

The People of Angkor: Between Tradition and Development

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At the local level, Angkor is more than an archeological and tourist site; it is also a "living place." Thousands of people live there, tend to their rice fields, and practice religious cults according to their traditions. Remarkably, some of their gestures and practices appear to be very similar to some ancient scenes depicted in the bas-relief of the Bayon temple's south gallery. Until recently, life in the villages of Angkor did not differ much from other villages in Cambodia. Thus, the uniqueness of the villagers is that they are living in a place that since 1992 has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List and also a place that symbolizes Cambodian national identity. Regulations aiming to protect defined archeological zones have been promulgated, and a growing number of tourists choose Angkor as a cultural and leisure destination. These two factors combined have had a profound socioeconomic impact on the daily traditional activities of the people of Angkor.

For several decades, international debates have focused on the conservation of monumental heritage and the development of tourism on World Heritage sites. More recently, the discourse opened to a broader definition of heritage that comprises monumental and intangible heritage, meaning that living traditions should also be considered. UNESCO has introduced the concept of "living heritage site" to Angkor. Even if the concept of living heritage is not clearly defined, it is understood that the traditions of the local population could also be viewed as part of the World Heritage site, implying that the site of Angkor should be approached in a holistic way that would include monuments, environment, and population, and their dynamic evolution through space and time. Until now, little consideration has been given to the traditional knowledge of the local populations such as land, religious or social practices and representations. This knowledge is at present in danger of disappearance.

The modern transformation of the landscape and the socioeconomic life of the local population began decades ago, with the work of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and the beginning of tourism in the early twentieth century. Major changes in the daily life of the people of Angkor are still to come. New elements to be considered include sudden exposure to the outside world after years of war and isolation, rushed development, and the arrival of mass tourism, as well as rapid demographic growth of the local population.

Angkor has become a new place with complex and antagonistic debates among people representing different interests such as the restoration of temples, conservation, the tourism industry, heritage management, and local development, as well as governmental authorities and the local population.

The difficult equation is determining how to combine conservation of monuments, promotion of tourism, preservation of the environment, and development of rural areas while paying attention to traditional social and economic practices in one single place called Angkor.

Until recently, the local population had little voice in or access to the debates. They will, however, face important challenges in the future. First, they will have to adjust traditional ways of exploiting natural resources in accordance with international regulations and they will have to find alternatives to agriculture for new generations. Second, they will have to deal with demographic growth and devise measures for relocating new families outside core areas. Third, they will have to find a balance between preservation of traditions and rushed development based on imported models.

The World Monuments Fund (WMF) and the APSARA Authority have initiated a program of site assessment, planning, mobilization, and interpretation that takes into consideration the local communities living close to Phnom Bakheng.

This paper aims to recognize the linkages between the local communities and the Phnom Bakheng site in the face of global challenges such as development of tourism. It will pay particular attention to the practices and representations of the site by the local population from past to present.

I. The people of Angkor: Historical context

Ancient times

Data on the people of Angkor in ancient times are very limited. Inscriptions¹ give some details about the donations and delimitations of lands and lists of servants, but little is known about the daily life of the local population. The only direct description of Angkor comes from Tcheou Ta-Kuan,² a Chinese diplomat who traveled to Angkor at the end of the thirteenth century. He describes the capital city as populous and wealthy. His depictions cover daily life inside the town walls and in its immediate vicinity, from the royal court and members of various sects to the common people.

In the existing villages of Angkor, some older people today recall stories and legends of the past that lean on the very visible traces of the past construction, such as temples and dikes. These vestiges are used as support for the transmission as well as the creation of stories about a past that is represented as glorious. Concerning Phnom Bakheng, people tell the legend of a leper king who was reluctant to take an herbal bath that would cure him. They locate this story at the base of Phnom Bakheng in a place called the Changran Eysor ("pot of Civa"). They also tell legends of Angkor Wat and Prohm Kel temples. Angkor Thom inspires commentaries on

the great city, the gates, and the layout of canals where sampans were said to circulate.

Then, from the fall of Angkor in the fifteenth century until modern times, amnesia reigns. Aside from the royal chronicles,³ the accounts of a few foreign visitors and explorers,⁴ and fragments of what has been transmitted orally, little is known about local life during this period. According to oral tradition, the city was abandoned after its fall, and many people were deported to Siam. It is recalled that some groups of people were allowed to stay, while others were forced to leave. Later, some of these people are believed to have returned, joined by newcomers.

However, after being the site of intense activities of successive royal capitals, Angkor was not forgotten. Pilgrimage and Buddhist religious activities, including the construction of monasteries and offering of Buddha statues, continued in Angkor. Two monasteries still in use today were reported to have been active in Angkor Wat.

Modern times

Since the end of the nineteenth century, French explorers and researchers have paid special attention to Angkor. The EFEO in Cambodia was created in 1907. At that time, few data had been collected on the local population as researchers were more interested in the architecture, history, and epigraphy of the old temples. The EFEO embarked upon important restoration work, hiring “coolies” for the site restorations. By 1970, the EFEO was employing several hundred workers from the surrounding villages. The older people recall the great personalities of the EFEO, such as the conservators Henri Marchal and Bernard-Philippe Groslier.

In their journals and records, the explorers and researchers describe scattered villages of poor rice farmers with strong religious beliefs and active practices. These villagers survived on rice farming and fishing, and also on resin tapping and sugar-palm and bat-guano collection activities. Some researchers noted that the gestures of the local population resembled those depicted in scenes of the bas-reliefs, but, surprisingly, few took a significant interest in the local traditions.⁵

Thus, the French explorers and researchers drew some old maps and located villages, some of which still exist today. During their explorations of Indochina from 1866 to 1868, the French explorers Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier came to Angkor and noted a few villages: Preadac, Siem Reap, Phok, as well as one village located inside Angkor Thom. In 1909, Lieutenant Buat, a geodesist, and Lieutenant Ducret, a topographer, established a more precise map of Angkor where one can identify the villages of Pradak, Rohal, Ampil, Tropeang Seh, Angkor Thom (Angkor Krau), Bakheng, Ta Chan, Kvien, Svay Romiet, and Bantey Chheu.

The beginning of tourism

Over the last hundred years, a new concept has emerged in Angkor: tourism. In 1907, 200 tourists, probably colonials from Phnom Penh or Saigon, were counted. But within decades, more and more tourists would come.

In the 1920s, in order to facilitate visitor access to the site, the government authorities, based on the recommendations of the EFEO, built the roads of the Small and Big Circuit and even a bungalow for overnight stays in front of Angkor Wat.

The first regulations and their implementation

Since the first drawing of regulations in Angkor in 1911, the definition of a protected area began to be debated.⁶ A decree dated 30 September 1929 stipulated that a “preserved zone” with specific regulations was to be created in Angkor. Villages located in the close vicinity of temples quickly came to be seen as disturbances. Villagers living inside the preserved zone were forbidden to build new houses, tap trees for resin, cut down trees, or clear new lands. Conversely, in order to control the expansion of the forest, rice farming was encouraged in the Western and Eastern barays as well as in the moats of Angkor Thom.

These regulations aiming to limit the expansion of villages, however, were rarely implemented, with the exception of the ancient villages located close to Angkor Wat and to Phnom Bakheng. In the 1960s these villages would move to new residential lands a few kilometers to the southwest. Nevertheless, the villagers would be authorized to practice agriculture on their old rice fields.

Local population memory

The memory of the present-day local population rarely goes beyond the grandparents’ generation. The older people recall the events of recent history, especially the periods of insecurity and combat during repeated Siamese invasions, the fractious struggles of the anti-French Issarak movement, and the violent upheavals under the Khmer Rouge. These villagers also emphasize the displacement of villages specifically in the area of Angkor Thom, Angkor Wat, and Phnom Bakheng. From the oldest times, they relate stories of the Siamese raids and the subsequent exodus as well as displacements of villages during the French period. In one instance, Vietnamese monks were practicing Hinayana Buddhism in a monastery at the top of Phnom Bakheng. This religious community was relocated by the French.

The disruption

In 1970 the country was at war. Republican troops under Lon Nol launched attacks against the Viet Cong and Khmer Liberation Army or *Khmer Rumdha* (Khmer

Liberation). Fearing the bombings, the local population fled their homes and found refuge in the nearby temples in Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat. Lon Nol's troops controlled the area with machine guns installed at the summit of Phnom Bakheng. But in 1972 the Khmer Rouge took swift command of Angkor and displaced the local population to areas north of Angkor. Until 1979 the area was deserted, used only temporarily by mobile brigades, the *krom chalat*, for agriculture and sugar-palm exploitation. A few of the dikes of the old rice fields were destroyed and replaced by larger, square rice fields. It is worth noting that the Khmer Rouge took particular interest in Angkor as a symbol of national pride, and visitors from allied countries were invited to visit the site.

The reconstruction

At the end of the Pol Pot regime in 1979, the people of Angkor desired to return the land of their ancestors, to rebuild their houses, cultivate their rice fields, and live according to their traditions. The people who had been displaced in the 1960s came back to the old settlements close to Angkor Wat and to Phnom Bakheng. Yet insecurity prevailed and the fighting continued only a few kilometers away. In order to avoid conflicts over land ownership, the authorities ordered a redistribution of property. Each family would receive a new agricultural plot.

The country was then ruled by the Popular Republic of Kampuchea. This government lacked international recognition and was therefore under economic embargo. Cambodia would have wait until the early 1980s to reopen to the outside world.

2. The rapid opening to international regulations and mass tourism:

The present

The early 1990s marked a turning point for Cambodia. In 1992, Angkor was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, ensuring the protection and conservation of the historic site's architectural zones and landscapes. Then, in 1993, internationally recognized national elections resulted in opening Cambodia to an influx of international aid.

At Angkor, World Heritage designation brought with it regulations, as well as mass tourism and rapid development. These changes have produced new social and economic impacts on the local population.

The first governmental measure was to repeat historical displacements. People who had returned to their old settlements close to Angkor Wat and Phnom Bakheng after the Pol Pot regime were assigned parcels of residential land north of Siem Reap town in a large area called Phum Thmey ("new village"). However, the inhabitants maintained their former village names in the new location, and the families

still had the use of their old rice fields close to the temples. In the following years, the poorest sold the new residential land and little by little resettled in the old villages close to their rice fields. Within a short time, people were living around Phnom Bakheng in small houses or huts in the hamlets of Tropeang Seh, Bakheng, Tropeang Peuk Teuk, Teaksen, and Kok Dong. In fact, with little revenue and lacking true ownership of the land, these people are socially and economically very vulnerable.

The people of Angkor: A traditional society

The people of the Siem Reap region are known to be very conservative with respect to old traditions. Notably, several traditional practices continue to be performed here, such as the top-knot cutting ceremony for teenagers and the Robam Trot, a dance performed for the Khmer New Year. Many old symbols and figures can also be seen in religious rituals.

The local population, living in small family groups or scattered villages, are mainly involved in traditional subsistence agricultural activities. Each family owns and cultivates one or several small parcels of land for rice cultivation, not exceeding one hectare. The people depend on one crop per year with a low average yield, less than one ton per hectare.

To earn their living, the local population traditionally engages in secondary activities such as growing vegetables, fishing, and the fabrication of palm sugar. Until recently they also made use of products from the forest, such as resin, medicinal products, creepers, fruit, and firewood.

The people of Angkor live in traditional raised wooden houses. They practice their religious beliefs in private ceremonies at home and celebrate Buddhist festivals in numerous monasteries. Besides the two ancient monasteries of Angkor Wat, new monasteries were built inside Angkor Thom in the early 1990s, close to existing Buddha statues.

Distribution of the population in the Angkor landscape

The landscapes and the natural resources of Angkor make it a very good location for living. The numerous mounds, old dikes, and roads create excellent conditions for building houses on high lands, out of the reach of water during the rainy season yet very close to low lands used for rice cultivation. Moreover, fresh water is easily accessible from wells (a few meters underground) and abundant ponds.

Phnom Bakheng and the local communities

Tourists visiting Angkor's monuments might not see the scattered villages of

Angkor, overshadowed by the temples and shrouded in forest. While climbing up Phnom Bakheng temple for the sunset, however, they will discover a vast cultivated plain and groups of houses hidden among the fruit trees.

Trying to define a homogenous local community with specific links to Phnom Bakheng is rather difficult, depending on whether the classification is geographic, social, or economic. Several villages of rice farmers are scattered in geographic proximity to Phnom Bakheng. Socially, we could define two local communities: the people of Tropeang Seh and the people of Kok Chan, who define themselves as distinct social units sharing a common history, ancestors, and veneration of the same *neakta* (land spirits).

• *Tropeang Seh community, close to Phnom Bakheng and Angkor Wat*

The families of the old hamlets of Bakheng, Kok Dong, Teaksen, Tropeang Peuk Teuk, and Tropeang Seh claim tight links among one another. Locally, this community worships several *neakta*, of which the most important are the *neakta* Ta Kuang, living in a small hut east of Kok Dong village, and the *neakta* Ta Raj in Angkor Wat. Concerning Phnom Bakheng, the people evoke the *neakta* Ta Kas Krohom on the hilltop.

• *Kok Chan and Baray communities, west of Phnom Bakheng*

These communities assert close connections: Kok Ta Chan, Kok Beng, Kok Thnaot. The people of Kok Chan village worship several *neakta* of which the most important is Ta Kuang, located east of Kok Chan village. Another *neakta*, Ta Kuang, is living in a hut inside the village of Kok Beng. The people of Kok Thnaot worship a *neakta* called Mok Buon⁷ (“four faces”), as well as other minor ones.

• *Other communities, Angkor area*

Other villages in the Angkor area have links with Phnom Bakheng. These connections can be classified as economic. Thus, some of the vendors in front of the east entrance of Phnom Bakheng come from eastern villages such as Sras Srang and Rohal whose inhabitants are said to be more skilled in handicrafts and business.

These local communities, however, are not closed to outsiders and, to the contrary, are presently mixing more and more with each other. This commingling could be related to the development of local businesses linked with tourism, which attract young people from different places and facilitate their meeting.

It appears that the social and religious center of these communities is Angkor Wat, where people gather for Buddhist festivals in the two ancient monasteries. There, they worship the *neakta* Ta Raj, the great land spirit who controls and protects the whole Angkor area. On the top of Phnom Bakheng, one can find evidence of at least three active religious cults: the *neakta* Ta Kas Krohom, the Buddha footprint, and a

statue of Preah Ko. Nevertheless, it appears that the religious cults there are practiced more by tourists than by local people.

Angkor Thom is also considered a place of great importance. Current villagers recall that some of their ancestors lived and cultivated lands inside Angkor Thom. Moreover, until recently, the natural resources of the forest inside the city's fortifications were still being exploited.

From the rapid field survey that I did, it appears that Phnom Bakheng is part of a large social area that comprises Angkor Thom, Angkor Wat, and the baray zones. More fieldwork is needed to understand the interactions among the local communities within this specific area.

Introduction of new regulations

A royal decree (001/NS) “establishing protected cultural zones in the Siem Reap/Angkor Region” was signed by King Norodom Sihanouk in May 1994. The decree defines a perimeter of protection inside the Siem Reap region and four zones of protected sites, each one with specific regulations. The “Central Park” comprises Zone 1 and Zone 2.⁸ Phnom Bakheng is located in Zone 1.

- *Zone 1:* Monumental sites. This zone contains significant archeological sites and their surroundings. Some 30 villages comprising 40,000 people are located in Zone 1.
- *Zone 2:* Protected archeological reserves. This zone contains “areas rich in archeological remains which need to be protected from damaging land use practices and inappropriate development”. This zone is larger than Zone 1 and contains 55 more villages.

Zone 1 and Zone 2 together cover an area of 401 square kilometers. Zone 1 and Zone 2 of the “Central Park” of Angkor contain a total population of 80,993. Other significant sites outside Central Park have been defined as Zone 1: Bantey Srei group and Roluos groups.

A year after the protected cultural zones were established, in February 1995, a second royal decree established APSARA, a national authority for the protection and the management of Angkor and the region of Siem Reap.⁹ Since its creation the APSARA Authority has gone through different phases. The first phase focused on protecting and restoring monuments. In the second phase, APSARA concentrated its efforts on tourism and is presently focusing on rural economic development.

In November 2004 the APSARA Authority debated the settlement of populations in Zone 1 and Zone 2 of the archeological site. It concluded that existing houses would remain but that new constructions would be forbidden.¹⁰ New alternatives must now be found for the housing and livelihood of future generations.

Living on a World Heritage site that is visited by thousands of tourists: Impacts on the local population

Regulations aiming to protect the monuments and landscape of Angkor and the development of tourism have and will have further social and economic impacts on the local population. Access to natural resources has been noticeably reduced; villagers have been displaced and denied or given limited access to new lands for housing. Some traditional activities have been abandoned, while a few new economic activities have emerged.

Access to natural resources reduced or denied

The traditional way of acquiring land was by plowing it. Until recently access to land was not a problem as there was a small population and plenty of land available. Since the promulgation of new regulations aimed at containing agricultural lands, there is a concern among the local population that future generations will not have access to arable land. In some areas close to temples, old rice fields had to be abandoned, reducing the income of many families. Regulations aimed at protecting the forest have led to prohibitions against collecting firewood and tapping for resin. Forced to buy firewood from outside, the local people have also abandoned the fabrication of palm sugar, which requires firewood for the boiling process, as it ceased to be profitable. Access to fishing resources has also been reduced with the prohibition against fishing in moats and ponds such as those at Angkor Wat and Sras Srang.

Displacement of villages, denied or limited access to new lands for housing

As mentioned earlier, in the early 1990s the villages located in the close proximity to Angkor Wat were moved again to southern lands. Many of the villagers have already sold their apportioned plots and returned to the lands of their ancestors. This situation, combined with the settlement of new people from other provinces, has created an anarchic land situation in the area west of Angkor Wat. In contrast, it is worth noting that in the old villages that were not relocated the land situation and demography is much more controlled and stable. Currently the old traditional villages present a potential for alternative tourism. The situation could change, however, as the trend is to build concrete houses, which are less costly and more modern than traditional wooden houses.

The APSARA Authority is now working on the development of new living sites for the younger generation. It has selected an area of 1,000 hectares in the area of Run Taek. Several projects there are currently being debated, such as promotion of rural credit, traditional architecture, and development of alternative activities such as making handicrafts, among others.

Development of new activities

The development of tourism and the reduction of traditional activities have led to a search for economic alternatives. The site-restoration agencies, the APSARA Authority, the Sokha Hotel company, as well as private companies employ a few thousand people as restoration workers, guards, or cleaning staff. Locals as well as people from other provinces have developed private small businesses, for example selling cold drinks, scarves, and locally made handicrafts in front of the temples.

Some villages, namely Sras Srang and Rohal, produce wooden handicrafts such as small oxcarts, birds, knives, and axes. Unfortunately, businesses close to the temples are not well organized and tourists prefer to buy souvenirs at shops in Siem Reap town. As a result the craftsmen located on the tourist site sell more at lower prices to middlemen than directly to tourists.

In poor villages such as Bakheng and Kok Dong, young people feel they lack both the skills to make handicrafts and the money to buy goods to sell to tourists. Many of these young people are now employed as construction workers for hotels in Siem Reap. There is a fear that with their low level of education they might not be qualified to work in the tourism industry once hotel construction inevitably slows down. The most lucrative jobs related to tourism, such as moto driver, taxi driver, and tourist guide, most often go to urban people, who are more educated and have easier access to foreign language courses.

In the last few years, a UNV (United Nations Volunteers) team followed by the ADPO (Angkor Participatory Development Organization) and several non-governmental organizations have initiated participative development programs in several villages in Zone 1, such as diversification of agriculture (high-yield vegetables and rice), rural credit, a rice bank, public health, and access to water. These groups also have been active in the promotion of traditional activities such as handicrafts and dance. (For example, a traditional *trot* dance troupe has been created in Pradak village.)

But many of these programs have not met expectations; the community-oriented programs do not always conform to the social reality. Moreover, the rural population seems very permeable and vulnerable to the economic and cultural pressures that have resulted from rapid exposure to the outside world.

Fragility of the traditional culture confronting outside cultures

Traditional knowledge is disappearing with the accelerated opening of formerly conservative populations to the outside world. The thread of oral transmission had already been cut during the Khmer Rouge period and is now neglected by the younger generation. Televisions can be found in all villages and accelerate the loss of traditional culture.

Fragility of the local population facing economic pressure

The creation of new needs leads to the search for sources of significant income, some of them illegal. The looting of artifacts sadly is often perpetuated with the help of villagers who see it as a means of quick and considerable income. Such a practice was unthinkable before the war. The stones and artifacts had more sacred values than economic ones. Child prostitution for tourists within the Angkor area must also be mentioned as an emerging economic alternative, however pernicious.

Conclusion

While development is visible in the urban areas, it is less perceptible in the rural villages of Angkor. The APSARA Authority has begun to restore a dialogue with the local population by holding meetings and consultations in the villages. These efforts to involve the people of Angkor in the decision-making process are to be encouraged.

For the future it is highly desirable for national and international institutions to concentrate on rural development and to build, with the participation of the local populations, long-term development programs that integrate the preservation of local traditions.

Whereas architectural monuments are being preserved and stabilized, the intangible cultural heritage is undergoing rapid transformations. Rituals, social practices, and economic activities are not fixed. These intangible aspects of cultural heritage are more sensitive to homogenization and more difficult to protect against the uniformity of globalization. Attending to this difficult issue, as this workshop is doing, contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of change and helps to prepare the local traditional population for the cultural transformations they face. Development cannot proceed in a sustainable manner unless the local communities are involved in the management of World Heritage sites. The pivotal role that communities play in the management of World Heritage sites must be recognized.

Recommendations

1. Recognize the outstanding linkages among people, the environment, and the monuments in a site listed on the World Heritage List.
2. Consider the importance of involving all the stakeholders, such as local communities, in the planning, management, and evaluation process.
3. Consider local culture and collect data on traditional knowledge regarding land tenure and water management, house building, social and religious practices, and legends and stories about the past.
4. Assess and understand the values given to Angkor and Phnom Bakheng by local

communities in order to involve those communities in the investigation and management of their pasts. Evaluate what they would like to see retained for future generations.

5. Promote alternative livelihood opportunities for the local communities.
6. Help to promote sustainable tourism in villages.
7. Promote environment-friendly industries.
8. Develop ecotourism so that the natural environment is considered.
9. Promote environmental education and information with the active involvement of children.
10. Give priority to development activities for the residents of the site (such as those outlined in Article 17 of the 1994 Royal decree).¹¹
11. Promote traditional construction.

Notes

¹ See: A. Barth et A. Bergaigne. 1885-1893. *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campâ et du Cambodge*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, G. Coedès. 1937-1966. *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, 8 Vol.; Hanoi/Paris, EFEO, Coll. de textes et Documents sur l'Indochine, III, and B.P. Groslier. 1973. *Inscriptions du Bayon*, 2ème partie de J. Dumarcay et B.P. Groslier, *Le Bayon*, Paris, EFEO, Mémoires Archéologiques, III-2.

² Pelliot, Paul. 1951. *Mémoires sur les coutumes du Cambodge de Tcheou Ta-Kouan*, Paris, A. Maisonneuve.

³ Khin, Sok. 1988. *Chroniques royales du Cambodge (de 1417 à 1595)*, EFEO.
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⁴ Aymonier, Etienne. 1900-1904. *Le Cambodge*, Paris, Ernest Leroux, 3 vol.
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⁵ Aymonier, Etienne. 1900-1904. *Le Cambodge*, Paris, Ernest Leroux, 3 vol.

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Ebihara, May. 1971. *Svay, a khmer village in Cambodia*, Michigan, Ann Arbor, University micro-films international, 2 T.

⁶ The Royal ordinance dated 31 March 1911 defines reserved perimeters for the “ruins of Angkor.” A zone of protection of 200 meters is identified around the most important monuments.

⁷ That could be identified as the Hindu god Brahma, represented with four faces.

⁸ APSARA, *The region of Siem Reap-angkor: villages and populations of the protected Zone 1 and Zone 2, Statistics in 1998 and 2002*, Department of culture and research, Apsara, 2003.

⁹ Autorité pour la Protection du Site et l’Aménagement de la Région Angkor.

¹⁰ Standards pour l’utilisation des sols dans les zones protégées 1 et 2, Décision du RGC no.70 SSR du 16 septembre 2004.

¹¹ Article 17 of the 1994 Royal decree says that “residents (of Zone 1) should be given priority for trading/permits concessions on the sites” and “assist the development of essential community facilities and encourage small scale-tourist facilities linked with village life.”