Sustainable Development in Angkor
Conservation Regime of the Old Villagescape and Development

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Introduction
The second phase of the Angkor management policy has its emphasis on promoting sustainable development of both tourism and local communities. What we found in Angkor is, however, the conservation of the old villagescape vigorously exercised by APSARA, rather than the fruits of development appreciated.

The term “villagescape” is my own invention, following Appadurai’s neologism – “ethnoscape”. Appadurai defines ethnoscape as
the landscape of persons who make up the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.

(Appadurai 1991:192)

Taking the essence of the modern political implication of ethnoscape beyond national borders, by villagescape I mean the combination of villages and landscape as the contested representation of a bounded landscape which no longer just belongs to traditional villagers in the globally recontextualized space, i.e. the World Heritage Site. The conservation of the old villagescape is based on UNESCO’s old conservation philosophy recaptured and reintroduced in Cambodia and which has recently become a highly contested discourse in relation to that of the community development. The main actors of the discourses are the local villagers and APSARA, while other groups of actors are involved to a certain extent.

Winter (2007), who studied the issue of heritage and tourism in Angkor, also uses the term “touristscape” as a dominant discourse there, together with that of monumental conservation and landscape zoning. He argues that these discourses frame Angkor as a static, singular and geographically bounded touristscape. The landscape of villages in the Angkor World Heritage Site is indeed treated by APSARA in the same way. In other words, the tendency in the management of Angkor is to transform or reconstruct the space into a frozen landscape considered ideal for a World Heritage Site. It contradicts lived-in landscapes if landscapes mean “created by people – through their experience and engagement with the world around them” (cf. Bender 1993:1). As Bender argues, “There is never a landscape, always many landscapes” (1998:25, original emphasis). It shows that constructing a landscape is a political process, not just cultural or economic.

This chapter firstly studies the concept of landscape as the basis of the villagescape and its application, especially in the context of World Heritage Sites. It then illustrates the background as to why this conservation regime has become prominent in the phase of sustainable development. Thirdly, it discusses the parallel development of the alternative residential site of Run Ta-Elk for the local population, which is framed as an ideal “eco-village” with a traditional façade according to a modern concept, and what this site actually means in relation to the management of local villagers. Fourthly, it investigates in which ways APSARA has been implementing the conservation of the old villagescape. Next, it will explore how the local inhabitants are responding to APSARA’s new regime. Local inhabitants referred to in this section are mostly those who have been living in the Angkor area for generations, though there is a number of migrated people who have been living in front of (west) or south of Angkor Wat since
the 1990s. Finally, it will conclude with an assessment of the current management situation and issues and demonstrate an alternative prospect.

**Concept of Landscape and Application**

**Concept of Landscape**

The idea of beautiful, splendid or bizarre scenery exists throughout the world. Memories of familiar or recognizable landscapes must exist in the minds of all men. The two terms – scenery and landscape – can mean both natural and artificial. Thus, the concept of landscape may not originate in one area, but the English term “landscape” connotes that the land in question is in a temperate climate. Gow (1995:43) argues, “[I]t is hard to see Amazonia as landscape, in the sense this term has for people from temperate climates.” Not surprisingly, therefore, the way in which the term is used in academia and agencies dealing with heritage today is based on the European concept.

According to Hirsch (1995:2), the term “landscape” was first introduced into the English language from the Dutch word *landschap* in the 16th century as a technical term used by painters. It was linked to the perception of countryside scenery and its subsequent improvement (through landscape gardening, estate management, etc.):

The goal was to achieve a correspondence between the pictorial ideal and the countryside itself.

(Hirsch 1995:2)

This tendency is reflected in the way the landscape concept is applied to broader domains of social and cultural life (cf. Hirsch 1995:2). Considering the etymological root in European painting and the later associations with the landscape gardens of the landed gentry and early financial bourgeoisie, it connotes a particular version of “high” or elite Western culture (cf. Green 1995:38). In addition, landscape is objectified as a framed, thus fixed, picture (cf. Pinny 1995) to gaze at and is often devoid of people. To a certain extent, this framing of landscape has caused policy-makers to consider rural landscape management as primarily orientated towards “gaze” and admiration. This earlier European concept of landscape as static and an object of viewing, like a park, however, stands in stark opposition to that of the practice of everyday life and social dynamism which entails change.

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1 In Village-E, moved by the government in 1991 from a location close to Angkor Wat to an area adjacent to Siem Reap, for instance, 70% of the villagers in 2010 came from other provinces according to a vice-chief. Villages north of Angkor Thom, however, consist of mostly old inhabitants who have been living there for generations, while some ancient villages along the main tourist roads in the east may have more new migrants. According to De Lopez et al. (2006:13), out of 59 villages in Angkor, some 87% of households are believed to trace their ancestry back to Angkorian times.
Application of Concept

When the term “landscape” is applied to a “non-Western” and “non-temperate” climate zone where a large population resides, tensions emerge between the managers of the “landscape” and those who live and work on the land. The managers try to maintain the fixed “picture” of the landscape, considering that the people create unwanted changes, despite the fact that the landscape has often been the outcome of people’s continued work on the land.

The phenomenon of freezing an idealized landscape can be observed in many World Heritage Sites. The managers of the sites try to frame and cut out the landscapes in a manner which fits the “pictures” that they consider presentable to others. The landscaping in the context of World Heritage Sites entails the zoning of protection and development according to their own criteria, which may cause the alienation of local inhabitants from their familiar lived-in “landscapes”. The landscape is then transformed into a desirable one for a World Heritage Site, principally for the visual consumption of tourists and simultaneously enhancing the prestige of the nation. In a number of regional World Heritage Sites, local inhabitants were completely or partially moved outside the immediate area in order for the managing authorities to create archaeological parks, resulting in the separation of inhabitants from their spiritual, emotional, historical, and economic connections with the landscapes. Borobudur and Prambanan in Indonesia, Ayuthaya and Sukhothai in Thailand (Black and Wall 2001; Tashiro 2001:219), and Vat Phou and Champasak in Laos (Nishimura 2005:19) are cases in point.

Heritage and landscape as social constructs are becoming accepted norms even among archaeologists. The shift in archaeological disciplines is bringing anthropologists into heritage studies, while archaeologists have incorporated anthropological approaches into their understanding of heritage discourse. Bender, one of the leading scholars in this endeavour, argues that

[In the context of a contemporary obsession with preserving and commodifying the past, it becomes particularly urgent that we take the measure of landscape, both theoretically and in practice. More often than not, those involved in the conservation, preservation and mummification of landscape create normative landscapes, as though there was only one way of telling or experiencing. They attempt to ‘freeze’ the landscape as a palimpsest of past activity. But, of course, the very act of freezing is itself a way of reappropriating the land. For the Heritage people freezing time and space allows the landscape or monuments in it to be packaged, presented, and turned into museum exhibits. We need to recognise that this is just one way of handling the past. We need to work against the grain of this passive, nostalgic, heavy-with-history notion of landscape.

(Bender 1998:26, original emphasis)
Hirsch (1995) also insists that landscape emerges out of a cultural process. For him, there are two kinds of landscape: the one we initially see and the second that is produced through local practice and which we come to recognise and understand through fieldwork and through ethnographic description and interpretation. In other words, “landscape” entails a relationship between the “foreground” of the imagined or ideal world and the “background” of ordinary, workaday life or social life. While the foreground is to be seen by outsiders and visitors, the background becomes contentious and sometimes conflicts with those who wish to show only “foreground” to the outsiders, hiding the “background”. Hirsch’s notion of “foreground” and “background” landscape suggests a landscape to be viewed with relations of power and as political space conducive of conflicts. It is also true that what can be “foreground” and what “background” may change through the passage of time.

In 1991, the “background” landscape in Angkor constituted poor local housing and their ways of life in general, so that the people who used to live around Angkor Wat – the most magnificent “foreground” – were forced out of their villages by the government to erase the sight of the “background”. After the World Heritage nomination and increasingly after 2000, the same methodology was not encouraged, but the conservation of an “old” landscape in Zones 1 and 2 was emphasized as the “foreground”, while modern or urban landscapes as the “background” were strictly prohibited from developing. In fact, the purpose was to convert the entire Angkor Park as a monolithic “old” landscape studded with ancient monuments and traditional houses. Terms such as “old”, “ancient”, “traditional”, or “original” are often used as the category for protection, whereas the category considered as “new” or “modern” contains objects of restrictions.

As discussed so far when a reference is made to a heritage site, the landscape is not just natural or static, but is something that emerges out of a cultural process and bears the trace of people’s lives and struggles, their embedded memories, kinship relations and identity which they have developed, and the rituals performed, connecting people living in the present with the past, and forging ties among them that will endure into the future (cf. Gow 1995; Morphy 1995). While another more appropriate term than landscape is sought to describe the environment of a living heritage site, the importance of visibility in landscape is clearly recognizable in sites designated as World Heritage and has been vigorously promoted by the tourism industry.

In 1992 the term “cultural landscape” was adopted as a new criterion for the nomination of World Heritage Sites. To embrace a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment and describe a mixed site

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2 Tongariro National Park in New Zealand, originally nominated as a World Heritage Site in 1990, became the first property to be inscribed on the World Heritage List under the revised criteria describing cultural landscapes in 1993 (cf. UNESCO 2011b).
(cf. Adams 2003:91-92), the 1998 Operational Guidelines (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 1999)\(^4\) state that cultural landscapes are

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\text{illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal [...]. Cultural landscapes often reflect specific techniques of sustainable land-use, considering the characteristics and limits of the natural environment they are established in, and a specific spiritual relation to nature. (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 1999:10)}
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UNESCO’s criterion of cultural landscape clearly recognizes the dynamic relationship between man and nature. However, the application of cultural landscape is rather limited or, even though it may be applied, the managing authorities tend to adhere to old conservation philosophy, ignoring the human-nature interactions. In Angkor, only mostly the areas along the rivers in Zone 4 were designated as cultural landscapes, thus the category was not applied to Zones 1 and 2. We shall see next why the strict conservation regime of the old villagescape began to be implemented in Angkor.

**Background of Conservation Regime in Phase II**

The activities of sustainable development practically started in 2004 (ICC 2004; Khuon 2006a, 2006b). This, however, has not been met by the reality, and the transition of the emphasis from conservation to development is not at all sharply marked. It may be said that the main reason for this is based on the fundamental concerns of the Cambodian government remaining the same as before, i.e. the promotion of tourism development and the conservation of “traditional” landscape with monuments for national prestige and tourist revenues. The restoration and conservation of monuments are on-going with a number of international teams in partnership with APSARA throughout the 2000s to the present. The major difference from the past is that APSARA has now exclusive authority to manage the Angkor site and needs to show on the diplomatic stage that it really concerns the local communities and their development too. In this connection, I will show below the implication of the conservation regime of the old villagescape.

Major concerns of APSARA in the second phase respond to those of the Cambodian Government, which are clearly manifest in Order No. 02-BB issued by the government in 2004. The Order defines the standard for land use in Zones 1 and 2 (APSARA Authority 2008). The government endowed APSARA with full authority

\(^3\) See also Pressouyre (1996:28-30) in which the relationships between mixed properties and cultural landscapes are discussed.

\(^4\) This was the most updated version of operational guidelines until 2003.
to urgently tackle illegal land transactions and migration followed by population increase, which are declared problems in the Angkor World Heritage Site (ICC 2004). Because of this new mandate, APSARA was strengthened with more funds, facilities, staff, and authority, as discussed in my chapter “World Heritage Making in Angkor” in this volume.

The main department determining the framework of and controlling the villagescape is firstly DMA-II, which was later renamed as DLHMAP. The director of this department was determined to conserve the ecosystem, the cultural environment and the lifestyle of the “original” villagers that has been expressed in proceeding conservation and development in parallel. It was expressed clearly in his slogan “Conserve for better development and develop for better conservation” (his emphasis) in the 15th Technical Committee of the ICC held in June 2006 (ICC 2006a:122). Half a year later at the Plenary Session, he emphasized again that APSARA would dovetail sustainable development activities with its conservation operations (ICC 2006b:33). At the said University of Sydney Conference, he also elaborated APSARA’s approach as to what to conserve and what to develop, and why:

[…] while the policy of “preserving old villages” was kept in mind it was decided that it was necessary to re-locate the inhabitants of a small minority of these villages, which were too close to the temples, to other available places. New lands were given to these villagers for housing construction. There were also a ban placed on rice cultivation within Angkor Thom and a ban on the traditional villager practice of resin collecting. These changes were considered necessary to allow restoration of the monuments and to conserve the important and depleted forests [...] .

(Khuon 2006b:2, original emphasis)

In another place, he mentions that APSARA is “charged with the responsibility to preserve the cultural landscape and authenticity of this marvellous site” (APSARA Authority 2008:6). The implication is that the conservation of “authentic” cultural landscape as a park necessitates the containment of the numbers of population and houses, i.e. the conservation of the old villagescape, while an excessive number of people will be transferred to the new area for living and “development”. In short, both conservation and development will be implemented under the name of “the conservation of the living standards and sustainability of the population”. The emphasis is clear that the Angkor heritage site is primarily to be conserved as a park for the visual consumption of non-residents/outiders, and development can be conducted outside Zones 1 and 2 with only a minimum controlled development allowed inside those zones.

The reorganization of APSARA through expansion and strengthening her authority was soon to be felt as overpowering by the local communities. It was more to do with the conservation of the old villagescape through the imposition of building
restrictions than development. Development was, in any case, to be implemented in a significant way outside the Angkor World Heritage Site as we shall see next.

**Run Ta-Ek – Eco-Village for Sustainable Development**

In 2008, the local population in Zones 1 and 2 was reported as exceeding 120,000 people in 112 villages (APSARA Authority 2008a). All the old villages, however, need to be preserved, based on Article 17: Local Residents, c-zone 2 of the Royal Decree (Kret) 001NS of 1994, and “if the citizens who have long been dwelling in the Zones may continue living there without being subject to any evacuation” according to the Decision of the Royal Government, No. 70/SSR (APSARA Authority 2005). In order to curtail further increases in the population in the two zones, the Cambodian government allocated APSARA 1,012 hectares of land at the Run Ta-Ek commune in the area near Banteay Srei temple as an alternative residential and development site. The land is mostly targeted for young married couples living in Zones 1 and 2. To develop the site, a Canadian architect-cum-town planner was called on to lead a team of young professionals from APSARA. His theme was to design Run Ta-Ek as an eco-village in a traditional Khmer environment as his report title suggests. It is aimed at a semi-urban type of development with socio-cultural and administrative facilities, including school, health centre, monastery, market, rural credit and office buildings, as well as land for organic farming, handicraft activities,

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**Fig. 1:** Location of Run Ta-Ek in relation to Angkor Park (left) (APSARA Authority 2008b).
and tourist infrastructures and facilities. The concept of developing an eco-village is described as to prevent brutal negative impact on the livelihood of the inhabitants because of a modern urban space. When
giving villagers the possibility to evolve favourably through space and time, at their own pace of life, a lifestyle based on their traditional ways and identity and incorporating their human potential would be a better approach.

(ICC 2006b:34; APSARA Authority 2008:7-8)

In the fancy booklet in Khmer and English, “Eco-village for Sustainable Development, Run Ta-Ek” (APSARA Authority 2008), it sounds like a promised land for both the local population and the international community which has the responsibility of overseeing the development. There, 852 hectares of land is allocated for housing and farming and, considering that the average family comprises 5.5 people and occupies one hectare of land, 850 families or approximately 5,000 people can be housed. The area is outside the protected zones, thus it should in theory be free from restrictions related to the World Heritage Site. APSARA, however, insists that

the new building must reflect some of the traditional specifications such as stilts, flight of stairs, sloping roof, shutters, living space underneath the residence, etc.

(APSARA Authority 2008:13-14)

In addition,

it is recommended that the land may never be sold, and that the Government of Cambodia remains the sole owner ad-infinitem based on the example of the land property laws presently in use in Zones 1 and 2.

(APSARA Authority 2008:14, original emphasis)

The justification for this is that “the freezing of land property should foster Run Ta-Ek’s stability and sense of permanence” (APSARA Authority 2008:14, original emphasis). Even though the above statements were on the concept note, here again, one can detect that living at Run Ta-Ek may be constrained as a satellite site of Zones 1 and 2. APSARA is also to provide only the land free to new residents, not building materials, except for the first 100 families who move in. This, however, contradicts one clause in Article 17: Local Residents, b-zone 1 of the aforementioned Royal Decree 001 NS of 1994, which stipulates that “[a]ssistance should be given to residents for their relocation, in particular by providing them with land and building materials for their houses and community facilities” (APSARA 1998:218). In Run Ta-Ek there stands a model

5 See also (ICC 2006b:34). According to the APSARA staff working at the site and the people who moved into the site, the land in Run Ta-Ek would be given free to the people after they have been living there for six years and can be sold to fellow-villagers, but not people who live outside.
traditional house using solar energy with modern technology, which of course the future villagers do not need to copy. The cost of building was nonetheless USD 30,000, according to the Cambodian architect who designed it. This suggests that the site is a showcase created as an ideal eco-village of western conception with the façade of “tradition” to entertain outsiders’ gaze, in particular that of foreigners, as well as to lure out more villagers from the Angkor World Heritage Site.

The area is quite isolated at the moment, even though the new national road No.67 was constructed nearby. This road is linked to another national road (No.6) that stretches from Phnom Penh to the Thai border, via Siem Reap. Road No.67 is also connected to the Thai border through Anglong Veng – the last stronghold of the Khmer Rouge. There is potentiality of development, perhaps in ten years time, but at the moment, the viability of making a living there is uncertain. Many inhabitants in Zones 1 and 2 are hesitant to move to this site, not only because of the reason mentioned above, but also because they neither wish to be separated from their family members nor live under the control of the government.

Another reason is that it is far from the markets of Siem Reap or other areas and that the construction cost needs to be borne by the inhabitants. A further point of hesitation is that the local inhabitants suspect the government of not yet having paid the original land owners of Run Ta-Ek for the land purchased, so that the newcomers may be attacked or the payment of money may be demanded by the original owners once they have moved in or, in any case, many foresee troubles between the old and new land owners. Some of the first 100 families have begun to build houses there to live since the latter half of 2010. Many more people showed interest in moving in, however, APSARA’s demands for their attending numerous meetings made some give up the idea in the end. The majority of villagers in Zones 1 and 2 are waiting to see what might happen to the first families who have moved there.

Apart from the local people’s sense of uncertainty about the prospect of life in Run Ta-Ek, APSARA is said to have discovered that the soil there is unsuitable for agriculture. The Authority, therefore, has a plan to bring mud from Tonle Sap Lake, which will be a costly operation.

Sustainable development is a cliché of policy-makers and practitioners of development throughout the world, suggesting a positive and ideal developmental goal. One wonders, however, how this site could realistically become a site for “sustainable development” and how much local communities have been consulted on the project design.
How to Conserve “Old Villages” and the Consequences

The Royal Decree of November 2004 stipulates that “the citizens who have been residing in those areas (Protected Zones 1 and 2) for a long time are entitled to abide in their homes and do not have to leave their residences”. APSARA is, therefore, unable to forcibly expel “old” inhabitants from the protected zones, and considered that the old villages, with the number of houses, designs and life styles, would need to be frozen, and it launched the strict conservation regime of constructions in “old villages”. Old inhabitants are allowed to renovate their homes if they have been damaged, or build a new house to replace the old one with APSARA’s authorization. Building entirely new houses is not permitted (APSARA Authority 2008:6).

Unauthorized activities which have taken place in the Angkor Archaeological Park are listed in the Order of the Royal Government of Cambodia, No. 02/BB of June 2004. These are “burning and destroying forest, digging, taking and filling earth, fencing in land borders, constructing residences in concrete, public buildings, religious buildings, souvenir shops, restaurants, drink shops, petrol stations and parking lots, the confusing policy of tourist transportation”, as well as “ox, buffalo and pigs in the wild and roving constantly in the Angkor Park, are increasing.” The Cambodian government also considers that
[t]hese anarchical acts highly affect the governmental policy for sustainable development and if the measures for stopping and repealing them are not strong and steady, there is no efficiency.

(APSARA Authority 2005)

The government’s determination to use strict measures to stop acts listed as illegal is clear here, but not why or how all these activities are affecting sustainable development.

The same Order also stipulates that the government exclusively assigns APSARA to take all the measures against any construction with building permits issued by other authorities. If such construction has been made without building permits from APSARA, the owners, without conditions, would have to dismantle the constructions already built within 45 days of the warning letter. Any offenders of the anarchical activities listed above would also have their files brought up and sent to the law court for trial and sentence. In addition, it stipulates that

[t]he timberyards, the fencing and appropriating land in the Angkor site shall be seized and transformed into national properties following the procedures in force, reforested and strongly protected.

(APSARA Authority 2005)

Moreover,

[a]ll measures and authorisations delivered by national or all local authorities, opposite to international obligations in force in the Angkor site that the Kingdom of Cambodia must respect, are invalid.

(APSARA Authority 2005)

APSARA, in a way, has followed faithfully what the government ordered it to do since 2004, but has carried out even more than what was stipulated, as we shall see below, with negative consequences in terms of the relationship with the local inhabitants and traditional authorities. The Authority began sending a monitoring unit of illegal constructions into every village in Zones 1 and 2. The beginning of monitoring varies from village to village, starting with easily accessible areas near Siem Reap and along the main roads. The frequency of monitoring varies from twice a day to once a week, but on average once a day. The monitoring unit is believed to belong to the DLHMAP, and information on illegal construction is passed to the DPOC which dispatches demolition units with firearms. The monitoring unit takes photographs of houses where reconstruction has been requested. According to many informants, the monitoring and demolitions began escalating from the latter half of 2008, after the national elections, apart from the villages near Siem Reap. A vice-chief of a commune said, “During the national election years, restrictions became loose and afterwards stricter”. It suggests that the level of restrictions is affected by national elections when the government needs
people’s votes. Measures taken up by APSARA in order to implement its new regime of conserving the old villagescape were reported to have been accompanied by some acts of illegality and mercilessness according to many local informants.

Methodologies of Research on Individual Cases

As the methodologies to learn the contents and processes of conserving the old villagescape, I employed informal semi-structured interviews as the normative anthropological mode of enquiry with a Cambodian assistant. The local villages visited include more than 20 villages in Zones 1 and 2 in the Angkor and Roluos groups. In addition, three commune offices were visited and several members of the commune staff were interviewed in their offices or at home. Cambodian or foreign members of NGOs who have been working in conservation and/or development projects were also interviewed, as were some members of the APSARA staff. The period when intensive interviews were conducted ranged from August 2009 to March 2011 for over two months in total.

Confusion on Policies, Miscommunication and Misunderstanding

The deliveries of the Order of 2004 by APSARA to the local communities were apparently not quite adequate, nor were communications between the two. Some local authorities and villagers have clearly not understood the contents of the Order. In addition, APSARA’s various departments and staff members have delivered different messages at different periods of time, confusing the local inhabitants and authorities to the extent that they mistrust each other.

In one commune, a vice-chief said that APSARA had organized meetings in each village twice a year, but only some villagers attended, while others did not. Thus, there are always some people in each community who are unaware of the new rules and regulations. T-shirts with the APSARA logo were given to all the participants at APSARA meetings as customary gesture of donation to the needy during 2009 and 2010, but the authority started to destroy houses afterwards: approximately 40 houses in this commune had been destroyed every year. This commune covers the area closest to Siem Reap and the central area of the Angkor group and, therefore, has more newcomers living in some of the villages, notably those in front and south of Angkor Wat. The demolition of their houses, however, has nothing to do with whether they are new-comers or old inhabitants. In some villages, APSARA is said to have told the villagers that the houses constructed after 2000, or in other cases after 2004, are subject to demolition, as well as those constructed without the approval of APSARA. The year 2000 or 2004 is also used to divide the “old” and “new” inhabitants.

In Village-A, APSARA was said to have changed its words as to what would be possible and what not vis-à-vis the construction of buildings. According to the village chief, in the first meeting organized by APSARA in 2006, villagers were told to build houses in traditional styles, otherwise it would affect the quality of the World Heritage
Site. In 2007, he said that APSARA had changed its wording, saying that villagers would not be allowed to build anything without asking APSARA.

In Village-B, different members of staff said different things in the course of four years. In a meeting in 2007, an APSARA staff member from Phnom Penh had reportedly said that it would be all right to build houses lower than six metres, chicken houses or cow sheds for families, without asking for permits from APSARA. In 2008, another APSARA staff member came to say that if people were living in tourist areas, building hotels, guest houses or large villas would not be permissible. In 2010, an APSARA staff member was said to have changed its words, saying that nothing could be built in the village without the authorization of APSARA.

People in many villages complained that APSARA has many departments and each applied different rules, and APSARA’s overall strategies and policies were unclear. A member of a commune, for example, explained that after people went to ask for building permits at the APSARA office, another department (DPOC) came to demolish buildings. Consequently, people get very angry. Not only is the construction of new houses for young people, houses of modern design, and larger houses than the original disallowed, but also the construction of animal pens, toilets or fences without adequate explanations provided, even though requests for construction might have already been submitted.

Some chiefs of villages and communes considered that the building of small palm-leaf huts (ktoun) might be permissible without asking APSARA and gave the house owners their approval for construction, including houses for young couples. APSARA refuted the validity of the local authorities’ signatures in accordance with the article of the Order and therefore demolished such houses, unless the house owners agreed to demolish them by themselves. The number of houses demolished on the order of APSARA in the entire World Heritage Site of Angkor is unavailable, however, one of the villages closest to Siem Reap town has had more than 50 houses demolished according to the local authorities. In some villages, one can observe only concrete pillars or incomplete houses standing without signs of further construction.

Delayed Issuance of Building Permits and Negative Consequences

Even where the local authorities and villagers might have understood the contents of the Order clearly, because APSARA’s issuance of building permits takes longer than promised, i.e. within 45 working days, some villagers could not wait any longer and began construction because wood had already been purchased, which might become rotten or be eaten by termites, and/or they might miss the auspicious day to commence the construction – an important consideration for the local people. In other cases, some villagers began construction even before 2004, but could not complete it due to shortages of money and because of the new Order.

Confusion in dealing with what is permissible and what is not in terms of building, coupled with delays in the issuance of the permit, is manifest in another way. A senior man with twelve members of a family in Village-C submitted a request for a permit to build a new house for him and his wife in 2006, but did not receive a permit from
APSARA for a long while. Then, in 2008, an APSARA staff member told him to start building the house or the wood might become rotten. Meanwhile, this man’s wife died. APSARA had apparently asked around the neighbours to find out for whom the house was being constructed. A neighbour replied that it was for his children. APSARA, believing the neighbours’ claim, issued a letter forbidding the construction of the new house, even though the family insisted that it was for the original owner, i.e. the father of the children. APSARA’s letter warned the man not to submit more letters or it would be considered as a violation of APSARA’s rules and regulations. The house was standing with about 80% finished, but the family was scared of completing the construction in March 2010. A year later, however, the family was somehow allowed to complete the construction.

In another case, a deception was reportedly employed by some members of APSARA’s staff. A senior man of Village-D in the periphery of Zone 2 had submitted a request for a building permit to APSARA but, because of APSARA’s delay in responding, began the construction of a traditional house before receiving the permit. When APSARA’s monitoring unit turned up in his village, he and his wife had already been living in this new house for two months. Later an APSARA staff member came to tell him to go to the APSARA office because a permit was ready for collection. When he did, he was asked to sign a document without being shown the content. It turned out that in the document he blindly signed that he agreed to demolish the new house by himself. It cost him USD 8,000 for building materials, without taking into consideration the cost of his son’s construction labour. He was obliged to remove the roof tiles and wood and only the brick walls remained when I visited him. APSARA staff members apparently kept coming back to tell him to demolish it all.

Deception was also employed by APSARA in another context according to a vice-chief of a commune. APSARA staff members told a villager to demolish his house and that both the village and commune chiefs had agreed to the demolition. Later, the villager went to ask both chiefs about this matter to discover it unfounded.

Impairment of Local Authorities and Village Unity

Traditionally, village and commune authorities have acted as the fathers of the commune members, to advise individuals in trouble and arbitrate between parties in conflicts to solve problems. APSARA, however, seems to have attempted to use the local authorities to achieve her objective of demolishing “illegal constructions”. Villagers, therefore, began to suspect the ability, authority and stance of the village and commune authorities. Some chiefs refused to put their signatures on the document to co-operate with APSARA, but others were compelled to do so. A vice-chief of a commune said that both commune chiefs and vice-chiefs had been elected by the people, but cannot serve them. Several people in the local authorities said, “The villagers began to hate me”. A vice-chief of a village said,

I am very sorry I cannot help villagers in trouble. I have not gone to the commune office to collect my salary for three months for I stopped
working as a vice-chief. All the commune and village chiefs want to resign from the posts.

Traditional local authorities and trust among the members of the respective communities have, therefore, been seriously impaired. In some cases, villagers began to suspect each other because they felt there were some APSARA spies among them in the village. This is supported by the unfair treatment of villagers in being issuing construction permits by APSARA. In some villages, communal harmony and unity are being impaired by recent APSARA approaches to the local villagers, but in a few villages, local communities began to help each other to deal with excesses and intimidation exercised by APSARA. According to a vice-chief of a commune, even provincial authorities nowadays are becoming powerless over issues of local communities in Angkor and try to ignore problems. A vice-chief of a village in this commune also said that the Siem Reap authority, as well as Sieng Nam – Siem Reap M.P. close to the Prime Minister – no longer had power over the policies concerning Angkor.

Intimidation, Corruption and Unfairness

APSARA’s frequent monitoring and apparent authority overarching traditional authorities have increasingly made the local villagers detest and fear APSARA. Some villagers frightened by APSARA, signed their names on the letters to agree to demolish their houses by themselves. Some village chiefs were equally coerced to sign their names on such letters, or APSARA threatened it would take this matter to court.

Corruption and unfairness have been experienced by many villagers concerning building restrictions. According to a Cambodian architect, one of his acquaintances is said to have paid USD 3,000 to APSARA to build a house in the protected zone. Many villagers said that the rich have escaped the demolition of their illegal constructions by paying huge bribes to APSARA staff members, whereas small amounts of money offered by poorer people have largely been ignored. As a result, the people subject to the demolition of houses tend to be the most vulnerable in the villages, such as the poor, widows, pregnant women with absent husbands, Aids patients, and the inhabitants of peripheral villages in Angkor, though villages closest to Siem Reap had been subjected to more demolition at an earlier stage. Some villages considered as co-operative with APSARA have had more lenient treatment than those which resisted. The local villagers consider the above discrepancies in APSARA’s law enforcement unfair.

In Village-E, one of the closest to Siem Reap, a poor pregnant woman who had built a kom, borrowing money from somebody, had her house demolished by APSARA some years ago. She cried herself to death. The vice-chief of a village felt terribly sorry for her and about his inability to help her.
Human Rights Violation and Robberies

In the process of enforcing APSARA’s rules and regulations related to “illegal construction” in the villages in Zones 1 and 2, APSARA, in particular DPOC staff members, often appeared to have resorted to violence and, at times, even robberies of valuables from the families targeted.

In Village-F peripheral to the Angkor group, a man rebuilt a ktaum because his old house became dilapidated. He had approval for its reconstruction from the village and commune chiefs, but not from APSARA. Upon discovering this, APSARA’s monitoring unit visited him twice to complain that it had not approved the construction. At APSARA’s third visit, the monitoring unit was accompanied by four pickup trucks with a crane and about 30 motorbikes carrying approximately 60 members of staff. An APSARA staff member carrying a pistol shot into the air several times to warn villagers not to protest or disturb the demolition. The house owner had his hands tied behind his back and was given electric shocks. His wife begged the DPOC staff members not to demolish her house, but they ignored her plea and pulled down the house. Prior to that, ten female staff members wearing masks covering their faces went into the house and removed everything inside. In the process, the family lost money, a small amount of gold, a mobile phone, a machete, and a knife. After the event, the house owner fell ill and his family had to live in a makeshift house with flooring made of bamboo laid directly on the ground. APSARA staff members later went to tell him that he had to live in that way, but it would be impossible to live like this during the rainy season. Unable to live there any longer, the family left to Thailand to lead a life of wandering around in search of work.

In Village-G, a widow who had been suffering from Aids (contracted from her soldier husband stationed in Poi Pet) stayed in the provincial hospital for treatment for a long time. Meanwhile, her six children were looked after in an orphanage. After she had recovered, she was released from the hospital to find her ktaum had become too old and needed a replacement. She therefore asked the village and commune chiefs for permission for its reconstruction and received the authorization. She took three older children out of the orphanage to live with her. Then APSARA came to demand the ktaum’s demolition. Later, about 60 DPOC staff members came with three trucks and many motorbikes and closed down the road. They stopped anybody from coming to help her by a DPOC police officer pointing a pistol at them. The house owner was lifted in the air by ten men who stopped her from disturbing the demolition. The woman not only lost the building materials of her house, but also tools, such as a hammer, axe, knife, and hoe.

In Village-C, there is a Japanese NGO called the Cambodia Village Support Group (CVSG) and it built a centre for the physically-handicapped (many landmine victims) and Aids patients in 2000. The organization is said to have had an agreement from the Cambodian government and APSARA for its establishment with chicken farms and vegetable gardens. Some of the Aids patients built 16 chicken huts which were, however, destroyed by the DPOC early in February 2010. The lower parts of two chicken huts were reconstructed later, and they were again subject to demolition that
same month. On this occasion, the section chief, both a land mine victim and an Aids patient, tried to take photographs as evidence upon consulting the Cambodian manager. He was kicked hard on the leg. Three other people who tried to help him were also beaten up by the DPOC police. One of the men incurred a head injury from the police who hit him hard with the handle of a pistol. The wife of the section chief was also treated roughly by the police who threw her away, grabbing her hair. They reported the incident to the village and commune authorities, as well as the representative of CVSG in Japan. The Cambodian representative of CVSG later met the staff member of APSARA in charge of the matter, but this has not led to a solution.

The following case was widely publicized through the Phnom Penh Post (Phnom Penh Post March 12, 2010; March 23, 2010), the Voice of America and other media. A pregnant woman living in Village-H was away from home to have a medical check-up at the provincial hospital. When she came back to her village, she found her kotta totally demolished by the DPOC. Her husband was away from home, working in Poi Pet.

Upon demolition, she lost USD 300 and a water jar, together with some building materials. When DPOC staff members arrived at her home, more than 100 villagers gathered to protest to them not to destroy her house. The DPOC police, however, were said to have shot six times near the feet of the protestors, and the police also beat up a villager. Six bullets shot by the police were shown to me at the interview. The woman made a complaint to the village and commune authorities, and contacted some media, as mentioned above, that covered the case. Two human rights organizations also went to interview her. APSARA staff members apparently complained to the commune authorities for suggesting that she contacted human rights organizations. Because APSARA filed the complaints to the law court, her mother, uncle and two other relatives went to attend the court hearing. APSARA told the court that the villagers had attempted to kill its staff members, so the court warned her party not to go against the rules and regulations of APSARA, to which her people agreed. Neither side apologised, nor were compensation paid or fines charged.
Fig. 3: Village C, a chicken hut later demolished by APSARA (2010).

Fig. 4: Village H, after APSARA demolition (2010).
Local Responses and Strategies

As mentioned above, because APSARA’s rules and regulations are not clear to the local population in general, and their communications are inadequate, people make mistakes. At the same time, the ways in which APSARA deals with each case and respective communities are arbitrary and are considered unfair by many local villagers. There are obvious cases of intimidation, corruption and human rights violations on the part of APSARA, as pointed out by the local population at large. In some cases, where the present house stands is not a particularly good location because the area can be badly flooded during the rainy season, but APSARA would not allow people to move the residence even though a family may have a better plot elsewhere within the village. APSARA’s rigidity and mercilessness, especially against the poor and vulnerable, and its apparent absolute rule over the Angkor World Heritage Site make the local people detest and fear it. There are numerous critiques on APSARA among people and members of the local authorities.

One member of a commune said, “APSARA is like the Pol Pot regime, even though it does not kill people. It does not want people to have comfortable lives, while its staff members live in grand houses”. A vice-chief of the same commune tried to defend the actions of people, saying, “People only try to protect their homes, because they do not live on trees, but APSARA never tries to listen to what people say”. Accompanying APSARA, a staff member of another commune has supposedly said, “Prime Minister Hun Sen issued a law for the people not to become developed”. Even though this account may be unfounded, what has been said has a certain truth manifest in the conditions under which local people are obliged to live. The actions taken by APSARA as the conservation regime, virtually do not allow people to develop in the Angkor World Heritage Site despite being in the phase of sustainable development and the officially declared statement by APSARA that “these communities can share in the sustainable development efforts” (ICC 2004:25).

Having said that, the level of antagonism which has developed among the local villages of Angkor varies. There are times when houses considered as having been built illegally have escaped demolition, apart from the cases involving bribery. These include when APSARA considers some villages co-operative, when powerful people, such as high-ranking military personnel, intervene, or when family members or a crowd of local villagers challenge APSARA by gathering and blocking its forceful demolition of houses, or where an able village chief has an effective strategy to counter it.

When some villages are considered as co-operative by APSARA, there are fewer troubles with traditional authorities and local residents, even though ordinary villagers still confess the difficulties encountered in everyday living because of restrictions on rice cultivation, collection of natural resources and building. In one commune also considered as co-operative by APSARA, the commune authority has managed successfully to persuade the DPOC not to demolish some buildings. Some villagers, however, were said to have not complied with the warning from APSARA to stop construction and were subject to demolition.
In a remote village (Village-I) west of Angkor Thom, a soldier stationed at Anglong Veng submitted a request to the village chief to rebuild an old house for his mother-in-law and, upon obtaining the authorization from the village authority, the house was rebuilt. In January 2010, however, APSARA’s monitoring unit went to the village three or four times, and the last time he was asked to dismantle the house. A son of this old lady is a four-star general who phoned APSARA to ask for the house not to be demolished and also phoned his superior in the army for help. Commune staff, local police and the village chief also went to discuss this case with APSARA staff members. With such pressures, APSARA staff could not force the house owner to demolish the house or do it by themselves. The incident is well known in the neighbouring communities as successful resistance against APSARA.

A man of Village-G, along the new road which stretches from Kôk Ta Chan village to the northern villages, was accused by APSARA of stealing somebody’s land, but he claimed the land had been inherited from his ancestors with the land title. APSARA took it to court, but he won the case in 2001, which is rather unusual as Cambodian legislature is notorious for corruption and partiality (ADB 2000:27), often siding with the government. He then built a house there with the construction permit obtained from village and commune chiefs. In 2006, APSARA asked him to pay some money and submit a request for a building permit, despite the fact that the construction had been completed in 2001. The DPOC then arrived with a large truck with a crane, followed by other trucks. The family members got together and the wife defied APSARA staff members, saying that if any material was taken from the house or got broken, she would demand compensation from them and told them that she would burn their trucks with petrol. The APSARA team consequently went back without taking any action and complained to the court again: APSARA suffered its second defeat. It is interesting to note that in this case the court gave a verdict in favour of the civilian, which may be related to the local power politics when the authority of APSARA was weak vis-à-vis the local authorities.

In Village-J north of Preah Khan, the construction of some houses was stopped and one house demolished by APSARA. The village chief came to realize in conversation with APSARA police when the DPOC would come to demolish another house, then called villagers to gather at this house on that day. When APSARA arrived with four trucks, about 50 people, a mixture of fellow villagers and those from other villages, were waiting drunkenly for their arrival. The number of villagers exceeded that of the APSARA staff. Prior to that, the house owner had already submitted a request for a building permit to APSARA and had gone to the APSARA office seven times, each time being told to come back the next day and more than four months passed. He was worried that the wood purchased might get damaged by termites or the auspicious day be missed (after that day, bad luck will follow according to the local belief) and, therefore, began the construction. APSARA’s monitoring unit had come several times to tell him to dismantle the house, but he did not comply.

On the day of demolition, only two DPOC policemen on a motorbike came into the house compound and took photos while other staff with trucks was waiting
outside. There were disputes between the policemen and the village chief. The policemen asked the village chief why the house owner had been building a large house before APSARA issued a permit. The chief replied that the house owner had respected APSARA laws, but APSARA had never respected his requests or needs. Then the APSARA policemen told him that if he would not stop the landlord's construction, APSARA would take away the building materials. The village chief replied to the police, “If your trucks come in, you will never be able to go back to Siem Reap!” The policemen went back to Siem Reap with their trucks following. The house owner said that APSARA staff members had come back later to talk to him nicely, taken photos of the house and asked him not to make walls before receiving the permit.

In Village-B, a man said that his daughter’s house was getting old, so he first asked for permission from the village and commune chiefs to build a rice barn to replace this, asking his daughter to stay there to look after the rice. APSARA staff then came to take photos of the old house. After the house construction started, he was told by APSARA staff members to stop the construction. Later on the same day, and many times afterwards, APSARA staff members returned to demand that he dismantle the house and also put pressure on the village chief to destroy it. When one truck and two cars full of APSARA staff arrived, the house owner went to ring the village bell to ask the villagers for help. More than 100 villagers gathered, but the village chief did not want to come. This was because APSARA had warned him that if he went against APSARA rules, he would be taken to court and put on trial. The number of villagers was overwhelming, so APSARA could not demolish the house, and one more truck on the way to the village was contacted by radio to return to Siem Reap. The house owner told APSARA staff, “Why does APSARA have power over commune authorities?’, “I just voted for the government and commune chief, not for APSARA”, and “If we are not allowed to live in our houses, what will happen to our children? Will they be unable to marry?”.

This was the third house which escaped demolition in this village. Each time, many villagers gathered, so that APSARA could not dismantle the buildings. More than 300 villagers were said to have gathered concerning the second house. They feel that it is impossible to defeat APSARA and are so scared of this institution that they decided to help each other. The old tradition of using the village bell to alert the inhabitants for mutual assistance had served well in this case. Nowadays, many villagers have mobile phones, which are also effectively used for fast communication.

Villagers north of Angkor Thom tend to defy APSARA, and even supra-village co-operation can be found regarding the matter. The tense situation is well described by a vice-chief of a commune: “If this situation continues, it will become another Pol Pot regime, and people may have a war against APSARA”. In early April 2010, four representatives of six villages in the north sent a delegation to the Prime Minister Hun Sen with a letter of protest against APSARA’s actions of demolition. Nearly half a year later, they received a letter from the Prime Minister who apparently wrote that the land around the area did not belong to APSARA or anybody else, but to the villagers,
and that he would come to make a deal with the villagers. When I visited Village-J in March 2011, the Prime Minister had not yet come.

Despite APSARA’s building restrictions, at least two new monasteries have been constructed in the last five years. One monastery built in Village-K in 2005 houses monks of the Thommayut sect moved from Wat Banteay Kdei; this is a sect mostly followed by the royal family. The chief monk there has had severe confrontations with APSARA regarding the building regulations, and the inhabitants of surrounding villages do not support the frequent changes of monks there and their activities, which have apparently been considered as just serving themselves. Some monks of the Mahanikay sect – the most popular in Cambodia – then moved from Wat Banteay Kdei to live in this new monastery.

Another new monastery has been under construction in Village-C for several years with permission from the commune and provincial authorities. Because a part of the village is quite far from the nearest monastery in Angkor Thom, and because of the many restrictions imposed by APSARA, villagers wanted to build a new monastery near the new road connecting Siem Reap with the northern villages west of Angkor Thom. There must have been some trouble with APSARA, however, the latter seems to have accepted the construction.

Moreover, in Villages-G and H, sala chen or Buddhist prayer buildings in the “traditional style” were constructed a few years ago without problems from APSARA. This may show some compromises and changes in strategies in the Authority, not to interfere with the religious initiatives of the local inhabitants if it has implications on fewer activities in Angkor Thom where the Angkor monuments are concentrated.

After the much publicized incident of Village-H, APSARA became more accommodating or softened the dealings with some villagers on the issue of constructing houses. Issuing building permits became faster, often within 45 working days, and some families who had formerly been refused permission to build houses or continue building were apparently permitted in Village-C, but not the section of CVSG. One family apparently paid bribes to APSARA, but in the other cases it is unknown whether bribery has been involved or not regarding issuing the permits.

As discussed so far, the local residents of Zones 1 and 2 have not just allowed themselves to be punished by APSARA without mercy regarding “illegal” constructions, but some individuals and communities have resorted to various ways to challenge, discuss, negotiate, and, in some cases, block APSARA from demolishing newly constructed houses when they considered it unreasonable. Because sustainable development of local communities is not yet seen in a significant way in the Angkor World Heritage Site, the local villagers feel their livelihood has increasingly been pushed to the limit. The Cambodian government has been trying very hard to delete the negative images of the barbaric past represented by the Pol Pot regime, while promoting the image of peace, modernization and sophistication, making use of Angkor as a foreground landscape. What is taking place there, however, cynically reminds us of the return or the residues of the past barbarity under the name of “protecting sustainable development” through the conservation regime of the old villagescape.
Conclusion and Alternative Prospect

The phase change of managing the Angkor World Heritage Site from emergency conservation to sustainable development has so far appeared not to reflect the reality. The new phase may be more accurately called the phase of the conservation regime of the old villagescape, with sustainable development chiefly planned outside Angkor. Admitting that development and its sustainability need time to bear fruit, it needs to be recognized that APSARA has so far failed to establish genuine co-operation with the local authorities and inhabitants. The reorganization and expansion of APSARA has certainly enhanced the image and actual authority over other traditional authorities, so much so that it has caused it to become the object of fear and long-term mistrust.

As discussed above, the main issue of the controversy in Angkor is not the idea of conserving the old villagescape, but the methodologies employed by APSARA to enforce it. APSARA is seen as unfair, intimidating and merciless. The victims are often the most vulnerable members of the local communities, whereas those with high-ranking connections or wealth, or who are APSARA employees tend to get away with no punishment. In addition, many local inhabitants consider some of the activities of the APSARA staff members illegal, notably the members of the demolition team. APSARA, on the whole, is also regarded as being as cruel as the Pol Pot regime. This situation puts managing the site at high risk.

In consideration of such a situation, it is high time to balance conservation and development in a realistic way, not just as propaganda. Another important consideration may be to ensure that the local inhabitants are able to make a living in the site and benefit from it, while tourists enjoy their visits. Natural and cultural resources need both protection and wise ways of utilization. Conserving the static landscape as an ancient archaeological park may not be the only thing that tourists want to see, but more interactive and participatory tourism. As we can now see in Siem Reap, some local NGOs are organizing eco- and cultural tours in and around Angkor and the Tonle Sap Lake, actively involving the local villagers who benefit from them directly. There is also a similar plan of village-based tourism with oxcarts started in 2010 by APSARA in partnership with New Zealand Aid. In this way, the Siem Reap/Angkor region is today becoming the destination of alternative tourism, offering tours to orphanages, handicraft-making, and the sites of development projects or the restoration of monuments. There are also numerous social business or NGOs-turned enterprises, such as Artisan d’Angkor, or business-oriented NGOs, such as the Butterfly Farm of the Angkor Participatory Development Organization (APDO), or other kinds of organizations with unique backgrounds and interests, such as the Institute of Khmer Traditional Textiles (IKTT) or the Joint Support Team for Angkor Preservation and Community Development (JST). All these are, nonetheless, quite active in assisting the poor and the vulnerable in the region. It is hoped, therefore, that APSARA relegates its developmental work more to such NGOs to collaborate with the local populations of the region, while reconsidering building restrictions in a humane way to have sustainable trusting relationships with local communities and authorities in order to make its phase of sustainable development plausible, if not genuinely successful.