laos, was never hit. Nearly all of the high mountains that form the natural border between Cambodia and Laos are considered spirit mountains, and few, if any, were hit during the bombardment.

There is, of course, another explanation for the lack of UXO contamination and subsequent fires on Haling-Halang: the Ho Chi Minh Trail—a network of secretive jungle paths in Laos and Cambodia that North Vietnamese combatants used to infiltrate Southern Vietnam—snaked through the eastern and western sections of what is today VNP, but avoided the highest mountain area (Haling-Halang) because the terrain was probably considered to be too steep and rugged. US military intelligence sources may have learned the approximate locations of the actual Ho Chi Minh Trail, and bombed and defoliated those areas accordingly, hence leaving Haling-Halang unscathed. To Animists from Ratanakiri, Cambodia, the lack of bombing, defoliation, and fires on the spirit mountain was clear proof of its power as a sacred place that was impervious to even the most advanced weaponry and military technology.

I have shown that there appears to be a correlation between the highlander belief that Haling-Halang cannot be flown over or burned with fire and how it appears that US bombers really didn't touch it, but what about the spirits killing trespassers outright or following them back to their villages and causing problems there? Forest cover maps show that the area around Haling-Halang (on both sides of the border) contains the highest degree of primary forest cover in the region, which would indicate the least amount of human disturbance and in turn point towards a higher amount of biodiversity and wildlife concentrations. This would also imply a greater number of poisonous snakes, of malarial mosquitoes, and disease-carrying ticks—all potentially fatal factors all too easily encountered in the jungle, and especially in primary forest. Moreover, if any tigers remain in the park this is where they would be, and tigers are greatly feared among villagers. In addition, our camera-trap surveys reveal a high density of sun bears, a highly aggressive animal that is known to attack unprovoked. Also, large “spirit leeches” that allegedly causes near-interminable bleeding are said to drop from the trees on Haling-Halang, creating another foe to be reckoned with on the mountain. Finally, the high mountains of Indochinese peninsula are home to the Asian giant hornet, an aggressive, venomous, ground-dwelling hornet whose nests can be stumbled upon accidentally. The Asian giant hornet represents perhaps the greatest threat in the mountains as they fly at 25 mph and 10-20 stings will kill a man in what amounts to a horrific and agonizing death (the inject venom which dissolves human flesh). To sum up, there can be no doubt that the deep mountain areas of Cambodia can be a dangerous place for a plethora of reasons, and that is something that both biologists and Animists will readily agree on.

We see then that the risk of illness, injury, or death increases greatly in remote jungle locales—places where the spirit mountains are supposedly found. But what about spirits following “intruders” back to their village homes? Symptoms related to malaria and diseases transmitted through ticks do not show up for days or weeks after infection, so it can appear to the highlanders that the spirits followed them home and punished them after they reached their village. Family and neighbors will often see this as a sign of bad luck and numerous expenditures in the form of animal sacrifices and rice wine jugs will have to be made to placate the angry spirits, creating a situation that can plunge a poor family into debt yet another sign that angry spirits have descended on the village. Again we see that there are valid technical explanations for what happened to the people who went to the spirit mountains, but at the same time the highlanders' belief in spirits punishing them for their transgressions consistently holds true. Writing about the Lahu tribesman of Northern Thailand, John Spies [4] writes, “Their understanding of the spiritual places cautioned them that when people cross the boundaries and tempt fate, they suffer the consequences” (p. 111). Again, both scientists and Animists can agree that there are risks and consequences associated with venturing to spirit mountains.

What is important to understand on the highlander side of this equation is that spirits will only send the hornets, mosquitoes, snakes and other threats to attack if the highlanders are breaking Animist etiquette by hunting or logging on sacred grounds, or if they did not ask permission of the spirits to take certain permissible Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) such as the much sought-after young bamboo shoots of Haling-Halang, or rattan vine or wild fruits. Writing about the Haling-Halang mountains and the Kavet and Brao highlanders or Ratanakiri, Ian G. Baird [2] tells us that the:

*“ Brao-Kavet do not hunt for wildlife on these mountains, and dare not cut down trees. A particular kind of thin bamboo that grows there is, however, especially useful for sucking jar beer. People are allowed to harvest it in small quantities, provided appropriate offerings are made to the powerful mountain spirits prior to cutting. Brao-Kavet identity politics are closely linked to religious practices associated with these mountains, as demonstrated by Brao-Kavet claims that only Brao-Kavet should be spoken there because the spirits do not understand Lao, Khmer, French, English, or other languages, and would be offended if anything but their own tongue was uttered” (1).*

In fact, my Brao informants told me of a young man in Tom Roech Village who went to Haling-Halang to collect the prized bamboo but did not meet with the local “magic man” to obtain permission from the spirits (this usually involves determining what sort of animal should be sacrificed and how much rice wine should be drunk). The story goes that as he was collecting the bamboo a freshly cut piece went straight through his thigh and he nearly died getting back to the village (a 4-day walk). In another case, the bamboo was successfully harvested and brought to Tom Roech Village but exploded when stuck into the rice wine jars in straw form. Biologists might chalk these two instances up to bad luck, but to the highlanders in the VNP buffer zone, they are clear proof of malevolent spirits in their lives doling out punishment for bad behavior on the spirit mountains.

### **3 The Potential for Ecotourism to Help Preserve Animist Heritage**

Surely this will not be the first time that some form of “carefully managed” ecotourism will be held up as the answer for environmental and cultural preservation, but we feel that Animistic Ecotourism (AE) has the potential to be above the grade and to truly make a difference. The point of AE is to have storytelling sessions with “magic men” and village elders written into tourists’ itineraries. Not only do visitors get to hear the old Animistic tales, taboos, and legends about the spirit mountains and spirit places, but based on my five years of ecotourism experience in Ratanakiri, the young people of the village like to hear them as well. This is especially important because, again based on our experience, it is only a handful of village elders who know these stories, and if the stories are not being aired for ecotourists they probably will not be told at all. Storytelling sessions are, therefore, a prime opportunity for highlander youths and even middle aged villagers to be exposed to their rich Animistic vernacular heritage. We feel that it is in this way—by ecotourists giving local people the chance to hear the old animist stories and legends during storytelling sessions—that a new form of ecotourism (AE) can really make a difference in preserving a fast-disappearing oral culture.

Ban Lung, provincial capital of Ratanakiri province, is one of the fastest growing cities in Cambodia (Ironsides 99), and much of the province (and Cambodia as a whole) is undergoing a maelstrom of change in the form of economic development; in Ratanakiri this often takes the form of massive agricultural plantations that require tens of thousands of hectares of forests to be cleared and entire villages to be relocated; mining concessions and hydroelectric dams are other invasive and extractive projects and little if any thought seems to go into the fate of the highlander people in Cambodia, which is one of the poorest and most corrupt countries in the world. Things are changing very fast in Northeast Cambodia, and many highlander youth today see their Animist heritage as something embarrassing or as representing a backwards and outdated culture from the Stone Age (Bourdier [5], p. 179-180). However, highlanders are curious about foreign visitors, something easily observed by any foreign or at least non-Asian visitor to the area as they take time out to see what we’re up to. One of the ideas behind AE is that if locals can see that foreigners view their Animistic heritage as something fascinating then perhaps they will be interested in learning more about it too.

Writing about the loss of indigenous knowledge and the resulting homogenizing global culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, renowned anthropologist Wade Davis [6] writes:

*“What ultimately we will discover on this journey will be our mission for the next century. There is a fire burning over the earth, taking with it plants and animals, ancient skills and*

*visionary wisdom. At risk is a vast archive of knowledge and expertise, a catalogue of the imagination, an oral and written language composed of the memories of countless elders and healers. . . .Quelling this flame, this spreading inferno, and rediscovering a new appreciation for the diversity of the human spirit as expressed by culture, is among the central challenges of our times” (34).*

By placing oral tales, ancient wisdom, and sacred places at the forefront of AE, we feel that this form of ecotourism can make a contribution to preserving a unique form of cultural heritage during a time of breakneck development that is engulfing highlander culture in Ratanakiri. According to Ironside [7], ecotourism is of often “touted as a key part of Ratanakiri’s development future,” although this rarely turns out to benefit the highlanders themselves (p. 97). Unfortunately, the failure of the “benefits” of tourism to trickle down to local people is all too often the case in Cambodia [8]. AE is a new and novel form of ecotourism that makes highlander beliefs and traditions the very reason to travel to Ratanakiri and VNP.

AE is, furthermore, an activity that provides a deeper experience for visitors, something far beyond taking photographs of native people in traditional costumes. I am deeply involved in promoting VNP treks, and the ecotourists I have corresponded with state that their experiences were greatly enriched when their guides took the time to tell them about the spirit mountains and various Animist paraphernalia (such as sacrificial alters and charms to ward off bad spirits) in the villages [9]. On the contrary, those who missed out on learning these things expressed profound disappointment. As VNP park staff are now aware of the importance of having their guides tell trekkers about the stories, and with storytelling sessions soon to be formally written into trekking itineraries, the potential for an exciting and fulfilling new form of ecotourism is very high in Ratanakiri. During a camping trip author Barry Lopez [10] listened to Native Alaskans tell stories about wildlife encounters, and he afterward remarked that, “The stories had renewed in me a sense of purpose in life,” and that “The landscape seemed alive because of the stories” (p. 63). We hope that AE can achieve similar effects for both ecotourists and the highlanders who come around the campfire to listen to the stories.

## 4 Conclusion

Science and animism converge in ways that are worth investigating when it comes to the risks involved in venturing to spirit mountains located in far-off jungle locations in Cambodia; the same could no doubt be said for many other tropical countries in the world where animistic beliefs persist. Additional and more in-depth studies of this relationship are likely to be fruitful. We hope that traditional indigenous knowledge of spirit places can be respected and find a place somewhere beside science rather than be viewed a form of primitive superstition to be laughed at. Finally, AE offers great potential in helping to keep the stories and legends surrounding spirit mountains such as Haling-Halang from disappearing from highlander culture in a rapidly changing part of Cambodia—and cultural extinction appears to be a very real possibility in this fascinating yet poorly understood or protected part of the world. AE also holds great possibilities as an exciting new branch of ecotourism, cultural tourism, and even historical tourism. Are the remote headwater areas like Haling-Haling really haunted with malevolent spirits ready to strike down intruders? Biologists, highlanders, and Animistic ecotourists can all be their own judge of that, and maybe they are all correct.

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