

LIVING WITH HERITAGE AT ANGKOR

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Abstract. The World-Heritage citation for Angkor celebrates its artistic and technical achievement as testament to a "past" civilization; yet contemporary Cambodians see Angkor as a continuing, integral part of their culture.

Recent work by the Cambodian APSARA Authority, Sydney University and other partners recognises Angkor as home to hundreds of thousands of Khmer, who through cultural and religious practices, are part of the spirit of the place.

The Living With Heritage project is using a consultative, participatory approach to identify heritage values and the threats to them in the Angkor region. The traditional role of the 'expert' has thereby evolved to include stakeholder consultation and facilitation.

Through close collaboration with key stakeholders and an inclusive participatory approach, the Living With Heritage project is endeavouring to build capacity for Cambodian heritage managers to address the inter-related nature of tangible and intangible values of the Angkor cultural landscape through values-based management.

1. Context

The great Khmer city of Angkor in Cambodia has breathtaking artistic, design and planning values, and is justifiably described in the World Heritage List citation using terms such as “unique artistic realisation” and “chef d’oeuvre of the human mind”. The citation also indicates that Angkor gives unique testimony on a past civilisation. (UNESCO 2008).

By stark contrast, contemporary Cambodians see a prime value of Angkor as a continuing symbol of Khmer culture; their beliefs, cultural practices and traditions are therefore an integral part of the ongoing spirit of the place.

2. The Challenge of Multiple Values

For 200 years the focus at Angkor has been on research, including archaeology and documentation, restoration and physical conservation of spectacular temple monuments. (Ang et al 1998). The outstanding aesthetic values of these monuments certainly appear to be behind the 1992 World Heritage listing. The ongoing traditional and religious connections between the local population and remains of Khmer civilization, however, do not form part of the reasons for World Heritage listing. These connections have been all but ignored. In the popular imagination they are subservient to images, recently reinforced by blockbuster movies, of mysterious jungle-covered ruins of unknown origin. Until recently, the local people at Angkor have been excluded from management decisions, have laboured as workmen under the direction of foreign “experts” and their longstanding rights to farm and utilise the area for religious practice have been increasingly restricted in the interests of conservation of World Heritage values and the perceived amenity of tourists who are arriving in dramatically increasing numbers (Miura 2004, Winter 2007).

A major challenge for heritage management at Angkor is to provide an appropriate response to all of the heritage values of this place — world, national and local values, including significant attributes that may not yet be formally recognised — even when these may be in conflict with other management objectives. A values-based approach, founded on active involvement of interested people, offers a framework for the establishment of effective management and

monitoring regimes. Values-based planning is increasingly becoming a benchmark of best practice heritage management for cultural places (Australia ICOMOS 1999, de la Torres 2005).

Since the western world "discovered" Angkor in the eighteenth century, it has been at once fascinated by its romance and beauty and confused about its real nature and extent (Chandler 1996). What has been interpreted in the past as a "site" or the "remains of a lost civilization" is now understood as a complex and different place: not just one site, but a great many interrelated sites, together comprising a layered cultural landscape of World Heritage significance; not the ruins of a former society, but the hub of a still thriving culture and religion.

3. The Greater Angkor Project

Research work by the University of Sydney, the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient and APSARA (the Cambodian "Authority for the Preservation and Safeguarding of Angkor and Surrounding Areas") in a collaboration generally known as the "Greater Angkor Project" (or "GAP"), has been contributing to the reappraisal of Angkor through archaeological survey, excavation and related techniques, generating a vast body of data that is being synthesised and analysed through advanced Geographical Information System ("GIS") programs. It is now known that the current archaeological park at Angkor was the cultural centre of a massive low density metropolis extending over more than 1,000 square kilometres — the largest known city in the pre-industrial world; herein referred to as "the great city of Angkor" (Evans et al 2007, Fletcher et al 2003, Pottier 1999).

4. Community Impacts

Ironically, the exciting results of the GAP project also highlight the potential for direct conflict between the protection of a thousand square kilometres of archaeological site and the ongoing life and livelihood of the people living there. The impacts on local communities occur in three broad areas:

Firstly, the population of approximately 100,000 Khmer who live within the Angkor Heritage Park need to manage their day-to-day activities so as not to cause physical damage to significant features, including the extensive archaeology beneath their homes and fields.

The use of mechanised equipment for agricultural purposes, for example, may be problematic in areas with underlying earthen archaeological features from the Angkorian period, yet such advances are worthy initiatives in such a poor nation whose people rely on local farming for their very subsistence.

Secondly, in an attempt to preserve, present and display traditional Khmer culture, local communities are experiencing some enforced restrictions on their traditional cultural practices and lifeways in the name of tourism. Some of these, such as obligations to build village houses using traditional techniques (rather than embracing modern materials and technologies), have the effect of retarding moves towards what developed nations see as ‘modern living’.

Thirdly, the sheer numbers of visitors and their often uncontrolled visitation patterns can inadvertently prevent, displace or modify ceremonies and social activities that would otherwise form part of important ongoing traditions — traditions which are all the more important in the context of the peoples’ recovery from decades of war and the Khmer Rouge regime. The affected practices range from important rites of passage rituals — such as the cutting of adolescent top knots, to the day-to-day lifeways — such as Khmer family picnics on the grass beside the moat at Angkor Wat (Ang et al 2007, Sokrithy 2007).

5. Living With Heritage

Some of the GAP researchers have stepped outside their traditional archaeology-focused role and responded to these emerging issues with a new project, known as “Living With Heritage” which is being run under the auspices of APSARA (University of Sydney 2008). Living With Heritage has a multi-national and multi-disciplinary project team funded by the Australian Research Council and involves cross-sector collaboration between the academic, government and private sectors.

The overall aims of the APSARA Living With Heritage project are to adopt spatial analysis and mapping approaches along with other sources of information to identify:

- key elements of cultural significance of the great city of Angkor;
- issues and threats which will affect their conservation; and

- policies and tools, including specific databases, required to ensure the ongoing conservation of the identified heritage values.

This process can potentially facilitate effective ongoing management of all the heritage values of Angkor, thereby maximising its value to the entire Cambodian community. While it is not the intention of the Living With Heritage project to prepare a new World Heritage nomination, the identification of these new values of universal significance and the increasing need to manage and protect them makes the re-nomination of Angkor to the World Heritage List (encompassing an enlarged conception of great city of Angkor) a course of action to be seriously considered.

6. Values-based Participatory Planning

APSARA has demonstrated strong commitment to conservation, developing a range of projects which seek to protect Angkor's heritage while considering issues of contemporary sustainability. In its approach to management, APSARA has adopted a framework that includes consideration of social, economic and environmental issues. This approach draws from a broad range of elements which make up the Angkor World Heritage site and the people who live and work in it, including those involved in tourism, trade, traditional culture, urban development, heritage management, landscape change and archaeology (Khun-Neay Khuon 2006).

Living With Heritage relies on and extends this issues-based, consultative approach to the identification of all heritage values and the threats to those values in the Greater Angkor region. This methodology has necessitated a change in the traditional role of the 'expert', who must now give up some of the power inherent in this expertise, no longer prescribing the cultural values of the place in elite isolation, but functioning as a stakeholder, consultant and facilitator to ensure that all the ways in which the place has cultural value to different groups are revealed are taken into account in the way the place is managed (Sullivan 2002).

The project methodology is simple. Using available data and consultation with local people, those places within the Greater Angkor area that may have importance for aesthetic, historical, scientific or social reasons are being identified. Consultation occurs through

discussions with key groups and individuals in facilitated workshops. Particular emphasis is placed on the reasons why the great city of Angkor or individual sites are important to the community or particular stakeholders as well as to researchers. Maps are being produced showing important places and their values.

This process is iterative — commencing with a Steering Committee of senior APSARA and other government and community representatives, then through a Technical Committee, whose members are being trained in heritage management processes (while at the same time contributing information) to the local community and from there back to the Steering Committee. The required tasks are therefore time consuming, challenging across three languages and at times distracted into discussions about other matters of concern to the officials and communities who are involved in the process. However, the results are rewarding and extremely informative for the project team members (who are constantly gathering new information about individual places and their attributes) but also to participants (who are broadening their own views of what constitutes their heritage).

By engaging stakeholders across a full spectrum — from senior government officials to community members — the Living With Heritage methodology extends the concept of holistic values assessment into actual place management, taking many of the concerns expressed by commentators such as Miura (Miura 2004) and providing a mechanism to address them in a management context.

The project is gaining momentum and significant progress has been made. Australian heritage managers and project researchers — functioning as facilitators — are working closely with APSARA and with the community on the identification of all the values of the place and the major threats and issues to these values. These issues relate to archaeological conservation, but also to day-to-day needs of residents, tourism pressures and visitor expectations.

2008 is year four of a five-year program. Future phases will involve further work with the community and local authorities to produce tools that will assist in conserving all of the heritage values of Angkor — those in the World Heritage citation and those of the local people — while beginning to address issues and problems that have been identified through the consultative process. The program also involves development of monitoring tools, including computer-based maps showing places of heritage value and areas under possible threat, as a basis for priority setting and ongoing monitoring programs.

7. Conclusion

In a complex, multi-layered cultural place like Angkor, effective conservation cannot occur in isolation. To conserve the heritage values of the place — either those in the current World Heritage citation or those which may emerge from the project itself — other values must also be acknowledged and managed. An open, respectful collaboration between heritage managers and local stakeholders serves not only to identify all of the values of the place, but also to establish a well-founded sustainable model for their ongoing conservation.

Through close collaboration with APSARA and UNESCO and through application of the values-based principles and processes of the Burra Charter of Australia ICOMOS, the Living With Heritage project is endeavouring to build capacity for Cambodian agencies and managers to recognise all of the values of the cultural landscape of the great city of Angkor and to use GIS as a mechanism for sharing information and values-based management.

There have been many exciting discoveries in the process of moving from the values expressed in the original World Heritage citation to a much wider set of values expressive of Angkor in its contemporary setting. Strong cultural continuity and traditional links are apparent, which demonstrate Angkor to be not only an architectural and engineering masterpiece from the past, but a living cultural and sacred landscape. In turn, formal recognition of these values by all parties should have a profound effect on conservation, management and tourism at Angkor and should strengthen the hand of managers and community in preventing inappropriate development and activities.

The Living With Heritage project recognises that, as well as being a major World Heritage place and burgeoning tourist destination, Angkor is the continuing home to hundreds of thousands of Khmer who not only make an invaluable contribution to the area's sustainable management, but through cultural and religious practices actually enhance the heritage significance of Greater Angkor and are an important part of the spirit of the place.

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