

A Commitment to Community Engagement

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The issue of integrating the local village communities in structuring heritage management is now a very prominent matter. We must see to it that the planning of the Angkor site, which is a living site, does not merely involve preserving monuments, but also considers the communities who live there. This living heritage approach involves the management of man and the environment, the intangible and the spiritual. The preservation of Phnom Bakheng as a living place goes beyond the conservation of its stone and brick structures to take into account the local people who use the site to ensure they can continue to practice their religious traditions and maintain an economic livelihood. This is truly a challenge for those of us who are planning specialists.

New approaches of the APSARA Authority

With the efforts of the Department of Monuments and Archaeology 2, the APSARA Authority is establishing a relationship with Angkor communities and beginning a new concentration on sustainable development. In 1995, the APSARA Authority was established to protect and conserve the World Heritage site of Angkor. The international community contributed to this protection with a two-phase program of work identified with the implementation of the APSARA Authority. The first phase, which began when Angkor was on the World Heritage in Danger List, aimed at fighting the looting of art objects, ensuring overall safety and security, and de-mining the site, for the safety of the local population and the visitors. During this time, the communities were sidelined from decision-making. Since 2004, APSARA has moved into its second phase of work, and the mission has changed. In addition to security and monument safety, the APSARA Authority has expanded its focus to embrace sustainable development, which includes working with the local population.

In response to the challenges of the second phase of the program, the APSARA Authority was restructured to include three new departments: the Department of Demography and Development, the Department of Water and Forestry, and the Department of Monuments and Archaeology 2. The Department of Demography and Development is responsible for economic and agricultural development. Director Tan Bounsuy, a specialist in agriculture, is now conducting research to find a means of using organic fertilizer to help the communities in the park improve their agricultural yield and introduce new crops. The intent is that communities could produce crops to sell to local hotels and thus improve their standard of living. The Department of Water and Forestry, led by Director Hang Peou, looks after

the forest resources and the water network of the region. The goals of this department are to make the sites more enjoyable and also to improve the everyday life of the Angkor region, since any new development cannot be separated from the water network or from the forest. The fact is that the forests and water resources are also inseparable from the monuments in the framework of Angkor.

Initiatives to benefit the local populations of Angkor

The Department of Monuments and Archaeology 2 was formed to improve the relationship with the communities within Angkor and to look after land use and habitats. The main responsibility of this department is land and community management in Zones 1 and 2 within the five protected zones that comprise Angkor Park. One of the first tasks of the second phase was to create a census of residents and villages in the area.

The population of Angkor has changed dramatically in recent years. Currently, there are 112 villages; many communities have existed in Angkor since ancient times and continue to live in the park today. Religious and economic traditions of the villages date from the time of the monuments' construction. To ensure that these populations can continue to live in accordance with their religious practices and customs, it is necessary to solicit the input of locals in making decisions for sustainable development and tourism in this region and to consider their values in plans for managing the social and natural environment.

The local population has benefited very little from the explosive tourism in Siem Reap. From an economic standpoint, 75 percent of money expended by tourists for trips to Angkor is spent outside of Cambodia. Of the remaining 25 percent, only about half reaches the communities directly. Looking ahead, it is important to hire people who live within Angkor so they too can realize the revenues of tourism. For example, the local communities must be able to grow vegetables and fruits that can supply nearby hotels. Knowing how people live enables planners to create means for local people to access the benefits of tourism.

In addition to economic issues, community values about how the park is used must be assessed. We have to go much further in understanding how people live in Angkor, as there are often a wide gaps among the standpoints of conservation technicians, the tourists, and the communities. Places that the community considers important for its uses are usually sacred places. Yet there are often sacred activities that tourists may want to see. A living heritage approach balances these values and provides opportunities for the local people to decide how they wish to continue their traditions, so that they may live their lives amid the new realities of tourism.

Conclusion

Through ongoing research and partnership with international projects, the APSARA Authority aims to care for the communities living within Angkor Park. This year we began a long-term project with the help of the University of Sydney and UNESCO called Living with Heritage. The program will last five years and concentrate on connecting conservation policy with the interaction between cultural heritage, society, and the natural environment. We also have a five-year project with New Zealand on planning management and community development, which will start next year.

Additionally, the World Monuments Fund (WMF) preservation project for Phnom Bakheng, under the auspices of the APSARA Authority, is taking steps to ensure that all who are involved, including the local communities, will benefit. The WMF has become aware of local population issues through their previous experience at the Preah Khan temple conservation project. During their work at Preah Khan, the WMF engaged and involved the surrounding villagers in maintaining the temple and allowed for a continued spiritual life. Now with the Phnom Bakheng project, the WMF has begun its work taking these various aspects of heritage into account: the condition of the monument, the landscape, and the people. Together we must involve the local community in this project in order to maintain the living qualities of this site.