

## TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENT: ANGKOR'S AWAY

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**Abstract.** Angkor is a national icon that is part of the Cambodian sense of identity as well as a spiritual landscape in which Khmer people have lived for generations. Angkor's landscape, monuments and traditional cultural practices are important to contemporary communities and to the future of the Angkor World Heritage Site and the Cambodian nation. Paradoxically, as the effective combined efforts of the Royal Cambodian Government and the international community have seen the Angkor World Heritage Site removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger, awakening of the global community to the wonders of Angkor has given rise to new threats from an ever-increasing wave of visitors and associated development pressures. However, tourism development may also present an opportunity for the site, its people and the national economy. With the support of UNESCO and the Governments of Cambodia and Australia, work has recently commenced on the preparation of an 'Angkor Heritage Management Framework'. The work will build on the considerable achievements of APSARA (the Authority for the Preservation and Safeguarding of Angkor and Surrounding Areas) in this area to date. The Framework recognises that managing heritage at Angkor is in large part about managing tourism – so as to assess risks, conserve tangible and intangible values, enhance visitor experiences and guide development in a way which respects and provides opportunities and benefits for the thousands of Khmer for whom Angkor is a sacred place, a special home and a dramatic symbol of nation.

### Preamble

Angkor is one of those heritage places which immediately invokes awe and wonder in the visitor because of its beauty, its superb artistic achievement and its sense of history reflected in the patina of time. The response of the international community to the danger facing Angkor after the Khmer Rouge period offers ample testimony to its international status and reputation. Because of the obvious outstanding universal values of the monuments of Angkor, and

the danger to them through neglect, looting and lack of care and maintenance, the world community understandably focused first on physical conservation and the restoration of these great treasures.

Part of Angkor's lure was that it was seen by many visitors as romantic ruins in the jungle, the remains of a 'past' civilization as they are described in the World Heritage citation. But there is a growing realisation of

the spiritual and social value of Angkor to the Khmer people. It was never a 'past' civilization to them and practices, beliefs and traditions related to the classic Angkorian period continue to this day. For many Khmer Angkor's chief significance is as a spiritual landscape. Angkor is also a national icon that is part of the Cambodian sense of identity. Angkor's landscape, monuments and traditional cultural practices are important to contemporary communities, to the future of the Angkor World Heritage site and to the Cambodian nation.

Paradoxically, as the effective combined efforts of the Royal Cambodian Government and international community have seen the Angkor World Heritage Site removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger, with world class conservation and restoration work from many willing and highly skilled international missions, the awakening of the global community to the wonders of Angkor has given rise to new threats from an ever-increasing wave of visitors and associated development pressures.

Tourism is a good servant but a dangerous master. Tourism can threaten the values of the site in a number of ways. Mass tourism can lead to physical damage and attrition of fabric, even in the short term. This is especially the case when tourists do not have an understanding or appreciation of the symbolic and spiritual significance of the huge site and behave in inappropriate and damaging ways. Because of the very rapid growth of tourism – more than doubling in the last ten years – there is a real danger of tourism becoming the master.

However, the Cambodian people need the economic advancement that tourism can bring and there is also a deep sense of satisfaction and pride to Cambodians in seeing the way the rest of the world values their heritage. For the 130,000 Khmer who live in the Park

there is a latent but unrealised opportunity to be part of the tourist economy and thereby a real chance to improve their subsistence lifestyle.

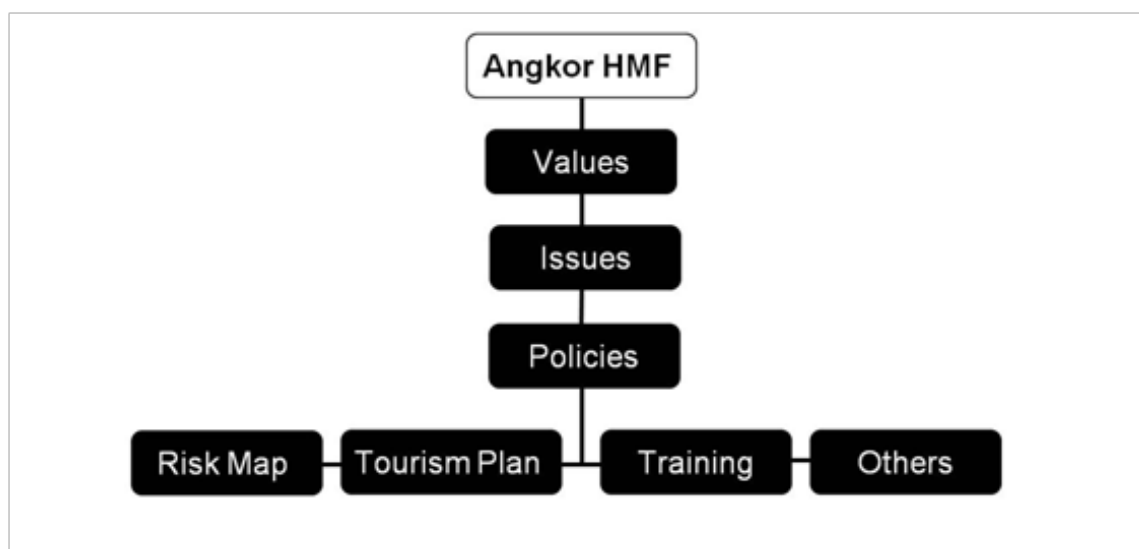
So tourism development – if it is a good servant – may also present an opportunity for the site, the Khmer people and the national economy. The Royal Government of Cambodia and the APSARA National Authority, which has overall responsibility for the Angkor World Heritage Park, have recognised the opportunities but also the dangers and issues that growing tourism brings.

With the support of UNESCO and the Governments of Cambodia and Australia, work has recently commenced on the preparation of an 'Angkor Heritage Management Framework' (HMF), which will build on the considerable achievements of the APSARA National Authority to date. A prime aim of the project is to create alignment with the tourism industry so that tourism activity enhances the site's heritage values rather than threatening them.

The Angkor Heritage Management Framework will adopt a values-based methodology in which the values of the site will be identified and agreed, issues affecting those values will be considered and analysed, then policies and implementation actions, which address the issues and retain the values, will be developed. Elements such as a 'Tourism Management Plan', 'Risk Map' and 'Training' are the tools which will allow implementation of the framework's policies.

### Values

Conservation of the Angkor World Heritage Site requires protection of all of its heritage values. These include the values identified in the World Heritage List citation, but also additional values such as natural attributes, and the role of Angkor in contemporary Khmer society as an important spiritual landscape



and a symbol of nationhood. Managing heritage and tourism at Angkor requires management of an agreed set of values. If tourism at Angkor is to be sustainable it must conserve all of the values of this extraordinary place.

## Issues

In order to conserve the values of the Angkor World Heritage Site, the Heritage Management Framework will need to resolve a diverse range of challenging issues. Examples include impact from tourism and visitation, hydrology and ecology, the needs of the local community, human resources available to the APSARA National Authority, a requirement for better inter-agency coordination and the identification and management of risk. The remainder of this paper deals principally with one pressing matter – that of tourism. Many interrelated and sometimes conflicting issues influence conservation and tourism at Angkor. Some of the major issues include:

### 1. VISITOR CONGESTION

Visitor congestion and visitor flows within temples are central issues at Angkor. Tourist numbers to Angkor have been rapidly increasing since the late 1990s. This increase in tourism at Angkor has caused rapid growth in the tourism industry in Cambodia but has also given rise to concerning levels of congestion at the principal monuments within the Angkor World Heritage Park.

### 2. DISTRIBUTION OF VISITORS IN SPACE AND TIME

At Angkor there is unequal distribution of visitors across the site in space and time. A small number of monuments are subject to high visitation, but these structures have a limited carrying capacity. Some monuments are threatened by an intense influx of visitors within a small time period, such as sunset.

### 3. SITE INTERPRETATION – PRESENTATION OF HERITAGE VALUES

Across the Angkor site there is limited and inconsistent interpretation, which results in a lack of awareness and understanding of heritage values. A critical objective of site interpretation at Angkor should be to expose visitors to the range of environmental, hydrological and socio-cultural values, rather than limiting the experience of visitors to archaeological, aesthetic, architectural or artistic values.

### 4. SITE IMPACTS

Site impacts include structural impacts to the monuments and environmental degradation. Traffic congestion, littering and inappropriate parking adversely affect the environment. Physical impacts

to the landscape and monuments of Angkor are prominent and easily identified, including damage and graffiti to temples, general wearing of monuments and degraded pathways in frequently visited areas.

### 5. VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND BEHAVIOUR

Visitor experience is shaped by tourism industry market factors. The messages and behaviour of guides and operators influence how visitors think, feel and behave and can thereby cause or avoid site impacts. Different market sectors have different expectations and requirements, which may cause conflict. Some sectors prefer visiting in large social groups while other sectors seek a quiet experience.

### 6. VISITOR SAFETY

The safety and security of visitors at the Angkor site must be ensured. Dangers include unstable masonry, precipices, water, animals, poisonous or allergenic plants, thieves, touts and other visitors.

### 7. SHARING THE ECONOMIC AND OTHER BENEFITS OF TOURISM

There is limited distribution of benefits of tourism to the local community. Local people do not share the prosperity brought by increasing tourism, nor are they afforded many of the economic or other opportunities which arise from visitation to places which are in the Angkor Park. Local communities at Angkor lack the skills to engage with the tourism industry in a sophisticated manner.

Matters identified as 'issues' may also be 'opportunities'. There are many ways in which visitor engagement with other values at Angkor can create new opportunities. These opportunities might arise from participation in cultural events, observation of Khmer ritual or ceremonies, visits to villages, interpretation and presentation of Angkor's extraordinary hydrology and water management, or other aspects of the natural environment. The APSARA National Authority has already commenced a number of initiatives in these areas.

## Policies

The Heritage Management Framework will establish a set of overarching policies that should assist the APSARA National Authority with the conservation and management of Angkor through a process of good decision-making.

This in turn will facilitate obtaining assistance and co-operation from other agencies and stakeholders. Policies will be broad-ranging and will cover matters

such as conservation principles for natural and cultural heritage, visitor management, (through new visitor circuits, improved visitor flow and parking arrangements), commercial activities, the presentation of the site and carrying capacity. Carrying capacity is of course a major consideration as the Angkor World Heritage Site is already challenged by the burgeoning number of tourists; however there are opportunities to address tourism impacts by encouraging different tourist behaviour and offering different tourist experiences.

### The Risk Map

Following a resolution by the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor and requests from the APSARA National Authority and UNESCO, the Heritage Management Framework will include the preparation of an initial Risk Map which will provide the structure for mapping and management of three different types of risk:

- structural risk;
- environmental risks; and
- socio-cultural risk.

The Risk Map is potentially a very powerful tool for managing the place, including tourism-based development. The Risk Map will use available information and expertise. The focus during the HMF project will be on establishment of the overall structure, including presentation of the Risk Map in both electronic and hard copy format, so as to assist with management of the Angkor World Heritage site. In this way, the overall framework will be established

and some information will be incorporated, so that the APSARA National Authority can continue to add data and manage the Risk Map as a useful tool.

### Tourism Management Plan

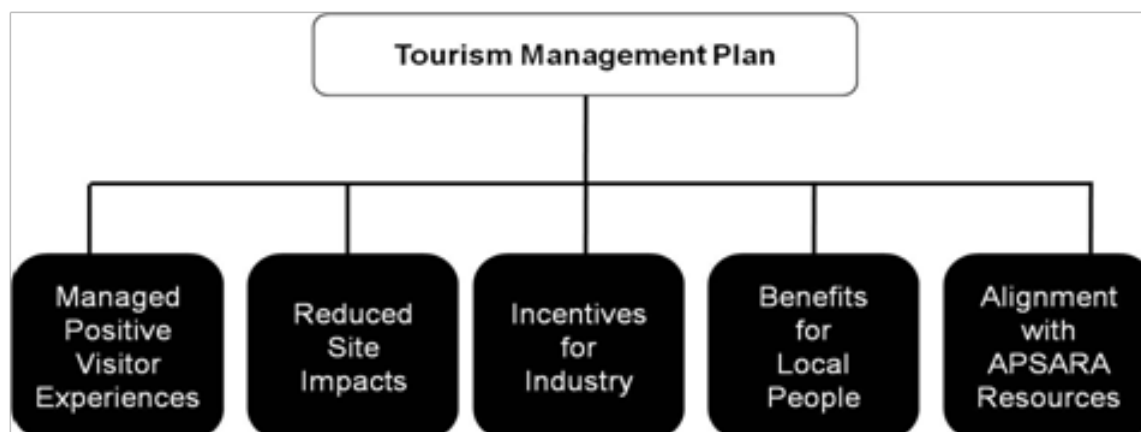
The Tourism Management Plan will provide the basis for management and coordination of the rapidly growing tourism industry at Angkor through five key initiatives:

- improving visitor experiences;
- removing or minimising visitor impacts;
- assisting the tourism industry;
- providing benefits to local people; and
- effectively deploying APSARA resources.

The Tourism Management Plan is thereby structured according to five over-arching policy initiatives:

The Tourism Management Plan will aim to establish a range of visitor opportunities which maximise the quality of experience for every visitor, recognising that different visitors have different expectations and requirements. In particular, the identification of additional attractions, activities and routes will offer a wider spectrum of visitor opportunities and the ability to enjoy other aspects of Angkor's natural and cultural heritage.

The Tourism Management Plan will aim to remove, prevent or minimise impacts from tourism through visitor education, management of visitor flows, enhanced signage and interpretation, thereby changing the behaviour and perceptions of visitors.



The Tourism Management Plan will involve engagement with participants across all sectors of the tourism industry, so as to create incentives for operators to change existing systems and products in ways which improve experiences, reduce site impacts and benefit local people.

The Tourism Management Plan will aim to foster greater participation in tourism operations by local communities, so as to provide direct economic benefits and alleviate rural poverty. Consultative processes will promote greater recognition, acceptance and celebration of local cultural beliefs, practices and traditions, thereby enriching both local people and visitors.

The Tourism Management Plan will recognise and respond to the practical realities of the resources that are available to the APSARA National Authority.

Some excellent work in this area has already been completed by the APSARA National Authority in analysing visitor information and considering visitor circuits and other potential tools for visitor management.

An important principle of the Tourism Management Plan is that visitor experiences can be improved and impacts can be minimised through a demand-led process which identifies and develops new opportunities for visitors, thereby altering visitor behaviour and spreading the load around the Angkor World Heritage Site, through changed visitor behaviour, rather than through regulation alone.

If this overall strategy to change visitor behaviour is to be successful, it is imperative that it be supported not only by the International Co-ordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor, the Royal Government and UNESCO, but particularly by the tourism industry, which must receive benefits itself. The project methodology therefore includes a range of techniques for meaningful engagement with participants at all levels of the tourism industry. In this regard, a critical success factor is the strong support which is being provided by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Tourism and the Director General of the APSARA National Authority. In early 2012 there will be a major interactive "Tourism Industry Workshop", which will be an essential cornerstone for the development of the Tourism Management Plan. At this workshop, the perspectives, interests and drivers of the tourism industry can be clearly articulated, so that these may be accommodated within the Tourism Management Plan itself.

If there is to be beneficial change in tourist behaviour at Angkor, consultation and interaction must occur with the tourism industry at every stage of the process. This interaction can occur in many ways.

It includes observation and informal discussions on site, review of tourism industry literature, structured formal meetings and one-on-one interviews with tourism operators. The consultation process to date reveals that industry participants are eager to receive more information and to have their opinions heard.

Consultation and communication to the point of understanding the key objectives and program drivers of the tourist operators themselves is crucial – so that the type of "new opportunities" which may cause a change in tourist behaviour can be identified. There are many case studies at Angkor which illustrate why this is necessary.

For example, the crowded sunset experience at Phnom Bakheng is highly problematic. Phnom Bakheng is a highly significant temple, close to the entrance to the Angkor World Heritage Park. The temple mount is at the top of a steep hill and is relatively small, but most evenings there are hundreds and sometimes thousands of visitors watching as the sun sets in the opposite direction from Angkor Wat. In the post-sunset twilight, surging visitors often prove dangerous for both people and monuments. Consultation with industry operators reveals that one reason that Phnom Bakheng is so popular is not necessarily the quality of the monument itself nor the panoramic sunset view, but its proximity to the park exit – which enables all the operators to take advantage of late-afternoon free entry and some operators to take their visitors to an additional gift shop on the way home – and then to make the early dinner sitting at the hotel. Therefore, for this market segment, any alternative sunset experience must also deliver the free park entry, the opportunity for the gift shop visit and an early dinner; otherwise operators won't change their habits. Of course the heritage value of the temple and the quality of the sunset are relevant, but the driving factors are micro-economic: free entry, gift shop rebates and restaurant discounts. Once such 'driving factors' are understood, it is much easier to develop new policies, products, visitor circuits and techniques so as to improve visitor experience and minimise impacts.

The Tourism Management Plan will seek to deliver two other important benefits. Firstly, it must lead to improvements for local people. This aspect of the project is a requirement of the Australian Government, as a funding body for the Heritage Management Framework project. One of the paradoxes at the Angkor World Heritage Site is that it makes such a substantial economic contribution as a tourism attraction, yet the tourist income is generally not delivered to the people who live there. The Tourism Management Plan will identify opportunities for sharing Angkor's richness with the local people, while at the same time fostering



and encouraging their local customs and traditional practices.

Finally, the Tourism Plan must also be realistic. Cambodia is not a wealthy nation and there are limitations on available resources. However, there is enthusiasm and goodwill, as well as significant opportunities for inter-agency synergy, through improved coordination and cooperation at each temple. The focus of the implementation phase of the Tourism Management plan will therefore be strongly on achieving what is possible, rather than what is theoretically ideal.

### Training and Capacity Building

Another fundamental component of the Heritage Management Framework is the training which will be provided to emerging young professionals who will participate in the work required to develop the Risk Map and Tourism Management Plan.

The training, which is now in progress, is tailored for Angkor and the APSARA National Authority and will lead to the establishment of a 'Technical Committee' of six promising graduate staff members from the APSARA National Authority. The training will introduce these personnel to principles and methodologies for heritage and tourism management. The training process will involve a hand-on approach, including site visits, interactive workshops and homework assignments. There will be a strong focus on site management and skills needed to implement the Heritage Management Framework. The important point of this training is that the project has an inbuilt mechanism for ongoing implementation through skills acquisition and experiential learning.

### Pilot Projects

The Heritage Management Framework includes a series of pilot projects which will demonstrate how the policies and principles of the Tourism Management Plan will work in practice. The pilot projects will also develop, test and fine-tune the new management approaches, while assisting the APSARA National Authority in implementing innovative projects and providing immediate benefits the local community and visitors.

At this stage, three pilot projects have been chosen. The first pilot project at the Beng Mealea temple will examine the "temple in the jungle" experience. At Beng Mealea there is a rare opportunity to experience an entire ensemble of temples and associated features along the ancient 'Royal Road'.

The second pilot project will focus on the North Baray, (a large rectangular lake built in the Angkorean period, which has recently been refilled), and the nearby temples of Preah Khan and Neak Pean. This

project will assist with local community engagement and new visitor experiences, by building on substantial work already completed by the Department of Water Management and Department of Land Planning and Habitat Management. In this pilot project, the focus will be on creating and placing a new "tourism product" within the market, so as to build a spectrum of visitor opportunities, thereby disbursing crowds, reducing impacts, increasing financial yield per person and channelling income directly towards local people.

The third pilot project will focus on the sunset experience within Angkor World Heritage Park. As well as contributing to a solution for this challenging problem, this pilot project will seek to demonstrate how visitor behaviour may be altered through supply of new attractions which meet the needs of tourism industry operators.

### Conclusion

Angkor is no longer on the List of World Heritage in Danger, but does remain at risk from its own ever-increasing popularity as a tourist destination. Conserving heritage at Angkor means managing tourism sustainably – so as to assess risks, conserve tangible and intangible values, enhance visitor experiences and guide new development. Tourism at Angkor must also be managed in a way which will respect and provides opportunities and benefits for the thousands of Khmer for whom Angkor is a sacred place, a special home and a dramatic symbol of nation.

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