

Priorities in Protection: Assessing the Impact of International and Domestic Cultural Heritage Preservation Policy in Cambodia

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I. INTRODUCTION

Cambodia is a land rich with cultural heritage, from the sweeping temples of ancient Angkor to the harrowing testimony of twentieth-century genocide. Cambodian and international authorities have made major efforts over the last few decades to improve the preservation of that cultural heritage. These efforts were part of a larger, global movement to preserve human culture, and operate within a framework of both international and Cambodian law. With so much money, time, and attention going into cultural heritage preservation, some questions arise. Are these efforts working? And who is benefitting from them? This report, compiled at the request of the Documentation Center of Cambodia based on legal and field research in Cambodia, seeks to answer those questions. It begins with a discussion of the cultural heritage preservation legal framework, and then goes on to analyze different cultural sites in ten case studies. Each site is different, but the cultural heritage preservation regime in Cambodia does generally work to promote the physical preservation of important sites. However, efforts seem too often to prioritize physical preservation and the tourism economy over cultural benefits to locals. To remedy this, policymakers should adopt a more balanced approach and prioritize local needs in their efforts going forward.

II. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

A. International Law

Since around the mid-twentieth century, there has been a global effort to promote the protection and preservation of cultural heritage.¹ Because of the global interest in cultural heritage, there has been a number of international agreements related to the topic. This section will discuss three that Cambodia is a party to: the Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict; the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property; and the Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Together, they create a legal regime that imposes responsibility for cultural heritage protection on states, even if international resources can still be accessed.

1. Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (“Hague Convention”)

The Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (“the Hague Convention”), one of the first major international treaties to be dedicated to issues related to cultural heritage preservation, was signed in 1954.² The Hague Convention’s ratification followed years of effort from the international community to address the damage to cultural heritage in recent wars.³ The groundbreaking agreement has since garnered 138 states party, including Cambodia and Thailand.⁴ This means that those countries, including

¹ “Cultural Heritage: 7 Successes of UNESCO’s Preservation Work.” UNESCO.org. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/cultural-heritage-7-successes-unescos-preservation-work>.

² Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, May 14, 1954, 249 U.N.T.S. 240 [*hereinafter* The Hague Convention].

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “States Parties.” UNESCO.org. Accessed November 24, 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts/states-parties?hub=180145>.

Cambodia, have agreed to follow the requirements and provisions of the Convention.

The Hague Convention has five components: (1) defining cultural property; (2) duties to safeguard cultural property; (3) duties to respect cultural property and not use it for military purposes; (4) duties to train military personnel on the Convention; and (5) duties of invading armies to care for cultural property.⁵ The Convention's definition of cultural property is broad and includes movable property, immovable property, and "centers containing a large amount of cultural property," i.e. libraries, museums, and historically-significant neighborhoods.⁶ States have duties to protect cultural property from military conflict, to educate their militaries about best practices in protecting cultural heritage, and to not target or destroy cultural property.⁷

These protections and duties only apply if there is an armed conflict present; however, the conflict does not need to be international in nature and the protections apply to internal conflicts.⁸ Additionally, a violation of the Convention is only present if there is a "nexus" between the conflict and the destruction of cultural property.⁹ "Military necessity" is the only exception to the duties in the Hague Convention.¹⁰ The Convention itself lays out mostly internal enforcement mechanisms, like states prosecuting offenders in state courts or

⁵ Evans, Ben and Devon Pawloski, Pheng Pong-Rasy, Orn Vannara, Seang Chenda, and Sopheak Pheana. *Protecting Cambodia's Heritage: An Exploration of International and Domestic Law*. Cambodia: Win Win Memorial Monument Team in collaboration with Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2020.

⁶ Ibid., The Hague Convention, 249 U.N.T.S. 240, Chapter I, Art 1.

⁷ Ibid., The Hague Convention, 249 U.N.T.S. 240, Chapter I, Arts 4-7.

⁸ Ibid., The Hague Convention, 249 U.N.T.S. 240, Chapter VI, Arts 18-19

⁹ Ibid., Evans et. al.

¹⁰ Ibid., The Hague Convention, 249 U.N.T.S. 240, Chapter I, Art 4.

taking other actions on their own.¹¹ But other agreements like the Rome Statute codify these offenses as war crimes prosecutable by institutions like the International Criminal Court (ICC).¹²

2. *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* (“1970 UNESCO Convention”)

The Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (“1970 UNESCO Convention”), as its title indicates, was drafted to rein in the illegal trade, looting, and sale of cultural property.¹³ Whereas the Hague Convention only applies during times of armed conflict, the 1970 UNESCO Convention does not have a provision about presence of armed conflict: it remains in force during times of peace.¹⁴ There are 149 states that have become party to the 1970 UNESCO Convention, and Cambodia is among them.¹⁵

The 1970 UNESCO Convention takes a multi-pronged approach to addressing the issue of protecting cultural heritage by preventing and punishing looting. The Convention requires parties to take many actions, among them: adopt “protection measures” within their borders, like as establishing national services

¹¹ Ibid., The Hague Convention, 249 U.N.T.S. 240, Chapter VII, Art 28

¹² Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, adopted July 17, 1998, 2187 U.N.T.S. 90; 37 I.L.M. 1002 (1998), Art 8.

¹³ Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, adopted November 14, 1970, 823 U.N.T.S. 231. [*hereinafter* 1970 UNESCO Convention]

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “States Parties, Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.” UNESCO.org. Accessed November 14, 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural?hub=416#item-2>

and promoting museums (Article 5); control the movement of cultural property by introducing authenticating certificates and preventing museums from acquiring illegal cultural property (Articles 6 and 7); return stolen property when requested (Article 7).¹⁶

The Convention also includes provisions requiring states party to “impose penalties or administrative sanctions” on people who violate these protections.¹⁷ The Convention does not leave states on their own, and says that parties may call upon UNESCO, a UN body, for technical assistance.¹⁸ In the event of disputes, UNESCO can “extend its good offices to reach a settlement,” but it does not have its own enforcement powers and the only enforcement mechanism are mandatory reports.^{19 20}

3. Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage (“UNESCO World Heritage Convention”)

The Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage (“UNESCO World Heritage Convention”) was established in 1972 to promote the preservation and protection of the global heritage, with a focus on cultural and natural wonders.²¹ It is a major document that forms the foundation of the global cultural heritage regime, serving as the legal source for the World Heritage Committee that manages the well-known World Heritage List.²² Sites

¹⁶ Ibid., 1970 UNESCO Convention, 823 U.N.T.S. 231, Arts 5-7.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1970 UNESCO Convention, 823 U.N.T.S. 231, Art 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1970 UNESCO Convention, 823 U.N.T.S. 231, Art 17.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1970 UNESCO Convention, 823 U.N.T.S. 231, Art 16

²⁰ Ibid., 1970 UNESCO Convention, 823 U.N.T.S. 231, Art 17

²¹ Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, Preamble, adopted November 16, 1972. 1037 U.N.T.S. 151 [*hereinafter* World Heritage Convention]

²² Ibid., World Heritage Convention, 1037 U.N.T.S. 151, Art 11

that are listed on the World Heritage List are eligible for international assistance in the form of financial assistance, staff and specialist training, equipment supplies, expert assistance, and professional studies.²³

Sites are nominated to the World Heritage List by states party to the Convention, of which there are 196, including Cambodia.²⁴ ²⁵ The Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention establishes ten criteria for sites to qualify for selection on the World Heritage List.²⁶ A site does not need to, but it can, qualify for multiple criteria. The criteria, which cover both cultural and natural elements, are as follows:

- (i) to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;
- (ii) to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;
- (iii) to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;
- (iv) to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
- (v) to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;
- (vi) to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);
- (vii) to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;
- (viii) to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological

²³ Ibid., World Heritage Convention, 1037 U.N.T.S. 151, Art 22

²⁴ UNESCO World Heritage Committee, *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (2025), Section III, 47 COM 8, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/>

²⁵ "States Parties." UNESCO World Heritage Convention, UNESCO.org. Accessed November 28, 2025. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/>

²⁶ Ibid., *Operational Guidelines*, para. 77

processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;
(ix) to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;
(x) to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.²⁷

As a body, the World Heritage Committee has published its own documents, including the Operational Guidelines. These documents have guided the World Heritage Committee and named priorities for international cultural heritage preservation. For example, the 2002 Budapest Definition established the Committee's strategic objectives, dubbed the "four Cs:" credibility, conservation, capacity-building, and communication.²⁸ In 2007, the Committee added "communities" as its fifth "C" to promote the protection of communities with ties to the sites on the World Heritage List.²⁹

In addition to creating the World Heritage Committee, the UNESCO World Heritage Convention binds states party to the protection of cultural heritage. Article 5 of the Convention lays out five requirements for these states: (1) integrating cultural heritage protection into planning programs for local communities; (2) establishing relevant services; (3) developing studies to make it easier for governments to respond to threats to cultural heritage; (4) taking measures to identify, protect, and rehabilitate cultural heritage; and (5) developing

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ UNESCO World Heritage Committee, *Budapest Declaration On World Heritage* (2002), 26 COM 9 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/1217/>

²⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Committee, *The "fifth C" for "Communities"* (2007), 39 COM 13 B, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/5197/>

national and regional training centers.³⁰ Article 15 also created a World Heritage Fund that invests in these efforts and the protection of World Heritage Sites, funded by both voluntary and mandatory payments.³¹

All in all, the UNESCO World Heritage Convention is a comprehensive and crucial component of the world's efforts to protect cultural heritage. It directs resources to the sites and countries that need it, and gives states a major role in the preservation of world culture. Although the World Heritage Convention has had a major impact on the state of cultural heritage preservation, not all observers say this is a good thing: some critics have written that UNESCO has “created a culture of economic and political quagmires rather than cooperation and preservation.”³²

B. Domestic Law

There are a number of national laws in Cambodia related to the protection of cultural heritage, with laws touching subjects ranging from protected areas to establishing legal bodies.³³ This section will discuss two major laws, the 1993 Decision on the Protection of Cultural Heritage and the 1996 Law on the Protection of Cultural heritage. Together, these laws have a broad reach and create basic protections for cultural heritage, such as protections from looting and investments to prevent natural damage to sites.

³⁰ Ibid., World Heritage Convention, 1037 U.N.T.S. 151, Art 5

³¹ Ibid., World Heritage Convention, 1037 U.N.T.S. 151, Art 15

³² Elizabeth Betsy Keough, *Heritage in Peril: A Critique of UNESCO's World Heritage Program*, 10 WASH. U. GLOBAL STUD. L. REV. 593, 594 (2011), https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_globalstudies/vol10/iss3/5

³³ “Cambodia Laws - UNESCO World Heritage Convention.” UNESCO.org. Accessed November 28, 2025. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/kh/Laws>.

1. 1993 Decision on the Protection of Cultural Heritage

Cambodia had laws related to cultural heritage from the French colonization period through to the post-Khmer Rouge period; most of those laws are no longer in effect after the transition to the current government in the 1990s.³⁴ One of the first, and still major, decisions in the modern Cambodian state related to cultural heritage was the Supreme National Council's 1993 Decision on the Protection of Cultural Heritage ("1993 Decision"). The 1993 Decision sought to set standards related to protecting cultural property, with a particular focus on preventing "illegal destruction, modification, alteration, excavation, alienation, exportation or importation."³⁵ It broadly defined national cultural heritage as any "cultural property" that is created or found within the country.³⁶ Its definition of cultural property was also broad, defining it as effectively any cultural, religious, or scientific human creation or natural phenomenon with historical significance.³⁷

These broad definitions create a legal regime where many objects are protected by domestic laws. This matters because the state, by law, owns newly discovered or undiscovered cultural property.³⁸ If someone finds something that could be classified as cultural property, they could be subject to the restrictions in the 1993 Decision and are supposed to report it to the local authorities.³⁹ People, or organizations, who violate the prohibitions on looting and destruction are

³⁴ Ibid., Evans et. al.

³⁵ THE SUPREME NAT'L COUNCIL OF CAMBODIA DECISION OF 10 FEB. 1993 ON THE NAT'L HERITAGE PROT. AUTH. OF CAMBODIA, ART. 1 (1993)
http://www.unesco.org/culture/natlaws/media/pdf/cambodia/cambodia_decision_protection_pat_culturel_10_02_1993_engtof.pdf.

³⁶ Ibid., Art 3.

³⁷ Ibid., Arts 2, 4.

³⁸ Ibid., Art 34A

³⁹ Ibid., Art 34B

subject to a number of criminal penalties under the 1993 Decision, including a fine or incarceration.⁴⁰

2. 1996 Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage

The 1996 Law of the Protection of Cultural Heritage (LPCH), like the 1993 decision, was established to protect against “illegal destruction, modification, alteration, excavation, alienation, exportation or importation.”⁴¹ The LPCH’s general provisions use the same broad definitions of cultural property as the 1993 decision, thereby creating a broad reach for the law’s provision.⁴² Beyond the law’s general provisions, it has a number of special provisions related to the management of cultural property and more prohibitions related to looting and damage.

Article 5, the law’s first special provision, establishes the Supreme Council on National Culture as the body responsible for the creation of policy “in the domain of national cultural property,” and gives the responsibility for policy implementation to the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts.⁴³ The Article also includes language distinguishing the wider Angkor region, placing it instead under the jurisdiction of the Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap (APSARA).⁴⁴ The middle articles, like Articles 7 and 11, define inventory and classification and create requirements

⁴⁰ Ibid., Art 70

⁴¹ Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Chapter I, Section I, Art 1 (1996), WIPO Lex No. KH021 <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/6396>

⁴² Ibid., Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Chapter I

⁴³ Ibid., Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Chapter II, Section 1 Art 5

⁴⁴ Ibid.

related to those topics.⁴⁵ ⁴⁶Article 18 then mandates the relevant “competent authority” to publish an annual registry of cultural property. ⁴⁷ The later articles augment the protections and punishments in the 1993 decision, as well as establishing protocols for when cultural property is discovered and for archaeological work.⁴⁸ Article 40, for example, requires any archaeological work be approved by the relevant authorities.⁴⁹ And Article 42 imposes a number of requirements on institutions conducting excavations, such as keeping a record or registry of cultural property, submitting reports to the authorities, and training “national technicians and researchers.”⁵⁰

Taken together, the provisions of the LPCH construct a legal regime that is wide-reaching and establishes a baseline of protections and procedures for handling cultural heritage and property. These provisions, however, leave much of the policymaking to other entities like the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and APSARA, as well as further sub-decrees.⁵¹ This leaves the possibility for gaps to emerge in the protection regime, gaps that have not all been filled since there are still many sub-decrees that have not been issued.⁵² The LPCH is still in effect, though, and functions as one of the major legal foundations for cultural heritage protections in Cambodia.

III. ANALYSIS

⁴⁵ Ibid., Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Chapter II, Section 3, Arts 7

⁴⁶ Ibid., Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Chapter II, Section 4, Arts 11

⁴⁷ Ibid., Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Chapter II, Section 4, Art 18

⁴⁸ Ibid., Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Chapter II, Sections 7, 9

⁴⁹ Ibid., Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Chapter II, Section 8, Art 40

⁵⁰ Ibid., Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Chapter II, Section 8, Art 42

⁵¹ Ibid., Evans, et. al.

⁵² Ibid.

A. Case Studies

The purpose of this paper is to assess the effect of the cultural protection legal regime on local sites in Cambodia, with a particular focus on how much the system is benefitting locals. As part of that inquiry, the author conducted site visits across Cambodia in the late Summer of 2025. This included visits to locations in the country's Siem Reap, Preah Vihear, and Phnom Penh provinces. The locations fall under the broad definitions of cultural property in both international and domestic law: they are museums, memorials, and archaeological sites. These are all either movable or immovable property, "centers containing a large amount of cultural property," and are cultural, religious, or scientific human creations or natural phenomenon with historical significance.^{53 54} Some of them meet UNESCO criteria and have been placed on UNESCO's World Heritage List or Tentative List.

Each case study includes a summary of the site's history and preservation status, followed by an assessment based on observations and conversation with officials and locals, when possible. Interviewees' names are used where permission was granted, but some requested anonymity in exchange for frank observations. Original plans included visits to Northern Cambodia along the Thai border, but renewed military conflict between Cambodia and Thailand led the U.S. Embassy and staff from the Documentation Center of Cambodia to advise against travelling to the border area. Remote interviews with officials from Northern Cambodia were conducted instead from Phnom Penh via Telegram.

⁵³ Ibid., The Hague Convention, 249 U.N.T.S. 240, Chapter I, Art 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid., THE SUPREME NAT'L COUNCIL OF CAMBODIA DECISION OF 10 FEB. 1993 ON THE NAT'L HERITAGE PROT. AUTH. OF CAMBODIA, Arts 2, 4.

B. Angkor Archaeological Park

1. History

Angkor Archaeological Park is a large archaeological site in Cambodia's northern Siem Reap province. It is composed of dozens of temples, canals, roads, and some villages. The site stretches over 400 square kilometers and was the center of the Khmer empire for centuries.⁵⁵ Angkor is most well-known for Angkor Wat, which is on Cambodia's flag and functions as the largest religious complex in the world.⁵⁶ Angkor Wat was originally constructed as a Hindu temple by the Khmer King Suryavarman to be his state temple and official mausoleum.⁵⁷ Later converted to a Buddhist temple, Angkor Wat continues to serve as a religious site for locals and visitors.⁵⁸ ⁵⁹ Another major temple among the many is Bayon temple. Bayon was built by King Jayavarman VII to serve as his state temple and was also later converted to be Buddhist.⁶⁰

The numerous temples on site fell into disrepair over the centuries after the capital was moved; restoration efforts didn't begin until the twentieth century, when the country was still under French control.⁶¹ Control of Angkor was transferred to Cambodian authorities upon independence in 1953.⁶² Conservation efforts came to a halt between 1975 and 1979, when the genocidal Khmer Rouge

⁵⁵ "Angkor - UNESCO World Heritage Centre." UNESCO.org. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/668/>.

⁵⁶ "Angkor Wat." AngkorEnterprise.gov. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.angkorenterprise.gov.kh/temple/65/angkor-wat>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Anonymous (driver) in discussion with the author, Siem Ream, Cambodia, September 1, 2025.

⁶⁰ "Bayon." AngkorEnterprise.gov. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.angkorenterprise.gov.kh/en/explore/685a0ec29b66c0d6db9be544>

⁶¹ "Siem Reap." EFEO. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.efeo.fr/base.php?code=217>.

⁶² Ibid.

regime ruled the country; during that period and the subsequent decades of conflict, Angkor suffered from neglect and looting.⁶³

In recent decades, the site has been the center of intense preservation efforts, from both the Cambodian government and the international community, and it was removed from UNESCO's list of World Heritage sites in danger in 2004.⁶⁴ Today, around 125,000 people still live in 112 villages on-site.⁶⁵ On top of that, Angkor is a center of national pride for Cambodians and a major part of their tourism industry: more than 2 million people visit each year.⁶⁶

2. *Status*

Angkor was inscribed on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites in 1992 for its significant cultural importance, both archaeologically and as a living site.⁶⁷ Following this inscription, the Royal Government of Cambodia established the Authority for the Protection of the Site and the Management of the Region of Angkor (APSRARA Authority). The APSARA Authority was tasked with preserving the Angkor site and ensuring compliance with UNESCO obligations.⁶⁸ The APSARA Authority works with numerous international organizations, and touts their success in getting Angkor removed from the list of World Heritage sites in danger.⁶⁹

⁶³ Kapila D. Silva and Neel Kamal Chapagain, eds. *Asian Heritage Management: Contexts, Concerns, and Prospects*. (Routledge, 2017), 220–221.

⁶⁴ Ibid., "Angkor - UNESCO World Heritage Centre."

⁶⁵ "About Apsara Authority - APSARA National Authority." APSARA. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://apsaraauthority.gov.kh/apsara-authority-main/about-apsara-authority/>.

⁶⁶ Chea Vanyuth. "Angkor Wat Sees 28% Rise in Visits, Nets \$42 Million." *Khmer Times*, December 3, 2024. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501601877/angkor-wat-sees-28-rise-in-visits-nets-42-million/>.

⁶⁷ Ibid., "Angkor - UNESCO World Heritage Centre."

⁶⁸ Ibid., "About Apsara Authority - APSARA National Authority."

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Preservation at Angkor is, in many ways, an international endeavor. In recent years, APSARA has worked with countries like South Korea and Japan to fund and oversee conservation projects focused specifically on Angkor Wat and Bayon Temple, and the US touts its own investments in the area.^{70 71} Additionally, international organizations like the World Monuments Fund have spent millions on preservation efforts.⁷²

3. *Assessment*

Angkor is the most well-known of the archeological sites in Cambodia, and it sees the most visitors each year. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Angkor is the recipient of significant funds and resources to promote cultural heritage preservation. This is visible in the site itself. The main ticketing area is well-designed and clearly made to handle large crowds efficiently, operating like a well-oiled machine. Tickets start at \$37 for one-day pass, a fee that Cambodian nationals do not have to pay.⁷³ This ticketing set-up suggests that preservation authorities want to generate revenue from tourists without imposing a burden on locals who want to engage with their own cultural history. And in fact, this set-up is successful in making sure that locals do still have access to the site. One driver

⁷⁰ "Steering Committee for Safeguarding of the Bayon Temple of Angkor." UNESCO.org, February 10, 2021. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/steering-committee-safeguarding-bayon-temple-angkor-thom-project-held>.

⁷¹ "U.S. Assistance for Cambodian Cultural Preservation." U.S. Embassy in Cambodia, February 24, 2025. Accessed November 13, 2025. <https://kh.usembassy.gov/u-s-assistance-for-cambodian-cultural-preservation/>.

⁷² "Where We Work: Angkor Archaeological Park." World Monuments Fund. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.wmf.org/monuments/angkor-archaeological-park>.

⁷³ "Angkor Pass/Ticket - Angkor Enterprise®." Angkor Enterprise. Accessed November 30, 2025. <https://www.angkorenterprise.gov.kh/en>.

told the author that he often visits Angkor with his family, and that the site is often packed with Cambodians for Khmer New Year celebrations.⁷⁴

The same driver, however, and other locals that the author had conversations with, expressed concerns about where the money was going. Some said that major infrastructure projects like the new Siem Reap Angkor International Airport have not brought the promised benefits to locals.⁷⁵ Observations of the site make clear that many of the funds are going back into preservation itself. The site is very well-preserved: reliefs on walls are clearly visible, stone structures are protected by wooden walkways, and there are a number of active preservation projects underway, including many funded by foreign governments like South Korea. There is also a small army of rangers and official tour guides on site that help protect the site from visitors and ensure tourists stay on dedicated pathways. Signage, and the tickets themselves, make clear that looting will not be tolerated and that the site is a living home to monks who should not be bothered.

Together, the international conventions and domestic laws surrounding cultural heritage protection have created an environment that does promote the preservation of the physical environment of Angkor. These investments seemed to have paid off. This does not mean that all locals are benefitting. Although many people live on-site at Angkor, Amnesty International has reported that they have

⁷⁴ Anonymous (driver) in discussion with the author, Siem Ream, Cambodia, September 1, 2025.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

been subject to forced evictions.⁷⁶ The government of Cambodia cited the need to protect Angkor's World Heritage Site status when they forced people out, even though Angkor's status as a living site was part of the inscription on the World Heritage List. Although UNESCO put out a statement of concern, its protections did not prevent the evictions and it has not taken significant actions to prevent something similar from happening again in the future.⁷⁷

Angkor's status as a World Heritage Site, and the domestic legal regime around cultural heritage protection, has certainly led to an influx of funds in the Siem Reap/Angkor area. As a result, the physical environment of Angkor is well-preserved and there is a significant amount of tourist infrastructure. This is in some ways a success of UNESCO and national authorities working together to preserve an historic site. However, although Angkor has become a major income generator, many locals have not seen the benefits of these investments. In addition to the Angkor residents forced off the land, many have become dependent on a local tourist economy that does not invest in education. This paints a picture of a protection regime that does protect physical culture, but deprioritizes people.

4. Recommendations

Many of the UNESCO agreements discuss developing expertise, and international and domestic authorities should work to set up additional scholarship and training programs. This would develop the requisite expertise, while making

⁷⁶ "Cambodia: Mass Evictions at UNESCO World Heritage Site Angkor Violate International Law." Amnesty International, November 14, 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/cambodia-angkor-wat-evictions-unesco/>.

⁷⁷ "UNESCO's reaction to Amnesty International's report on Angkor." UNESCO World Heritage Centre, UNESCO.org. November 15, 2023. Accessed November 28, 2025. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2629>

sure that local Cambodians are still benefiting from the money flooding their regions. Additionally, UNESCO and Cambodian authorities should work to establish enforceable legal protections for people who live in the area of the Angkor World Heritage Site.

C. The Former 479 Fronts Museum

1. History

The Former 479 Fronts museum is a former military site just outside of Siem Reap. It consists of a number of reconstructed buildings, as well as old equipment, educational facilities, and memorials. In the 1970s, military forces from Lon Nol's government and the insurgent Khmer Rouge across the country in a battle for control. This area was no exception, with the two sides both fighting in the area.⁷⁸ The Khmer Rouge defeated Lon Nol, took power in 1975, and imposed a brutal genocidal regime. In 1979, the Khmer Rouge were deposed by Vietnamese forces.⁷⁹ The Vietnamese then established the Front 479 Headquarters to coordinate their activities fighting the Khmer Rouge in the Siem Reap region.⁸⁰ The site was used by Vietnamese military forces until they returned to Vietnam in 1989. After that, the 4th Military Region of the Cambodian Army made the site their headquarters until they moved in 2004 to their current location elsewhere in the Siem Reap Region.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Brigadier General Nit Narong, "Summary of Site History" (museum sign), The Former 479 Fronts Museum, Siem Reap, Cambodia, seen September 4, 2025.

⁷⁹ "កាលបរិច្ឆេទព្រឹត្តិការណ៍." khmerrougehistory.org. Accessed November 4, 2025.
<https://khmerrougehistory.org/timeline/>.

⁸⁰ Military History Team, Military Region 4, "Military history of the Front 479 Headquarters" (museum sign), The Former 479 Fronts Museum, Siem Reap, Cambodia, seen September 4, 2025

⁸¹ Ibid., Brigadier General Nit Narong, "Summary of Site History"

Because of its location, and its use by multiple parties, the site of the Former 479 Fronts museum was central in all of the military conflicts that engulfed Cambodia in the late twentieth century. Given this historical significance, Cambodia and Vietnam have cooperated to invest in preservation efforts. In 2018, authorities began to reconstruct buildings and in 2019, authorities made the decision to develop the area into a museum.^{82 83} This decision came at the same time as celebrations in Vietnam commemorating 30 years since the end of Vietnam's military deployment in the region.⁸⁴ The development is nearing completion and set to open to the public in 2026.⁸⁵

2. *Status*

The Cambodian military has been working with Vietnamese counterparts to develop and preserve this site since 2018.⁸⁶ Though the former military base was originally much larger, the authorities have focused their preservation efforts on five core hectares. In that area, they have rebuilt a number of buildings, including soldiers' barracks, the kitchen, the meeting room, and the commander's quarters. There are also spaces for education, a peace monument, and various displays of military equipment and old weaponry. Both Cambodia and Vietnam have contributed funds to the rehabilitation project, and the site has signs

⁸² "About the process of restoring, building, preserving, and protecting the military historical site of the former Front 479 Headquarters, Vietnam Volunteer Army (1983-1989), former 4th Military Region Headquarters (1989-2004)" (museum sign), The Former 479 Fronts Museum, Siem Reap, Cambodia, seen September 4, 2025.

⁸³ Pisey (military and museum official) in discussion with the author, Siem Reap, Cambodia, September 4, 2025.

⁸⁴ "Volunteer Soldiers Mark 30 Years of Mission Fulfillment in Cambodia." Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus), September 22, 2019. Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/volunteer-soldiers-mark-30-years-of-mission-fulfillment-in-cambodia-post160861.vnp>.

⁸⁵ Ibid., Pisey (military and museum official) in discussion with the author.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

indicating their cooperation.⁸⁷ The museum is not fully open to the public, as it is still being finalized; however, local school students take tours of the grounds. The museum is on track to open in 2026.⁸⁸

3. *Assessment*

UNESCO, and other international entities, have had little-to-no role in the historical preservation at the Former 479 Fronts Museum. Instead it has been mostly a Cambodian and Vietnamese joint project. These efforts have resulted in a impressive reconstruction of the military facilities on-site, and preserved a large number of important military artifacts. The legal regime created by Cambodia's domestic laws created a framework for people to report findings, such as military artifacts, making it possible for authorities to collect them in a museum like this. Signage—mostly in Khmer, though also in Vietnamese and English in places—carefully lays out the military history of the site to give visitors a complete understanding of its historical and cultural importance.

Although the museum is not currently open to the public, it does open to local schools for educational tours.⁸⁹ When the museum does open, officials have discussed a tiered ticketing scheme similar to other attractions in the Siem Reap area, which would make it cheaper and easier for Cambodians to visit in comparison to foreign tourists. They have also discussed developing a library space for people to come and learn about the area's military history.⁹⁰ Altogether, the Cambodian and Vietnamese governments efforts at the Former 479 Fronts

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Museum have yielded success: the site has been preserved and it is well-positioned to bring educational and cultural benefits to locals.

4. Recommendations

Many locals are not aware of the museum and the area's history despite the museum's plans to open in 2026.⁹¹ To bring the intended educational and cultural benefits to locals, museum and government officials should work to promote the opening of the site. They should also develop educational programs that can be integrated into local curriculums, and adult educational programs that attract locals' interests. To ensure that the benefits of this project remain equitable, officials should plan to use revenue from ticketing to continue preservation efforts and promote these educational opportunities.

D. Wat Thmey

1. History

Wat Tepothivong, also known as Wat Thmey, is a site near the center of Siem Reap. It consists of a larger two-story building, stupas including a memorial stupa, memorial information, and a number of one story structures, including a reading room, a school, and buildings used for a museum. The larger building was initially a hospital that provided care to Chinese engineers who were working on the development of the Siem Reap Airport.⁹² It was then converted into a resort for the French. Lon Nol's government, following the 1970 coup, used the building

⁹¹ Anonymous (driver) in discussion with the author, Siem Reap, Cambodia, September 4, 2025

⁹² Eng Kokthay, "Wat Tepothivong Memorial Site" (museum sign), Wat Tepothivong (Wat Thmey) Memorial Site, Siem Reap, Cambodia, seen September 4, 2025.

for military purposes; the building was part of the government's front lines with the Khmer Rouge.⁹³

When the Khmer Rouge took power, they embarked on a genocidal campaign that targeted people in all parts of Cambodia. Wat Thmey then became one of the 388 killing fields across the country.⁹⁴ ⁹⁵ Khmer Rouge forces used the building at Wat Thmey to receive, house, and execute people who they detained in Siem Reap, Battambang, and Preah Vihear provinces. When they arrived, people were housed in the one-story buildings on-site before soldiers executed them in the compound or near the pagoda.⁹⁶

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, locals started to find numerous bones on and near the site. The local government organized people to collect skulls and bones and arrange them on the site. They found an estimated 800 human remains. For years, people used the site as a place of prayer, referring to it as Wat Kbal Khmoch ("Death Skull Pagoda").⁹⁷ In the 1990s, the monk Tith Sen built a larger pagoda. In 2006, victims' families constructed the memorial stupa to store the victims' skulls and bones.⁹⁸ In addition to the memorial stupa, the site now also houses a museum.

2. *Status*

⁹³ Association for Conserving Ashes of Khmer Rouge Victims in Wat Thepothivong, "Wat Tepothivong Memorial Site" (pamphlet), Siem Reap, Cambodia.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ "The Memorial Stupa" (museum sign), Wat Tepothivong (Wat Thmey) Memorial Site, Siem Reap, Cambodia, seen September 4, 2025.

⁹⁶ Ibid., Eng Kokthay, "Wat Tepothivong Memorial Site"

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Wat Thmey has received more attention in recent decades, from both government officials and tourists. The Association for Conserving Ashes of Khmer Rouge Regime Victims in Wat Thepothivong operates a memorial on the site. The Association previously worked with the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts to excavate and preserve human remains.⁹⁹ It also worked with the Documentation Center of Cambodia to install informational photographs and signs to teach visitors about the Khmer Rouge, the killing fields, and the subsequent tribunals.¹⁰⁰ The site is also used by Buddhist monks, who, amongst other things, tend to the stupas.

3. Assessment

Preservation at Wat Thmey has mostly been led by locals with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and organizations like the Documentation Center of Cambodia. This has resulted in a site that is powerful, accessible, and in tune with local needs. Buddhist monks still use the site and locals can come and pay respects to family and loved ones killed by the Khmer Rouge.

The site does receive some attention, but is not broadly advertised to the many tourists in town for Angkor. As a result, Wat Thmey sees fewer investments and less revenue, but also is not catering to the needs of foreign tourists the way sites like Angkor does. The signage at Wat Thmey, combined with the fact that there is a separate entrance to the museum and the pagoda area, could also make it easy for visitors to miss the museum. This could potentially result in fewer

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Documentation Center of Cambodia, "The Exhibitions: Provincial Museum Exhibitions on Forced Transfer During the Khmer Rouge Period" (museum sign), Wat Tepothivong (Wat Thmey) Memorial Site, Siem Reap, Cambodia, seen September 4, 2025.

educational opportunities and lower ticket revenue. Overall, though, Wat Thmey is built and operating largely for the benefit of Cambodians, and any benefits to tourists are essentially a bonus.

4. Recommendations

Wat Thmey is already largely creating positive benefits, but there are a few recommendations that could further improve the site. Signage could be improved to minimize the likelihood that people miss the museum. Additionally, formal educational programs could be developed that could be integrated into the local schools' curriculum, such as field trips and visits. These programs could also be a model for adult education or programs for visitors to Siem Reap. And although it is not a recommendation to improve the Wat Thmey site, the preservation model there could be a model for other efforts in different parts of the country: empowering local efforts by augmenting them with national resources.

E. Koh Ker

1. History

Koh Ker is a large archaeological site in the northern Cambodian province of Preah Vihear. It consists of a large pyramid, numerous temples, former water tanks, and other remnants of a relatively large urban development.¹⁰¹ Koh Ker was originally built by the Khmer King Jayavarman IV in 921 and is served as a capital of the Khmer Empire alongside Angkor.¹⁰² It was envisioned as a sacred

¹⁰¹ "Koh Ker: Archaeological Site of Ancient Lingapura or Chok Gargyar - UNESCO World Heritage Centre." UNESCO.org. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1667/>.

¹⁰² Ibid.

city and was constructed according to ancient Indian concepts of the universe.¹⁰³

The result is an intricately planned site that created a new architectural style: the Koh Ker style.¹⁰⁴ This style, which is described by signs on-site as “bigger and more dynamic,” was unique and went on to influence design and construction in the region.¹⁰⁵

Koh Ker’s status as a Khmer capital was relatively short-lived.¹⁰⁶ Over the centuries, it suffered a similar fate to many other sites in Cambodia: erosion, disrepair, and looting.¹⁰⁷ Recently, however, Koh Ker has received more attention and has been the center of more preservation efforts.¹⁰⁸ Efforts to return looted objects have intensified, with US officials taking action to repatriate items like a 10th century sandstone statue.¹⁰⁹ Today, Koh Ker is still considered sacred and locals use the area for worship and to carry out traditional rituals.¹¹⁰

2. *Status*

The Cambodian government first designated Koh Ker as an official archaeological site by Royal Decree in 2004.¹¹¹ In 2006, Cambodia established

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ “Koh Ker: Ancient Capital City of Lingapura or Chok Gargyar” (sign), Koh Ker Archaeological Site, Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia, seen September 5, 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., “Koh Ker: Archaeological Site of Ancient Lingapura or Chok Gargyar - UNESCO World Heritage Centre.”

¹⁰⁷ ALIPH, “Project for Conservation and Restoration of Prasat Kraham of Prasat Kraham Complex, Koh Ker Site: Project Description” (sign), Koh Ker Archaeological Site, Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia, seen September 5, 2025.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., “Koh Ker: Ancient Capital City of Lingapura or Chok Gargyar” (sign), Koh Ker Archaeological Site

¹⁰⁹ U.S. Attorney’s Office, Southern District of New York, “MANHATTAN U.S. ATTORNEY ANNOUNCES CIVIL ACTION SEEKING FORFEITURE OF 10TH CENTURY SANDSTONE STATUE LOOTED FROM CAMBODIAN TEMPLE,” April 4, 2012, Press Release, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120414213609/http://www.justice.gov/usao/nys/pressreleases/April12/duryodhanastatueforfeiturepr.pdf>

¹¹⁰ Ibid., “Koh Ker: Ancient Capital City of Lingapura or Chok Gargyar” (sign), Koh Ker Archaeological Site

¹¹¹ Ibid.

the National Authority of Preah Vihear (NAPV) to promote cultural preservation in the region.¹¹² In 2020, the government amended the Royal Decree concerning Koh Ker to set up the site for inscription as a World Heritage Site, which it achieved in 2023.¹¹³ NAPV is still the primary government authority managing Koh Ker, and now they work with institutions like UNESCO's International Coordinating Committee for Preah Vihear.¹¹⁴ Additionally, international organizations like the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage (ALIPH) contribute significant funds and efforts. ALIPH contributed over \$250,000 (USD) in 2020 to preserve a statue of a dancing Shiva and is currently working on a restoration project of the central tower of the Prasat Thom complex.^{115 116}

3. Assessment

Similar to Angkor, Koh Ker has received an influx of investments since it was designated an official archaeological site and then an UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is visible in the various projects underway on site, including the preservation project of the central Prasat Thom tower. As a result of these efforts, the physical environment is generally well-preserved. There are numerous intact and well-preserved temples and the central pyramid is in a good enough

¹¹² "Who We Are ?" NAPV. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://napv.gov.kh/national-authority-for-preah-vihear?lang=en>.

¹¹³ Ibid., "Koh Ker: Archaeological Site of Ancient Lingapura or Chok Gargyar - UNESCO World Heritage Centre."

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., ALIPH, "Project for Conservation and Restoration of Prasat Kraham of Prasat Kraham Complex, Koh Ker Site: Project Description"

¹¹⁶ "Restoration of the Dancing Shiva of Koh Ker: Aliph Foundation - Protecting Heritage to Build Peace." ALIPH Foundation. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.aliph-foundation.org/en/projects/restoration-of-the-dancing-shiva-of-koh-ker>.

shape that visitors can climb to the top. Like Angkor, the official designations of Koh Ker has meant the development of more infrastructure for visitors, such as road access, ticketing counters, and signage. This signage includes numerous warnings about looting and which authorities to contact if someone suspects looting. The infrastructure was, however, less developed: there were fewer designated paths and facilities for visitors, resulting in informal paths that could impact the local environment and a large amount of litter at certain sites.

Koh Ker receives significantly fewer visitors than Angkor each year. As a result, the atmosphere is much more peaceful and the facilities are less designed around improving the experience for tourists. When the author conducted a site visit, most of the other visitors there were either Cambodians on group tours or locals engaging in everyday activities like fishing. Although there was still local life present at Angkor, the environment at Koh Ker was much more conducive to it. Many Cambodians are not able to visit Koh Ker because of its out-of-the-way location, but the ones who are able to find themselves able to access their cultural heritage without having to battle large crowds of tourists who are being given priority. Altogether, the preservation efforts at Koh Ker seem to have prioritized locals more than Angkor, and the locals seem to be reaping more benefits.

4. Recommendations

Even though Koh Ker receives fewer visitors than Angkor, it still generates revenue from ticket sales and attracts international investments. Cambodian authorities should use some of these funds to develop educational and cultural programs that could be enriching for locals and tourists alike. It should

also establish additional scholarship programs to give locals the opportunity to develop cultural preservation expertise and prevent local villages from being too economically reliant on tourism. Finally, UNESCO and Cambodia authorities should work to implement enforceable legal protections for people who live on site to prevent forced evictions like the ones that occurred at Angkor.

F. Northern Cambodia: Preah Vihear and Anlong Veng

1. History

Northern Cambodia is a region that contains a number of culturally-significant sites, including the Temple of Preah Vihear and Anlong Veng. The Temple of Preah Vihear is a series of linked Buddhist sanctuaries that straddles the Cambodia-Thailand border.¹¹⁷ Though its full history can trace back to the ninth century, most of the surviving parts of the temple were constructed in the 11th and 12th centuries by the Khmer Empire.¹¹⁸ ¹¹⁹ During the Khmer Empire's decline over the next few centuries, Siam (modern-day Thailand) took control of the area around Preah Vihear. Eventually, French colonialists negotiated a settlement with Siam that granted Cambodia control of the Temple.¹²⁰

Thailand disputes this arrangement and has repeatedly made attempts to take control of the area. During World War Two, Thailand seized the areas as part of their alliance with Japan.¹²¹ After Cambodia achieved independence, Thai

¹¹⁷ "Temple of Preah Vihear - UNESCO World Heritage Centre." UNESCO.org. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1224/>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ John D. Ciorciari, "Thailand and Cambodia: The Battle for Preah Vihear." Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education. Accessed November 16, 2025. https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/thailand_and_cambodia_the_battle_for_preah_vihear.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

troops moved into the area to replace the outgoing French troops; Cambodia filed suit at the International Court of Justice, who granted Cambodia control of the Temple in 1963.¹²² Tensions flared again in 2008, when Cambodia successfully sought to have the Temple of Preah Vihear inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.¹²³ These tensions turned into military confrontation and temples in the area suffered damage.¹²⁴ It wasn't until the ICJ reaffirmed its ruling in 2013 that the border area saw peace again.¹²⁵ However, 2025 brought more conflict, with Thai and Cambodian troops engaging in crossfire for several months that damaged several temples.¹²⁶

The area is also significant because of its role in more recent Cambodian history. Northern Cambodia, especially Anlong Veng in the Oddar Meanchey province, was the final stronghold of the Khmer Rouge after they were deposed in 1979.¹²⁷ Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, died and was cremated in Anlong Veng and the area has a number of other significant sites related to Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.¹²⁸

2. *Status*

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., Evans, et al.

¹²⁵ Request for Interpretation of the Judgment of 15 June 1962 in the Case concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand) (Cambodia v. Thailand), Judgment, I.C.J. Reports 2013

¹²⁶ Youk Chhang (Executive Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia) in discussion with the author, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 9, 2025.

¹²⁷ Ly Kok-Chhay. *ANLONG VENG DISTRICT: PRESERVATION OF 14 KHMER ROUGE HISTORICAL SITES* (map). "Documentation Center of Cambodia." Accessed November 16, 2025.

<https://www.dccam.org/homepage/peace/khmer-rouge-historical-sites/>

¹²⁸ Ibid.

The Temple of Preah Vihear is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, and has been since 2008.¹²⁹ The site is managed by the National Authority for Preah Vihear, which is also tasked with managing other sites of cultural significance in the region.¹³⁰ There are also a number of temples along the border and in the region that do not receive as much attention, or do not have official preservation status like the Temple does.¹³¹ The border's disputed status makes preservation of all of these temples more difficult, and the two military conflicts in the twentieth century have resulted in damage to the temple sites.¹³² As for the region's Khmer Rouge history, the Documentation Center of Cambodia has a provincial center in the area to promote memory and preservation: the Anlong Veng Peace Center.¹³³ The Anlong Veng Peace Center provides tours, educational experiences, and preservation support to people in the area.¹³⁴

3. Assessment

Northern Cambodia has numerous temples along the Thai border with cultural significance to many villages. The Temple of Preah Vihear receives most of the attention, and many of these temples are kept intact only by the efforts of villagers themselves. Bou Saran, a Deputy Chief of one of the villages in the region, said that she is not aware of any financial assistance her village has

¹²⁹ Ibid., "Temple of Preah Vihear - UNESCO World Heritage Centre."

¹³⁰ Ibid., "Who We Are?," NAPV

¹³¹ Ibid., Youk Chhang (Executive Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia) in discussion with the author.

¹³² Ibid., Evans, et al.

¹³³ "DCCAM PROVINCIAL CENTER: Anlong Veng Peace Center." Documentation Center of Cambodia. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.dccam.org/homepage/development/dccam-provincial-center-anlong-veng-peace-center/>

¹³⁴ Ibid.

received to preserve the temples in their area.¹³⁵ After a local temple was severely damaged by logging, villagers have been working to preserve the damaged temple's relics.¹³⁶ Tieng Saliv, known as "Uncle Liv" in the village of Romchek where he is Chief, reported that it was similar for his village. Though, he suggested there was more involvement from officials. He said that only locals and staff from the Anlong Veng Peace Center take care of the temples.¹³⁷ Officials from the Ministry of Culture have made visits as well, mostly for GPS purposes to demarcate the border.¹³⁸

Both village officials said that the local schoolchildren have basic knowledge about the temples, but do not know much about them.¹³⁹ Children don't visit the temple as part of the school curriculum, though some may visit with their families on their own time.¹⁴⁰ Both village officials also said that preserving cultural heritage is important, and that historical narratives of the region should include both the temples and important Khmer Rouge sites.¹⁴¹ However, Bou said that it has only been Cambodians who have told the Khmer Rouge history of the region and that international organizations have bigger role to play in preserving those sites.¹⁴² On the note of education, Uncle Liv explained that they have been successful over the years in spreading awareness about the

¹³⁵ Bou Saran (Deputy Chief of Sralao Sraong village) in discussion with the author, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 10, 2025.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Tieng Saliv "Uncle Liv" (Chief of Romchek village) in discussion with the author, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 10, 2025.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., Bou Saran (Deputy Chief of Sralao Sraong village) in discussion with the author; Ibid., Tieng Saliv "Uncle Liv" (Chief of Romchek village) in discussion with the author.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., Bou Saran (Deputy Chief of Sralao Sraong village) in discussion with the author

protected area and what that means.¹⁴³ He stressed that this was not a formal education campaign, but an effort over time to inform people of what the protected area was and how they should engage with cultural property.¹⁴⁴

Bou and Uncle Liv's testimony makes clear that the international and domestic cultural protection regimes are not conferring substantial benefits on the locals in Northern Cambodia. Villages are not receiving the resources they need to maintain these sites, nor do they have enough expert professionals to assist with preservation efforts. These do not have enough resources on their own to begin developing local expertise, so they have to make do with less. The result is temples that have deteriorated over time, even as villagers have tried and succeeded in protecting some sites. So while Preah Vihear is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the region receives lots of international attention, locals still don't have formal roads to get to their own temples.¹⁴⁵ Local villagers seem to be an afterthought, even as they are the ones doing much of the work to preserve the cultural property in the region.

4. Recommendations

Northern Cambodia, especially Preah Vihear, does receive attention from Cambodia and the international community, but that attention has not translated into local investments or support. Bou Saron and Uncle Liv both said that more assistance from authorities would make a big difference, especially if they could

¹⁴³ Ibid., Tieng Saliv "Uncle Liv" (Chief of Romchek village) in discussion with the author

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., Bou Saron (Deputy Chief of Sralao Sraong village) in discussion with the author; Ibid., Tieng Saliv "Uncle Liv" (Chief of Romchek village) in discussion with the author.

build a road to the temples.¹⁴⁶ Cambodian authorities should work with village officials like Bou Saron and Uncle Liv to identify similar needs and help direct funds for cultural preservation efforts. International organizations could also provide this support, either in collaboration with the Cambodian government or as their own grant programs. Once there are more resources going towards local villages, authorities should also work together to develop childhood and adult education programs. Together, these programs would make a big difference on the ground and begin bringing benefits to locals in the region.

G. Wat Bo

1. History

Wat Bo is a Buddhist monastery in the Wat Bo neighborhood of Siem Reap. It is one of the oldest monasteries in the province.¹⁴⁷ It has long served the region as a religious site for both monks and laypeople, as well as place where young people can take refuge. Youth come to the monastery to receive and education, along with room and board.¹⁴⁸ Wat Bo also serves as an archaeological center, as it has a collection of over 2,500 artefacts dating as far back as prehistoric times. In recent years, the site has become increasingly popular with researchers and tourists.¹⁴⁹

2. Status

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ “Wat Bo and its collections” (museum sign), Wat Bo, Siem Reap, Cambodia, seen September 6, 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Mom Kunthea, “Wat Bo is Siem Reap’s new tourist destination.” Khmer Times, September 23, 2024. Accessed November 4, 2025.

<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501563857/wat-bo-is-siem-reaps-new-tourist-destination/>

Wat Bo is still an active Buddhist monastery, and is managed as such. Many of the shrines on site have places that accept donations for maintenance. Because the site has been the subject of increased attention, more investment has poured in. The Siem Reap Provincial Administration announced a cooperation with the German Agency for International Cooperation in 2024, culminating in the Wat Bo Village Community Project.¹⁵⁰ There is also currently a museum under construction with funding from the royal government.¹⁵¹ Currently, the site is open to the public and tourists will often visit, with some giving donations. The monks still manage the monastery, but more interest in the area has led to more investments.

3. Assessment

As an active Buddhist monastery, Wat Bo is very accessible to the public and only asks for donations. This includes both the sacred spaces and the makeshift museum of artifacts. Monks at Wat Bo have worked hard to collect and preserve the artifacts present there. Although many artifacts found in Cambodia belong by law to the government, the government has not made efforts to force Wat Bo to deliver these objects to the National Museum or other authorities. Instead, they have worked with them to protect the artifacts; in fact, the government is currently funding the construction of a larger museum on site.

The accessibility of the site to anyone who wants to respectfully enter, combined with the collaborative approach between the monks and the

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ “Construction Project of the Samdech Preah Prom Ratanamani Pin Sem-Rajabo Museum” (museum sign), Wat Bo, Siem Reap, Cambodia, seen September 6, 2025.

government, have created a site that complies with preservation responsibilities and keeps its doors open to locals. The monks do not discriminate against tourists, but they have Cambodians and other Buddhists in mind when it comes to their preservation efforts. This means that although visitors are welcome, many education benefits go towards locals and Buddhists living at the monastery.

4. Recommendation

The Wat Bo neighborhood has received increasing attention from tourists and visitors, and the completion of a museum on site will likely accelerate those trends. This could bring the monastery more money to develop educational and cultural programs and invest in preservation projects. However, to ensure the tourist economy does not take over and benefits are equitable, Cambodian authorities should work to develop housing protections in the area. This would prevent displacement by hotels. They should also work with Wat Bo monks to ensure the new museum is free and accessible to locals, and that its resources are readily available to local schools.

H. Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

1. History

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (“Tuol Sleng”) is a collection of buildings in the middle of Phnom Penh. The complex was originally used as a high school for local students.¹⁵² However, the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime turned the site into a notorious torture prison soon after they took power in 1975

¹⁵² “History of the Museum.” Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Accessed November 13, 2025. <https://tuolsleng.gov.kh/en/museum/building/>.

and forcibly emptied the city.¹⁵³ During their reign of terror from 1975-1979, the Khmer Rouge established nearly 200 prisons across the country. These sites were used to imprison “enemies of the state:” foreigners, intellectuals, and others targeted by the regime.¹⁵⁴ Once imprisoned, people were subject to inhumane conditions and numerous torture tactics. Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, was one of these prisons and has since become a symbol of their notorious cruelty.

From 1975-1979, Tuol Sleng was the center of this network of prisons and between 12,000 and 20,000 people were imprisoned there; only a dozen survived.¹⁵⁵ Oftentimes, entire families were imprisoned on site.¹⁵⁶ The population of most of these prisons across the country were whoever the Khmer Rouge regime, “Angkar,” considered enemies of the state.¹⁵⁷ Although many of these civilian victims were imprisoned at Tuol Sleng, more recent research has revealed that 80% of the prisoners at Tuol Sleng were actually Khmer Rouge cadres.¹⁵⁸ This 80-20 split suggests that Tuol Sleng served a special purpose in the network of prisons: it was used to punish Khmer Rouge cadres and their families who were deemed not loyal enough. Although this has complicated narratives of

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Narrowcasters (Cambodia) Co., Ltd., “Audio Tour of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum” (pamphlet), 2015, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., “History of the Museum.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Harriet Fitch Little. “Forty Years after Genocide, Cambodia Finds Complicated Truth Hard to Bear.” The Guardian, April 16, 2015. <http://theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/16/forty-years-after-genocide-cambodia-finds-complicated-truth-hard-to-bear>.

victimhood, some victims have welcomed this revelation as an opportunity to confront uncomfortable truths, which is a necessary part of reconciliation.^{159 160}

Since the fall of the Khmer Rouge, and the end of protracted armed conflict in Cambodia, Tuol Sleng has become a physical manifestation of the country's memory. It has been turned into a museum, which receives significant international attention and serves as one of the main memorial sites for genocide victims.¹⁶¹ The museum aims to walk visitors through the history of the site, and the genocide more broadly, humanizing victims through their personal stories. The site also hosts archives, temporary exhibitions, and events to promote education, memory, and justice.¹⁶²

2. *Status*

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is owned and operated by the Department of Museums of the Ministry of Culture and Arts.¹⁶³ Although the site is owned and operated by the Cambodian government, there is still significant international interest and involvement in its preservation. The site, and particularly its archives, was previously inscribed in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. This was due to the sites significance in both global history and

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., Youk Chhang (Executive Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia) in discussion with the author.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., "History of the Museum."

¹⁶² "Events." Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Accessed November 13, 2025. <https://tuolsleng.gov.kh/en/events-news/>.

¹⁶³ UNESCO, *Executive Summary: Nomination 1748*, Phnom Penh, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1748/documents/>

preserving global memory, and there is a marker in the museum commemorating this inscription.¹⁶⁴

Cambodia nominated Tuol Sleng to be a World Heritage Site, as part of a collection of three sites that are collectively referred to as “Cambodian Memorial Sites;” UNESCO granted World Heritage Site status in 2025.¹⁶⁵ It isn’t just the broader international community who has shown interest in Tuol Sleng’s preservation. Germany’s Civil Peace Service provided funds for the museum to hire staff, and the US embassy in Cambodia has invested more than \$100,000 in projects related to Tuol Sleng since 2017.¹⁶⁶¹⁶⁷

3. *Assessment*

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is a powerful act of memory in the middle of Phnom Penh. The site is well preserved physically. Some aspects of prison cells no longer remain (such as walls separating larger rooms into smaller cells), but this has mostly been done to promote the educational purpose of the museum—there are still examples of what the average prisoner may have experienced. This physical preservation is heightened by an audio tour that communicates the emotional weight of the site. There is signage, but the signage has significantly less information than the audio tour. The audio tour is affordable for foreign tourists and discounted for Cambodians, making the information both

¹⁶⁴ “UNESCO Celebrates the 14th Anniversary of the Inscription of the Tuol Genocide Museum Archives on the Memory of the World Register.” UNESCO.org, July 28, 2023. Accessed November 13, 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-celebrates-14th-anniversary-inscription-tuol-sleng-genocide-museum-archives-memory-world>.

¹⁶⁵ “Cambodian Memorial Sites: From Centres of Repression to Places of Peace and Reflection - UNESCO World Heritage Centre.” UNESCO.org. Accessed November 13, 2025. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1748/>.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., Fitch Little.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., “U.S. Assistance for Cambodian Cultural Preservation.”

accessible and a revenue generator. On top of the information shared in the tour, the museum has extensive archives that it makes available to the public online.¹⁶⁸

Although the museum does a good job of explaining the broader history of the site and of the Cambodian Genocide, it does leave out important information about the Tuol Sleng site itself. Records from the Documentation Center of Cambodia have shown that 80% of the prisoners at Tuol Sleng were Khmer Rouge cadres.^{169 170} However, this fact is not in any of the official materials and is not mentioned anywhere on site. The effect of this is that the museum effectively serves as a model of what Khmer Rouge prisons were like throughout Cambodia, while only selectively discussing the history of this specific prison. This creates a dissonance for some survivors, who have said that the complicated truth is part of the history and therefore should be part of the museum.¹⁷¹

4. Recommendations

Domestic and international efforts have created a powerful site of remembrance, and an importance center of education for Cambodians and the rest of the world. But the exclusion of key parts of the site's history creates a dissonance that limits the many benefits of the site and makes it harder for visitors to walk away with a full understanding of what they should remember. Officials should consider including this information in the historical descriptions on site and the audio tour. Complicating this narrative would only increase the

¹⁶⁸ "Archives." Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Accessed November 13, 2025.
<https://archives.tuolsleng.gov.kh/>.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., Fitch Little.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., Youk Chhang (Executive Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia) in discussion with the author.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

educational benefits of the site. Additional educational programs and partnerships with the Documentation Center of Cambodia would bring the benefits of memory to more people. Finally, Cambodian authorities should use the museum's digital archives as a model to make the information and history from other culturally-significant sites just as accessible. This would democratize the memory and study of the past, and spread out the opportunity for scholarship.

I. The Choeung Ek Genocidal Center

1. History

The Choeung Ek Genocidal Center is a site located approximately 15 kilometers (9 miles) southeast of the center of Phnom Penh. It is mostly a field with a large memorial stupa in the center. Scattered throughout the site are signs explaining the dark history, mass graves, and other preserved elements like pavilions and buildings. There is also a small visitor center at the entrance, a museum, and a book store on site.

When the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975, they began to empty cities like Phnom Penh. Many people were marched out into the country in a forced attempt to create an agrarian, Communist society.¹⁷² The Khmer Rouge regime enforced their rule with brutal and genocidal violence. People who were deemed threats or undesirable were brought to “killing fields” across the country.¹⁷³ At these killing fields, Khmer Rouge troops would commit torture and mass murder,

¹⁷² “Cambodia.” Holocaust and Genocide Studies. University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts. Accessed November 13, 2025. <https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/cambodia>.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

then dispose the bodies in mass graves. There were up to 300 killing fields across the country that killed up to 3 million people.^{174 175}

Choeung Ek was one of these 300 and the Khmer Rouge killed people in more than 100 mass graves.¹⁷⁶ People would be transferred to Choeung Ek from prisons such as S-21 (now Tuol Sleng).¹⁷⁷ Packed into trucks, they would be forced into small buildings to await their fate. The Khmer Rouge employed a number of inhumane tactics to kill and torture their victims, including smashing babies against a tree and making their mothers watch.¹⁷⁸ Some people were able to escape and later tell their stories, but the vast majority died.¹⁷⁹

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, local villages identified the as one of the regime's killing fields. There were more than 100 pits containing mass graves and more than 6,000 bodies were exhumed in the 1980s.¹⁸⁰ Since then, the city has been repopulated and started to grow and development around Choeung Ek; however, the site itself is now a museum and center for genocide education and prevention.

2. *Status*

¹⁷⁴ Narrowcasters & Associates Co., Ltd., "The Choeung Ek Genocidal Center | Audio Tour of the Killing Fields" (pamphlet), 2011, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., "Cambodia." Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., UNESCO, Executive Summary: Nomination 1748

¹⁷⁷ មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលប្រល័យពូជសាសន៍ជើងឯក - Choeung EK Genocidal Center, "មុនឆ្នាំ១៩៧៥

ជើងឯកជាកន្លែងបញ្ចុះសពជនជាតិខ្មែរស្រុកយាបចិន // Prior to 1975, Choeung Ek was a Chinese-descendent cemetery," Facebook, March 7, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1C3APr2beE/>

¹⁷⁸ "Chan Kiri Tree/Killing Tree" (museum sign), Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, seen September 10, 2025.

¹⁷⁹ Sokphal Din, "Witness History: Surviving Cambodia's 'Killing Fields'," interview by Rebecca Kesby, *BBC*, July 3, 2019.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., UNESCO, Executive Summary: Nomination 1748

The Choeung Ek Genocidal Center is now a museum that receives support from several sources. The program for the center's audio tour lists individual donors, as well as the Municipality of Phnom Penh, Cambodian Living Arts, the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, the Transcultural Psychological Resource Center, and the Documentation Center of Cambodia.¹⁸¹ The government of Cambodia also supports the site and nominated it to be listed as World Heritage Site, alongside two other genocide sites in the Phnom Penh area.¹⁸² In 2025, UNESCO granted it World Heritage Status, alongside Tuol Sleng, as part of the "Cambodian Memorial Sites."¹⁸³ Choeung Ek has become the most well-known of the killing fields and attracts a large number of tourists each year.¹⁸⁴

3. Assessment

The Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, like the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, is one of the main locations for memory of the Cambodian Genocide. Cultural heritage protection efforts, both domestic and international, have allowed authorities to construct a powerful site of memory that benefits Cambodians and foreign tourists alike. By working together, government officials and locals have been able to preserve human remains found on site, with many of them being given a final resting place in the memorial stupa on site. This not only helps

¹⁸¹ Ibid., Narrowcasters & Associates Co., Ltd., "The Choeung Ek Genocidal Center | Audio Tour of the Killing Fields" (pamphlet)

¹⁸² Ibid., "Cambodian Memorial Sites: From Centres of Repression to Places of Peace and Reflection - UNESCO World Heritage Centre."

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Istvan, Zoltan. "'Killing Fields' Lure Tourists in Cambodia." National Geographic. January 10, 2003. Accessed November 13, 2025. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/news-killing-fields-cambodia-tourist>.

preserve the history and memory of the Khmer Rouge era, but gives families some sense of closure.

The area is well-preserved and starkly depicts the site's vicious history. Like at Tuol Sleng, much of the information that visitors would be interested in is on an audio tour. The audio tour is available in 12 languages, although signs around the site are only in Khmer and English. This audio tour includes historical information and personal testimonials to give visitors a complete understanding of the horrors. Although it is relatively comprehensive and mentions the Khmer Rouge's time as a government-in-exile, the tour does not discuss the country's war with Vietnam or public opinion in Cambodia during this time.¹⁸⁵ Unlike Tuol Sleng, the signage does communicate a good deal of information, so visitors who don't participate in an audio tour can still walk away with the important knowledge the site is trying to convey. Many of these signs reiterate that Choeung Ek is a burial site, reminding visitors to act respectfully and not walk on the mass graves.

Overall, the Choeung Ek Genocidal Center's main focus is to educate people about the killing fields not just there, but around the country as well. Many of these killing field are inaccessible or lost, so this provides Cambodians with a tremendous educational benefit and provides a place for shared grieving. Unlike some other locations in Cambodia, notably Angkor, the site is not catering to the needs and wants of foreign tourists. Although foreign tourists are clearly in mind, as there are 12 language options for the audio tour, the main focus is to give

¹⁸⁵ Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, "*Audio Tour of the Killing Fields*" (Audio tour, Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 10, 2025), <https://www.facebook.com/killingfield/>

Cambodians a place to learn and remembers. In this, the cultural heritage protection efforts have been successful.

4. Recommendations

This site is a good model of preserving cultural heritage for education purposes without catering solely to foreign tourists. Locals have a place where they can learn and grieve, alongside foreign tourists who have also come to pay their respects. Authorities could improve the impact of Choeung Ek by working with the Documentation Center of Cambodia to develop additional education programs for students and adults in Cambodia and elsewhere. Furthermore, authorities could work with local survivors and their families to ensure that their needs are prioritized and met as the site continues to get more attention internationally.

J. Oudong

1. History

Oudong is a village to the north of Phnom Penh. The village is the site of a post-Angkorian city that once served as the capital of Cambodia. Sitting alongside and on top of Oudong mountain, this site is composed of numerous temples, various Hindu and Buddhist statues, a market, and other archaeological remnants.¹⁸⁶ It was originally founded in the early seventeenth century and was designated a capital city by King Jayajetha II in 1618, serving as the seat of government between the Angkor and Phnom Penh eras.¹⁸⁷ It grew as various

¹⁸⁶ "Ancient City of Ondong - UNESCO World Heritage Centre." UNESCO.org. Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6459/>.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., "Ancient City of Ondong - UNESCO World Heritage Centre."

kings built out the temples and other structures on site, becoming a model of Cambodian architecture and planning.

In the Khmer Rouge era, Oudong saw intense fighting. The Khmer Rouge initially took over Oudong and used the close proximity to Phnom Penh to begin attacking the capital.¹⁸⁸ In March 1974, the Khmer Rouge forced Oudong villagers out of their home. This was treated as a trial run of forced evacuations, and the Khmer Rouge later used these methods in the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh.¹⁸⁹ Because of its close proximity to Phnom Penh, the Lon Nol government saw any Khmer Rouge presence in Oudong as a threat. As a result, the government fought hard to retake the area before its fall. This meant intense bombing that killed many villagers and left the site “in ruins.”¹⁹⁰ Many temples and tombs in the Oudong complex were “sacked and largely destroyed.”¹⁹¹

2. *Status*

Today, the damage has not been completely restored, but people have returned to Oudong. Villagers live in the area, local tourists make the climb to pay tribute, and the government submitted “the Ancient City of Oudong” to be a UNESCO World Heritage Site.¹⁹² The submission cited UNESCO criteria iii (“to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared) and criteria iv (“to be an

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., Youk Chhang (Executive Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia) in discussion with the author.

¹⁸⁹ “Scholar Describes Fall of Phnom Penh, 30 Years Later.” Radio Free Asia, June 3, 2025. Accessed November 4, 2025. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/politics/cambodia_short-20050418.html.

¹⁹⁰ Schanberg, Sydney H. “Town Is Devastated In Cambodian ‘Victory’,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), July 28, 1974.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., “Ancient City of Oudong - UNESCO World Heritage Centre.”

outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history”), pointing to Oudong’s significant cultural, political, commercial, and religious history.¹⁹³

Oudong was placed on UNESCO’s Tentative List, which means it is being considered for World Heritage Site status. The increased attention has resulted in some more tourists, but there has not been significantly more investment in the area; the only sign on site of preservation or other efforts is a small visitor center and a map.

3. *Assessment*

Oudong is a good example of a site that is being preserved for use by locals: a large number of the visitors are Cambodians who climb the stairs to make an offering. This contrasts with a site like Angkor, which is mostly overrun with foreign tourists. The stairs up to the temples have numerous vendors selling flowers, incense, and other items people may want with them when they get to the temple at the top. The temples themselves are well-preserved, but the general area suffers from litter. Trash from visitors—and from monkeys who aggressively approach visitors—piles up right alongside the sacred temples. This is exacerbated by the large market in the middle of the site. Although the market does provide even more local vendors business opportunities, the lack of formal visitor infrastructure leads to too much trash and not enough waste facilities.

The lack of more formal infrastructure, in comparison to more developed sites like Angkor and those in Phnom Penh, does have other impacts on the

¹⁹³ Ibid.

function of the site. There is only one small visitor center that is not always open. It does not have many signs about the history of the site, and only offers one map that is challenging to read. Because of this, visitors—whether they are locals, Cambodian tourists, or visitors—don't have the opportunity to learn about the full history of the site and may miss aspects of the site. Some people do offer tours, but they have to be booked ahead of time and cater mostly to foreign tourists.¹⁹⁴ This creates a situation where the infrastructure does preserve the main function of the temples themselves, but does not do well to preserve the history that makes the temples so significant.

4. Recommendations

Oudong is on UNESCO's Tentative List.¹⁹⁵ As part of this, Oudong will likely receive more attention and resources in the coming years. As this occurs, cleaning up the site should be a major focus. Removing litter and installing waste management infrastructure would go a long way in preserving the site as a sacred place. Additionally, signage should be installed that explains the history of the site. This signage could be in a revamped visitor center, or just small signs by the numerous temples and statues. These changes would help improve the experience at Oudong, and ensure that future visitors understand its importance. Authorities should also be mindful of the local usage of the site as it becomes a more attractive tourist destination. Policies should be developed that allow Cambodian

¹⁹⁴ "Showing 1 - 24 of 200+ results for "oudong tour"." Viator. Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://www.viator.com/searchResults/all?text=oudong+tour>

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., "Ancient City of Oudong - UNESCO World Heritage Centre."

vendors to continue operating, and that encourage responsible and respectful tourism.

K. National Museum of Cambodia

1. History

The National Museum of Cambodia is located in the heart of Phnom Penh only a few blocks from the Royal Palace. The museum first opened in 1920 as the Albert Sarraut Museum, named after the Governor-General of French Indochina at the time.¹⁹⁶ In its early years, the museum saw growth both of its collections and of its physical building. The French gave control of the museum to Cambodians in 1951, ahead of independence, and the first Cambodian director was appointed in 1966.¹⁹⁷ During their reign from 1975-1979, the Khmer Rouge closed and evacuated the museum, killing many staff and leaving the collections to suffer neglect.¹⁹⁸ The museum opened again in 1979; however, the immense loss of life and expertise has impacted the museum's operations as the country has rebuilt.¹⁹⁹ In recent years, repatriation efforts and prosecutions of looters has led to a large-scale return of artifacts to Cambodia from third countries.²⁰⁰

2. Status

The National Museum of Cambodia is under the auspices of the Department of Museums of the Ministry of Culture and Arts.²⁰¹ In addition to

¹⁹⁶ "Museum History." National Museum of Cambodia. Accessed November 16, 2025.

https://www.cambodiamuseum.info/museum_history.html.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ives, Mike. "Cambodia's Stolen Statues Are Coming Home to an Overflowing Museum," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/19/world/asia/cambodia-national-museum-statues.html>

²⁰¹ Ibid., "Museum History." National Museum of Cambodia.

preserving important cultural artifacts and hosting archives, the museum works to promote Cambodian culture by participating in exchange programs with foreign museums and publishing materials in multiple languages.²⁰² As part of these relationships, the National Museum has received assistance from countries like the United States, whose embassy touts numerous projects related to the museum.²⁰³ Given its central location in Phnom Penh, and the impressive collection, the National Museum is a major attraction that the country's tourism ministry promotes in materials about the region.²⁰⁴

3. *Assessments*

The National Museum plays an important role in the cultural heritage preservation ecosystem in Cambodia. It houses a large collection of cultural property, ensuring that the property is protected and preserved. Many items were stolen or looted from their original locations and have made their way to the National Museum through the process of repatriation. This is probably one of the most significant role that the National Museum plays in Cambodia's cultural heritage protection regime: securing the repatriation of cultural property, and providing storage and preservation space for that property. This means that the National Museum is one of the major players actively preserving cultural property in the country. Its success buoys broaden efforts, and many of the benefits go to

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid., "U.S. Assistance for Cambodian Cultural Preservation."

²⁰⁴ "Phnom Penh (Capital City)." Tourism Cambodia. Accessed November 16, 2025.
<https://tourismcambodia.org/provinces/44/phnom-penh-capital-city>

locals themselves; the ticket price for Cambodians is steeply discounted, making the cultural property on display easier to access for locals.²⁰⁵

4. Recommendations

The National Museum is, in many ways, already a successful example of cultural heritage preservation. To broaden its impact in the country, museum officials and the Ministry of Culture and Arts should work to develop satellite locations throughout the country, or institute a grant system for local museums. This would allow for the development of preservation expertise, and give the National Museum more flexibility with its collection. Travelling exhibitions could expand the audience able to learn from the historical objects, and improvements to local museums could empower them to bring back regional artifacts currently stored in Phnom Penh. These actions would open the door to more Cambodians learning about their history, and broaden the impact of the National Museum beyond those able to visit Phnom Penh.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, there is a complex network of international law, treaties, domestic law, domestic policies, and international involvement underlying cultural heritage preservation in Cambodia. International law protects sites during times of war, creates responsibilities for the state during times of peace, and prohibits looting. It also establishes programs to funnel resources to preservation projects, especially for sites considered particularly significant to the global community. Domestic Cambodian law builds on this to create a legal protection regime where the state owns the country's

²⁰⁵ "Information for Visitors." National Museum of Cambodia. Accessed November 16, 2025. https://www.cambodiamuseum.info/en_information_visitors.html

cultural property and plays a large role of preserving it. The impact of this cultural preservation regime on the ground has been mixed, as shown by the ten case studies examined in this paper.

While efforts from international and domestic authorities have preserved sites physically, most of the benefits in many major sites are not going to local Cambodians. This is especially true at the Angkor Archaeological Park. That does not mean that these efforts are doing harm or that benefits can't be shifted to locals. By working with local groups and stakeholders, Cambodian and international authorities can develop and implement policies that will ensure locals benefit from these sites. The case studies in the paper include some recommendations, but engaging with policy makers and local leaders will yield more specific policies to implement. Cambodia has a rich cultural history that deserves to be preserved. And Cambodians deserve to reap the benefits of this preservation, not just foreign tourists. This is possible, but only if authorities choose to prioritize cultural benefits instead of just physical preservation and the tourism economy.

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