

A White Paper on \_\_\_\_\_

# PRESERVING WORLD HERITAGE & THE ROLE OF INTERPRETATION

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## Introduction

At four o'clock in the afternoon every day, 3,000 tourists arrive at the base of the tenth-century temple-mountain Phnom Bakheng in Angkor, Cambodia. Tour busses unload eager crowds who begin the ascent to the summit in a race to beat the throng vying for the best spot to watch the sunset. Out-of-breath visitors clamber up the ancient staircase, nearly eroded away from overuse, without pause to consider this narrow stair had been constructed over a thousand years ago for use only by high priests and the god king. This sacred stepped temple, locally recognized as a gathering place for the gods, now functions more as stadium bleachers for the masses to climb on and photograph the sun setting and the Angkor Wat temple.

Angkor is not only one of the most rapidly growing World Heritage destinations, but it is also listed by UNESCO as a heritage preservation "success story."<sup>1</sup> Why this designation is granted, given Angkor's plight of mass tourism, is largely because of Angkor's progress in the past decade. In 1993, when UNESCO embarked on an ambitious plan to safeguard and develop the site, Angkor had a different, arguably more urgent, set of troubles—landmines, illicit excavation, and unchecked pillaging of artifacts. Now thirteen years later, Angkor has clearly benefited from substantial international conservation assistance and has even been chosen by the New York Times as luxury destination of the year.<sup>2</sup>

In 2006, Angkor is anticipating two million visitors<sup>3</sup>— a 100 percent increase over 2005—who are expected to spend close to three hundred million dollars.<sup>4</sup> The numbers alone communicate success of sorts. Architectural preservation, jungle de-mining, and looting prevention campaigns have shifted public perception of Angkor from endangered to accommodating. But now the site is facing its most daunting challenge yet—the danger of being loved to death by visitors.



**Tourism & Preservation** TOURISM IMPACT ON HERITAGE SITES  
*Sustainable preservation requires a program to promote enjoyment, education, and managed visitor use of a site to maintain conservation efforts. Image: Tourists descend Phnom Bakheng after watching the sunset. Angkor World Heritage site (Winter, 2005)*

Expansion of the tourist infrastructure, including an enlarged airport, is happening apace with the influx of foreign, mostly Asian, visitors. (An estimated 18 percent are Korean.) Responding to threats posed by the rising tourist tide, those charged with protecting this World Heritage site have extended their concerns from the protection of its physical structures to include an interest in the protection of its living heritage—the spirit and people of Angkor and its national and local value—at risk from accelerated regional growth brought on by tourism. But is this concern being voiced too late? And why were these issues not better addressed at the onset of heritage planning?

These questions are important considerations for the field of heritage preservation at large. World heritage sites facing similar growing tourism numbers<sup>5</sup> are in need of new and sustainable methods to ensure the way a visitor experiences a site does no harm, but rather contributes to its safeguarding. Places of such universal value also require more attention to the protection of living heritage—including knowledge and practices of the communities living around the site—threatened by rapid development and foreign cultural influences resulting from economic activity and increased visitation.

Major shifts in preservation needs are reflected in recent developments in the preservation field. The International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) created the Ename Charter, now in its third draft, to convey the importance of integrating a program of interpretation into preservation approaches, stating, “Interpretation of the meaning of sites is an integral part of the conservation process and fundamental to positive conservation outcomes.”<sup>16</sup> An informed and interested visitor is more likely to feel invested in a site and its preservation. Conservation and interpretation form the basis of a sustainable heritage practice and if undertaken together have the power to protect and communicate both the physical and intangible values of a place for future generations.

## Need for new preservation models

While it is hoped that Angkor will not become the cautionary example of “tourism killing tourism” for the heritage preservation community, it serves as an emblem of an old “monument-centric conservation approach” that pervades preservation efforts worldwide. Preservation planning at Angkor began with a decade focused on the conservation and stabilization of the monuments. Then in 2003 the director general of APSARA, Angkor’s management authority, placed an urgent new emphasis on “the monitoring of tourism development in accordance with precise predefined objectives.”<sup>17</sup> Visitor management, community and economic development, and preservation of living heritage became priorities for achieving sustainable site management.<sup>8</sup>

Central to the old model for preservation is an assumption that preserving the historic fabric of a site is the most urgent



### Tourism & Preservation RESPONDING TO MASS TOURISM

*A recent article on the heritage of Venice offered the point of view that the city is “basically already lost” because of the tourism phenomenon and the related failure to plan for the needs of the city’s long-term residents. From Elisabetta Povoledo, “Vanishing Venice: A City Swamped by a Sea of Tourists,” New York Times, 1 October 2006.*

first step towards long-term preservation. Interpretation is often presumed to be simply “presentation.” There is a misconception, even within the field, that interpretation comprises a packaging of the available history of a site after the “real work” of conservation is complete. As a result, conservation and interpretation have been practiced as parallel or discrete functions, and conservation is usually well underway before an interpretive approach is considered. Even with the establishment of key guidelines that emphasize the importance of interpretation—including the Burra Charter (1999),<sup>9</sup> the International Charter on Cultural Tourism (1999), and the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (2002)—in most cases, especially when physical deterioration is present, conservation takes priority and precedes interpretation efforts. This is certainly true at Angkor, where a decade of conservation work has been carried out with little or no interpretation accompanying it.

Yet regardless of the current levels or anticipated growth of tourism at heritage sites, a new approach to preservation is needed: one that brings in interpretation at the onset of a project to ensure that conservation efforts are properly sustained and heritage is effectively communicated. Conservation and interpretation rely on very different skill sets and expertise making it logical to separate these functions, but opportunities to educate visitors are missed with this division. At Angkor, the absence of interpretation about conservation processes means that there are thousands of tourists at the temples each day who are not properly informed about the fragility of the art and conditions of the stones, and their behaviors onsite reflect this lack of understanding.

## Value of interpretation for sustainable preservation

The power of interpretation is that it can shape history. Taking the form of an illustrated sign, a script for a tour guide, or a program of onsite performances, interpretive messages about a site become the basis for a visitor's memory of a place, regardless of the depth and quality of the underlying research. More than likely, the stories that

get told about a place are the ones deemed significant by the planning team. If the historical basis is shallow, the chosen stories can propagate cultural myths and romantic associations with the site. More important, if communities and stakeholders are not included in the interpretive team, the stories being told onsite are unlikely to reflect their values and cultural identity.

*"To approach conservation purely by lockout is politically infeasible on a planet with six and a half billion humans; equally important, it's inhumane and unjust. The benefits are enjoyed mainly by distant, affluent members of society, while the costs are paid mainly by struggling, powerless folk on the landscapes nearby."*

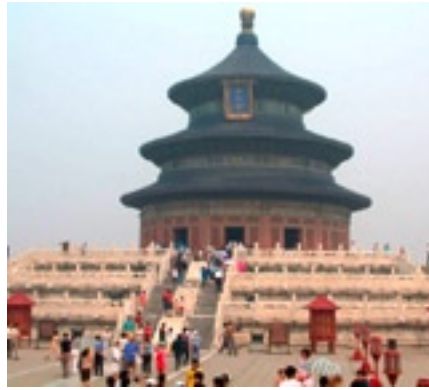
*-David Quammen, National Geographic Magazine issue on world parks, October 2006*

While conservation will ensure that the physical memory of a place is preserved, interpretation—with its multidimensional structure of defining site significance with all stakeholders, building on scholarship, assessing visitor and user needs, selecting, testing and implementing strategies—can provide a framework for ensuring the physical and intangible heritage is communicated and preserved in a meaningful way.



**Building Stakeholder Support** COMMUNITY MEETINGS

*Image: Village chiefs and monks discuss presenting their Khmer heritage during a community meeting focused on interpretation and conservation activities. (Gilmartin, 2006)*



## A comprehensive approach to interpretation

Just as conservation of a site should be based on thorough research of materials, causes of damage, and protective solutions, interpretation must also be allowed time and precision in handling the complex layers of history and site significance. This comprehensive approach to interpretation is best understood as a process with many nodes for consensus-building with stakeholders. This approach comprises three critical elements: **scholarship**, **tourism**, and **stakeholders**.

An emphasis on **scholarship** ensures that what gets presented to the public is founded on strong research and incorporates all aspects of the site's significance including its natural and social histories.

Interpretive planning that is integrated with **tourism** ensures the visitor experience offered at the heritage site is carefully situated within the greater framework of tourism trends and economic development.

Ongoing involvement with **stakeholders** enables those who have the greatest effect on the long-term preservation to participate throughout the decision-making process and voice their interests in and concerns about presenting and benefiting from their heritage.

An early focus on interpretation during the preservation project planning—using this comprehensive approach—can produce sustainable benefits for the World Heritage site, the local communities, and visitors.

### Scholarship

The interpretive process should include rigorous interdisciplinary research, with an understanding that the period of relevance does not end when the historic site was constructed or its population shifted, but continues through to the present day. In addition to scholars and specialists, working with community representatives enriches research and allows multiple voices to shape the stories told on site. If ongoing, the interpretive process protects the cultural integrity of a site and its communities by acknowledging new and even conflicting perspectives and providing a three-way exchange among visitors, researchers, and communities.<sup>10</sup>

*"Research is a continuing need and the life blood of good preservations. Both historical authenticity and proper interpretation demand facts. Research is the way to obtain these facts. There is no substitute for it, and no historic preservation should be attempted without research."*

*-Edward P. Alexander of Colonial Williamsburg*

Scholarship also informs conservation and is informed by conservation. When interpretation is undertaken together with conservation, there is an opportunity to involve audiences and communities in the conservation process and discoveries. Informing visitors about the work being done enables a more robust understanding of the science, technologies, and financial resources required to protect a site. By communicating what makes a site worth protecting, interpretation inspires visitors to become interested stewards, thereby supporting the mission of conservation.

## Tourism

Interpretation can become the basis for managing tourism and facilitating success at a heritage site. Successful tourism cannot be measured by the number of tourists alone. Other key benchmarks include economic benefits to the communities and quality of the visitor experience. Interpretation can provide ways to increase tourism income to communities, while curbing many of the problems associated with mass tourism.<sup>11</sup> Consultation with tour guides, hoteliers, and other industry representatives during the interpretive planning process frames interpretive programs based on growth and patterns of visitation.

It is important to understand how tourists' visits to the heritage site fits in with their overall travel plan. By conducting relevant audience research, interpretive planners can tailor programs to reflect an informed understanding of tourists and their interests and motivations for visiting a site. Will most visitors pass through the site on a day trip? Will they be staying multiple nights in a nearby hotel? What is the typical amount of time visitors expect to spend at the site? What are tourists' primary expectations of the site visit?

At the Statue of Liberty National Monument, for example, some 18,000 daily visitors regularly arrive with the aim of climbing the statue for views of Manhattan and New York Harbor. Due to post-9/11 security constraints, however, only a fraction of these tourists can enter the monument's interior. At present only the Statue's pedestal is accessible to the public, and then only by prior reservation. As a result, most visitors to this World Heritage site leave in frustration, having experienced a scenic round-trip ferry ride and perhaps a Ranger-led tour of the 0.9-square-mile Liberty Island, but very little direct connection to the Statue itself. Recognizing the need for a richer visitor experience, the National Park Service–U.S. Department of the Interior has initiated an interpretive plan to enhance pre-visit information and create a "discovery trail" that will deliver interpretive content to the tens of thousands of tourists outdoors.

Audience research is essential for shaping varied experiences that can appeal to a range of visitors. For instance, pilgrims traveling to the Mohabodhi Temple in



### Interpretation & Tourism CREATING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

*Currently at the Statue of Liberty, most visitors are able to view only the Statue's "skirt." A revamped visitor experience, using a comprehensive interpretive approach, will ensure the way a visitor remembers the site is a meaningful experience of liberty.*

India where the Buddha attained enlightenment, are likely to seek a spiritual or meditative experience.<sup>12</sup> Other travelers may prefer a strictly informational visit. A responsible interpretive program will accommodate these diverse interests and build in opportunities for different ways to experience the same site. An audio program, for example, can help to disperse visitors in order to prevent crowding, noise, and wear; provide important historical background; and increase visitors' understanding of the area's valuable resources. Besides engaging different kinds of tourists, varied offerings can promote extended stays and repeat visits, as some people will want to experience the sites in their full complexity.



### Interpretive Methodologies PODCASTING & AUDIO TOURS

*Lively audio programs can provide in-depth, personalized interpretive experiences for visitors, educate an "armchair traveler," and reinforce conservation messages.*

## Stakeholders

Many forms of master planning and conservation planning make generous efforts to involve stakeholders. The benefit of engaging stakeholders through the interpretive planning process is that interpretation provides an excellent meeting ground for public and private partners, and invites community involvement at all levels. Interpretation is also accessible: No specialized knowledge is needed in the way that speaking about conservation requires an understanding of tools and materials. Interpretation is about telling stories, and it relies on stakeholder involvement to ensure that stories being told reflect the interests, traditions, and outlooks of the people whose heritage the site represents.

Meetings with policy makers and other stakeholders must create a forum for discussing traditional knowledge, site use, and the economic needs of residents. The designation of an area as a World Heritage site sometimes means that even community-based improvements, such as construction of homes and markets, are restricted by regulations against unplanned development. What then is the benefit to the communities living around the heritage site? To ensure that local stakeholders are responsible for the messages delivered at a site *and* are the recipients of economic development, ongoing communication with these groups is essential.

Coordination between interpretive planners, policy makers, and communities can help local populations realize and plan for the financial benefits of potential tourism. Without direct communication, local groups are unlikely to comply with heritage restrictions and may feel marginalized in the process of planned development. Similarly, through relationships with local enterprises, planners can create interpretive plans that contribute to capacity building and utilize local tour guides, restaurants, and hotels.

*Developing countries are major tourist destinations, attracting 35 percent of international travelers each year. However a large proportion of the profits from tourism drains out of the world's poorer nations and back to large travel firms, hotel chains, and booking and transportation providers based in developed countries.*

*—United Nations Conference on Trade and Development*

## Conclusion

As World Heritage sites face growing numbers of tourists, preservation concerns are shifting from a strict focus on material conservation to a view that encompasses the monument as situated in a living cultural landscape. This holistic outlook embraces the goals of sustainability and requires an interpretive approach that encourages site stewardship and promotes enhanced visitor experiences. A comprehensive interpretive approach is based on the critical elements of in-depth research, the requirements and effects of tourism, and the active involvement of the local community at all levels. This approach allows for myriad voices and diverse methodologies that create engaging content derived from authentic sources and rich personal histories. When interpretation is carried out in collaboration with stakeholders there is an opportunity for capacity-building programs with the local population that can provide a structure for continued site interpretation, maintenance, and improvement. Public and community understanding of the significance of World Heritage sites is crucial for the long-term preservation of our shared global patrimony.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> "Success Stories," see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/107/>, accessed 18 Sept. 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> Matt Gross, "Why is Everybody Going to Cambodia?" *New York Times*, 22 Jan. 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Adam Piore, "Tourist Jungle Grows Over Angkor Wat," *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 Sept. 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> Pan Letian, "Angkor Burdened With Influx of Visitors, Job Seekers," *China View*, 16 Sept. 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> In Seth Kugel's *New York Times* article, "Preservation: Sure it's a Good Thing, but..." (15 Jan. 2006), the Jiuzhaigou Valley, China was described as being "spoiled by mass tourism." Kugel cites other examples of heritage sites with climbing tourism numbers due to designation as UNESCO World Heritage sites. These include Chichén Itzá and Calakmul, Mexico, and Lijiang, China.
- <sup>6</sup> From the Ename Charter Web site, "The intention now is to continue the cycles of reviews and revision that will eventually produce a Fourth Draft, more comprehensively reflecting international consensus on the guiding principles of heritage interpretation. This will be used as the basis to launch a more exhaustive global dialogue on interpretation," see <http://www.enamecharter.org/>, accessed 17 Jul. 2006.
- <sup>7</sup> Hervé Barré, "Cultural Tourism and Sustainable Development," *Museum International*, Vol. 54, No. 1 & 2, 2002.
- <sup>8</sup> Christopher R. Cox, "Monumental Dilemma," *Travel + Leisure*, Dec. 2004.
- <sup>9</sup> A key article in the Burra Charter states that "conservation, interpretation and management of a place should provide for the participation of people for whom the place has special associations and meanings, or who have social, spiritual or other cultural responsibilities for the place," see <http://www.icomos.org/australia/burra.html>, accessed 17 Jul. 2006
- <sup>10</sup> Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1957), 6.
- <sup>11</sup> Walter Jamieson, *Community Destination Management in Developing Economies*, (Binghamton, NY: Hawthorn Press, Inc., 2006), 86.
- <sup>12</sup> Nirmala George, "India's Buddhist Heritage Draws Seekers," *Denver Post*, 2 Oct. 2006.