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Sustainable tourism and its use as a development strategy in Cambodia: a systematic literature review

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Sustainable tourism and its use as a development strategy in Cambodia: a systematic literature review

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Governments in many developing countries endorse sustainable tourism, despite associated practical limitations and challenges as a development strategy. Using the case of Cambodia, this paper illustrates how sustainable tourism issues in a developing country may be better understood through a systematic review of scattered relevant peer-reviewed and grey literature. This can help in identifying emergent themes and challenges, gaps in knowledge, and opportunities for future research. Analysis of 77 documents on Cambodia's sustainable tourism revealed themes and challenges relating to: (1) an emphasis on nature-based tourism (ecotourism); (2) calls for greater community engagement for sustainable outcomes; (3) stakeholder perceptions and values as drivers of tourism success; (4) cultural heritage as a key tourism attraction; and (5) foreign investment shaping Cambodia's tourism future. Unequal emphasis is given to key government policies for tourism development and there is limited practical guidance on how to realise a vision of sustainable tourism. There is a lack of consideration of how the socio-economic and cultural context affects sustainable tourism. The evidence suggests that sustainable tourism in Cambodia is questionable until fundamental economic, social capacity and policy issues are addressed, along with greater emphasis given to the tourism system's demand side.

Keywords: developing countries; South-East Asia; systematic review; sustainable tourism; cultural tourism; ecotourism

Introduction

Rapid tourism growth is occurring in countries where there is high dependency on low-return manufacturing and rural industries and where the countries are recovering from political unrest (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2012). Governments and non-government organisations (NGOs) operating in these economies increasingly regard tourism as a means of alleviating poverty and a force to drive development in a business environment where opportunities for economic expansion are limited (Harrison & Schipani, 2007; Hummel, Gujadhur, & Ritsma, 2012; United Nations [UN], 2003; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2011; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). Tourism is well placed to contribute to poverty reduction because it is highly localised and can provide direct benefits to communities where low-skilled workers in remote areas can participate and benefit (Jiang, DeLacy, Mkiramweni, & Harrison, 2011; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012; Zapata, Hall, Lindo, & Vanderschaeghe, 2011).

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While tourism may bring short-term economic benefits to the poor, tourism alone is unlikely to make longer term, sustainable contributions to poverty reduction (Dwyer & Thomas, 2012; Harrison & Schipani, 2007; Mitchell, 2012; Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008; Sharpley & Naidoo, 2010). Identified barriers to sustainable tourism that may contribute to long-term poverty alleviation and socio-economic development include, but are not limited to: inadequate community-level support from government, NGOs and financial organisations; dominance of tourism by intermediaries and wealthy elites; lack of awareness and/or ability of people living in remote areas (e.g. traditional farming/fishing communities) to participate in tourism opportunities; and inadequate training and technical support (Hall, 2007; Islam & Carlsen, 2012). Subsequent adverse socio-economic and environmental impacts of tourism development practices include: displacement of local peoples (Snyder & Sulle, 2011), widening socio-economic inequalities (Hunt, 2011; Jamal & Camargo, 2014; Tosun, Timothy, & Öztürk, 2003), loss of traditional sources of income such as agriculture (Sahli & Nowak, 2007), economic leakage (Akama & Kieti, 2007; Dwyer & Thomas, 2012), and various forms of environmental degradation (Gaughan, Binford, & Southworth, 2009; Gössling, 2002; Pleumarom, 2002).

Despite these and other challenges, many national governments, NGOs and international aid agencies actively promote the potential role that tourism can play in improving economic, social and environmental conditions, and usually refer to the preferred form of tourism as “sustainable tourism”. As is the case in many economic sectors, sustainability has become part of the tourism vernacular and has been appropriated not only by tour operators and businesses, but also by governments, conservationists, community organisations, and tourists, to give moral rectitude or green credentials to tourism activities that fulfil their own definitions of sustainability (Mowforth & Munt, 2009). Sustainable tourism though is not about labelling certain types of tourism as sustainable, but rather acknowledging that all tourism should be more sustainable (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2005).

While sustainable tourism is a value-laden and inconsistently applied term, few challenge its ideals (Bramwell & Lane, 2008; Buckley, 2012; Reimer & Walter, 2013; Weaver & Lawton, 2007). However, what constitutes sustainable tourism is widely contested (Butler, 1999; Hardy, Beeton, & Pearson, 2002; Lu & Nepal, 2009; Page & Dowling, 2002; Sharpley, 2000). In particular, some scholars challenge how realistic and feasible sustainable tourism actually is in developing countries (Carbone, 2005; Chok, Macbeth, & Warren, 2008; Ioannides, 1995).

Cambodia, like many developing countries, is a case where government tourism policy strongly endorses sustainability principles (Chheang, 2008, 2009a; Royal Government of Cambodia [RGC], 2012). However, evidence suggests that both public and private tourism investments currently contradict the ideals of sustainable tourism (Buckley, 2012). The high levels of foreign investment and the rush to develop tourism raise concerns about: the sale of and allocation of key assets, the appropriateness of tourism developments in some environmental and cultural contexts, the environmental impacts of tourism development, leakage of profits offshore, displacement and marginalisation of local peoples, and whether communities reap the benefits from tourism that will aid social and economic development (Keating, 2012). In many cases, international funding is tied to infrastructure development (built capital) and there is concern that the rapid growth of tourism is at the expense of the environment (natural capital) and society (human and social capital) when the capacity to manage growth is limited (Pleumarom, 2002). Efforts to achieve sustainable tourism in Cambodia, and in other developing countries, are often limited by poor infrastructure (e.g. roads, electricity, clean water supply, liquid and solid

waste management) beyond the major hubs, low human capacity in both the public and private sectors, and unequal power relationships that lead to inequitable distribution of tourism opportunities and income, including for disadvantaged communities that could benefit from tourism activities (Bauld, 2007; Chheang, 2010b; King, Basiuk, Chan, & Yem, 2009; Kosal, 2011; RGC, 2010).

Questions that arise are whether sustainable tourism is realistic in developing countries with limited capital to invest in a transitioning economy? Is it a reasonable model for poor communities, where human health and well-being possibly demand at least a short-term humanitarian or capacity building model ahead of sustainability? Is the sustainable tourism ideal practical and equitable in a society that lacks the power to fully engage in tourism? Is developing country governmental commitment to sustainable tourism simply a response to developed country idealism and maintenance of colonialism through aid? If sustainable tourism is possible in developing countries, how would it be characterised?

We examine these questions using a systematic review of the peer-reviewed and grey literature. The purpose of the study is to identify and examine emergent themes and challenges in sustainable tourism in Cambodia to help advance the sustainable tourism agenda. We particularly searched for articles that adopted a sustainability focus and provided a clear context in which to consider the sustainability agenda. We searched for guidance in developing a vibrant tourism sector that maintains sustainability ideals rather than simply promulgating sustainable tourism idealism. Gaps in knowledge are identified and research needs highlighted. The methodology employed here builds on comparable review strategies by Berrang-Ford, Ford, and Paterson (2011) and Pearce et al. (2011).

Tourism in Cambodia

Tourism in Cambodia has experienced consistent growth in international arrivals since the early 1990s. Between 2000 and 2010, tourist numbers surged from 450,000 to 2.5 million (Kaynak & Kara, 2012), and in 2012 over 3.5 million tourists contributed over USD 2.2 billion to the Cambodian economy (Ministry of Tourism [MOT], 2013). The majority of visitors are from Vietnam, Korea, China, Laos, Thailand and Japan (almost 60% between 2011 and 2012), with other visitors predominantly from the USA, France, Australia, and Malaysia. The 2012 total contribution of tourism to GDP was 25.8% and the total contribution to employment was 22.3% (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2013). Forecasts suggest there will be over 4.75 million visitors per year by 2022 (WTTC, 2012), although the *Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2012–2020 (TDSP 2012–2020)* (RGC, 2012) projects Cambodia will receive 7 million international tourists and 8–10 million domestic tourists per year by 2020, bringing annual revenue estimated at USD 5 billion and creating 800,000 jobs.

Apart from being a major contributor to the Cambodian economy, tourism is also seen as a way to promote cultural identity and values that were eroded during French colonial rule and decades of civil war (Chheang, 2009b). Turmoil began in the late 1960s with Cambodian involvement in the American–Vietnam War (1955–1975). Conflict in Vietnam spilled into the north-eastern provinces of Cambodia and led to bombing by the United States as Viet Cong forces opened supply routes to the west. The political landscape became increasingly fragmented and ideologically split. This led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge and one of the most radical and brutal social experiments ever witnessed (Winter, 2007). The result was an attempt to transform Cambodia into a

peasant-dominated agrarian society. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge regime seized power and established Democratic Kampuchea. During the decade 1970–1980 it is estimated that over 1.2 million people died through torture, execution, malnutrition, overwork and illness (Heuveline, 1998; Tully, 2006). The educated and elite were particularly targeted for persecution, leaving the country almost bereft of academic and social institutions and leadership.

Although tourism plays an important part in recovery from this humanitarian disaster, progress has been slow due to resultant limitations of capital in many of its forms. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) acknowledges recent progress in human development, but notes that over 30% of employed people still live on less than USD 1.25 a day and 53% of the total population live on less than USD 2.00 a day (ADB, 2012b). At the same time, the state of the natural environment has regressed, especially through increasing CO₂ emissions, loss of habitat and increased pollution levels, particularly in waterways. In addition, infant mortality and basic sanitation have not reached targets set by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (ADB, 2012b).

Cambodia's *National Tourism Policy* (MOT, 2010) identifies a need to develop a diversity of tourism destinations, products and services that deliver experiences attractive to different tourist markets, especially where Cambodians, as individuals and communities, can participate in tourism businesses and gain direct benefits. The Cambodian *TDSP 2012–2020* (RGC, 2012) provides a framework to guide tourism development, and it shows the Cambodian Government's commitment to sustainable tourism development. The Government's *National Strategic Development Plan Update 2009–2013* (RGC, 2010) continues to emphasise the role of tourism in the economy, including the need to improve tourism infrastructure and the development of more tourism destinations and attractive tour packages. It also recognises the importance of preserving and promoting the rich Khmer cultural heritage and traditions. Barriers to tourism development are also identified and include: the quality of some resorts, facilities and tourism services do not meet required standards; tourism development is concentrated in urban areas, which prevents the poor in remote areas from benefiting; necessary physical infrastructure (e.g. roads, electricity, clean water supply, liquid and solid waste management) is inadequate; tourism has not stimulated domestic production and consumption; some private investment projects have not progressed according to schedule; and the quality of public and private human resources necessary for tourism remains low (RGC, 2010).

Methods

A systematic literature review was used to capture and analyse literature that dealt with an aspect(s) of sustainable tourism in Cambodia. Emergent themes and challenges related to sustainable tourism in Cambodia were then identified and examined. Systematic reviews identify articles using clearly formulated search criteria, and systematic, explicit and reproducible methods to select and critically examine relevant literature (Gough, Thomas, & Oliver, 2012; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). This approach is common in the health sciences and has increasingly been applied to environmental and climate change studies (e.g. Ford et al., 2012; Furgal, Garvin, & Jardine, 2010; McLeman, 2011; Plummer, de Loë, & Armitage, 2012), but has yet to be applied extensively in tourism research. The systematic review methods used here follow the steps described by Berrang-Ford, Pearce, and Ford (in press) and are consistent with the methods employed by Berrang-Ford et al. (2011) and Pearce et al. (2011).

Document selection

A systematic search of both peer-reviewed and grey literature (non-peer-reviewed – e.g. government and NGO reports, university theses) was conducted for the period 1 January 1993 to 1 April 2013. Articles not in English, published prior to 1993, and book reviews were excluded. The date limitation was selected because in 1993 Cambodia held free elections and a new constitution was ratified, which restored the monarchy and signalled the start of a new market-based economic era, including the rise of tourism.

The peer-reviewed literature was searched using Scopus and Google Scholar. Scopus was selected because it is one of the most powerful, current, comprehensive, and widely used search engines available for interdisciplinary peer-reviewed literature (Falagas, Pit-souni, Malietzis, & Pappas, 2008). To confirm that Scopus had captured the available relevant literature, the search was performed in three additional search engines: Taylor Francis, Web of Knowledge, and IngentaConnect. These searches duplicated what had already been captured or gave results that were not accessible. A keyword search was performed in Scopus using the English keywords *tourism and Cambodia*. This search retrieved 39 documents, of which 16 were retained for full review. The same keyword search in Google Scholar retrieved 14,700 documents. Due to the large number of hits returned, the search was restricted to “in the title of the article”. This search retrieved 51 documents, of which 19 (3 peer-reviewed and 16 grey literature documents) were retained for full review (Figure 1).

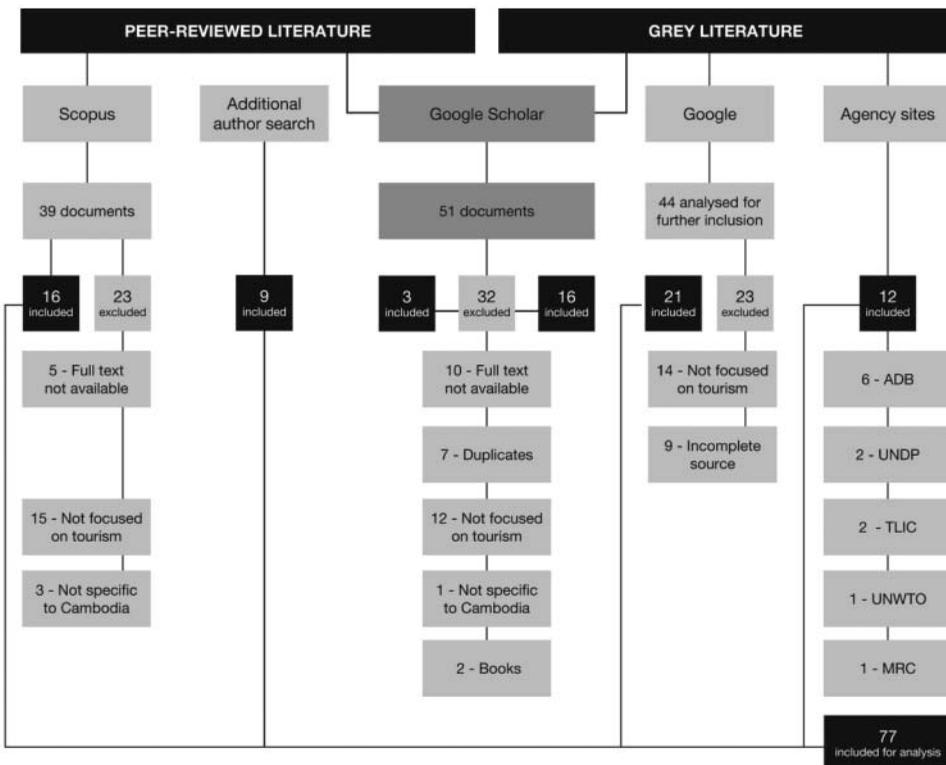


Figure 1. Document selection summary.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion	Exclusion
Articles published after 1 January 1993	Articles published after 1 April 2013
Full text available	Full text not available
English	Non-English
Available via Scopus; Google Scholar; Google; ADB; UNWTO; UNDP; MRC; and TLIC search	Not available in these databases
Journal article; conference paper; thesis; dissertation; discussion paper; report; book chapter (where PDF available)	Edited book; book review; editorial
Focus on an aspect of sustainable tourism	Not relevant to sustainable tourism
Focus on Cambodia	Not specific to Cambodia
Impacts of tourism on socio-cultural, economic, and environmental outcomes	Does not address social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism

The grey literature was searched using two online search engines, Google and Google Scholar, and five agency websites: ADB, UNWTO, Mekong River Commission (MRC), UNDP, and the Learning Institute of Cambodia (TLIC). The search terms *tourism AND Cambodia* were again used. To account for the large number of articles retrieved, a review strategy described by Furgal et al. (2010) was applied. The first 100 hits were considered for inclusion in the study and thereafter each consecutive source was considered for relevance until 25 consecutive irrelevant hits were found. Thereafter, we advanced the search to 50 hits and considered the next five source hits for relevance. This process continued until the 300th source was reached, at which time the search was stopped. An additional 44 documents were retained for further analysis and 12 from the agency website searches (Figure 1).

A two-stage inclusion/exclusion process was applied to both sets of literature (Table 1). Stage 1 eliminated duplicate records, edited books, book reviews, and articles to which full text was not available. In stage 2, every document was examined and the abstract was read to ensure that the article dealt with an aspect of sustainable tourism in Cambodia. All other documents were excluded. Also during stage 2, Scopus was searched for additional articles by authors with two or more already identified relevant articles. Nine additional articles were retrieved.

Document review

After applying the inclusion–exclusion criteria, 77 articles were retained for full review: 28 peer-reviewed journal articles (36%) and 49 grey literature (64%). A questionnaire was developed to categorise articles and identify key themes and publishing trends related to sustainable tourism in Cambodia. The questionnaire defined the general characteristics of the article (e.g. year published, geographic foci, author affiliation, type of document, and type of tourism addressed). Descriptive and basic inferential statistics were used to illustrate quantitative trends in the literature. The 77 documents were then imported into NVivo qualitative management software. Each document was analysed and coded based on the type(s) of tourism and aspects of sustainable tourism that it addressed. Key themes were identified and information under each theme was synthesised.

Search limitations

We recognise the limitations of the search process and biases in document selection, review and coding. Due to the parameters of the search engines and criteria, some relevant literature is likely to have been excluded from this study (e.g. books not available online). Although measures were taken to be objective (e.g. the use of NVivo to identify trends in the literature), some bias is inherent in the review process (e.g. selection of coding themes). That said we believe we have captured a large portion of available literature on sustainable tourism in Cambodia, including insights on the sustainability of current tourism practices, gaps in knowledge, and opportunities for future research.

Results

Publication trends

There has been sporadic publication of peer-reviewed articles on sustainable tourism in Cambodia over the last 20 years, with an average of 1.4 articles per year, increasing to an average of 2.2 per year over the last 10 years (Figure 2). This output may reflect the low number of in-country academics with ability to drive critical analysis.

Much of the literature is by authors with Western university or NGO affiliations (e.g. Chheang – Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace; Pleumarom – Third World Network; Reimer and Walter – University of British Columbia; and Winter – University of Sydney), with few others having more than one peer-reviewed publication on Cambodia. While this may be the result of the English inclusion criterion of the review, it also suggests a lack of continuity of research and a Western perspective on tourism in Cambodia. The five most prolific peer-reviewed authors account for 18 articles, nearly quarter of the total literature reviewed: Winter (2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2008) on heritage tourism and Angkor; De Lopez (2001, 2003) and De Lopez et al. (2006) on conservation and stakeholder management; Chheang (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011) on investment, planning, development, and tourism development; and Walter and Reimer (2012) and Reimer and Walter (2013) on community-based ecotourism (CBET).

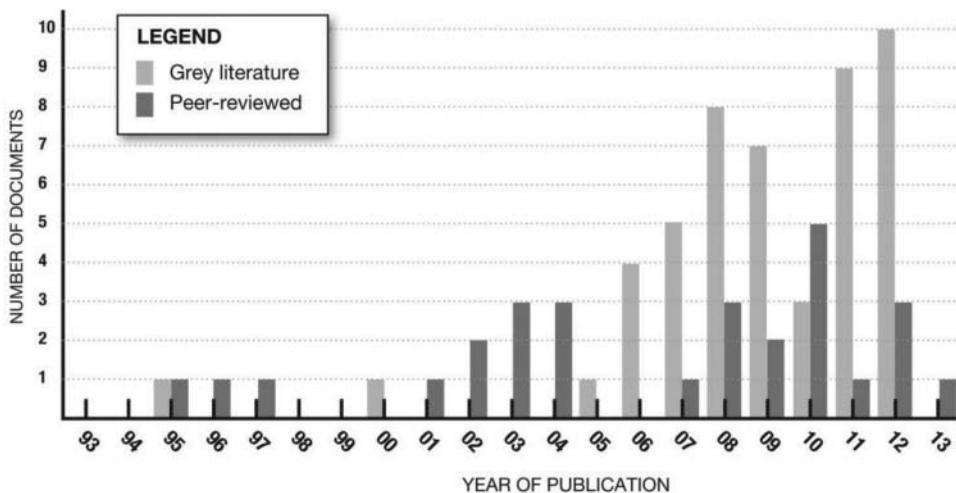


Figure 2. Articles reviewed by year in the grey and peer-reviewed literature.

Despite their roles as tourism hubs, few articles (one each) focus on the larger population centres of Sihanoukville (Ponna, 2009) and Phnom Penh (Pheng & Batra, 2009). The remaining location-specific literature is dominated by an emphasis on natural areas, particularly protected areas. However, limited attention has been given to tourism in the coastal provinces or the Mekong River, despite their inherent importance as tourism focal areas, and few articles address the potential adverse effects of tourism in the coastal zone. This is an emerging research need as the coastal zone, including much of the coastline and many offshore islands such as Koh Rong, is already experiencing tourism development (van Bochove, Ioannou, McVee, & Raines, 2011). Also absent in the literature are discussions on the role of the internationally recognised Ramsar wetlands, significant mangrove forests, coral reefs and seagrass meadows, in tourism and of broader transboundary issues for tourism, particularly between Cambodia and Thailand, Vietnam and Laos.

Key themes in the literature

Key themes and challenges for sustainable tourism in Cambodia identified in the literature are: (1) an emphasis on nature-based tourism (ecotourism); (2) calls for greater community engagement for sustainable outcomes; (3) stakeholder perceptions and values as drivers of tourism success; (4) cultural heritage as a key tourism attraction; and (5) foreign investment shaping Cambodia's tourism future.

Emphasis on nature-based tourism (ecotourism)

Ecotourism in Cambodia is the focus of 23% of the reviewed articles, and it is usually promoted as a source of income generation for local communities and as a means for conserving the environment (Bauld, 2007; Conway, 2008; Khanal & Babar, 2007; Prachvuthy, 2006; Walter & Reimer, 2012). The literature reports several examples of ecotourism, or its variant CBET, including Chiphat (Reimer & Walter, 2013; UNWTO, 2012), Peam Krasop (Bécherel, 2008), Yeak Laom (Bith, 2011), Tonle Sap (Chheang, 2008; Dowley, 2007), and Tmatboey (Clements et al., 2008), and references are made to the potential of coastal areas for ecotourism development (ADB, 2012a; King et al., 2009; Ponna, 2009).

Apart from the described benefits of ecotourism, several authors highlight challenges including: limited local community awareness of tourism benefits (Clements et al., 2008; Conway, 2008); inequitable distribution of benefits (Dowley, 2007; Neth, 2008); limitations of small-scale tourism products and environmental and social carrying capacity constraints (Conway, 2008; MRC, 2010; Neth, 2008); facilities and services not matching tourist demand (Bauld, 2007; Neth, 2008; Prachvuthy, 2006); conflict with exploitive industries such as logging and fishing (De Lopez, 2003; King et al., 2009); and land concessions for mining (Kosal, 2011). There is also concern that ecotourism can inadvertently cause degradation of the natural resources that are the main attraction for the ecotourism market (Neth, 2008).

In the case study of Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve, an area rich in natural assets, Neth (2008) identifies additional challenges for ecotourism: limitations of human resources to operate ecotourism ventures due to inadequate education and training; inadequate financial capacity of government and NGOs to monitor the natural resources that draw tourists; a lack of governance and clarity regarding access to natural resources; and land speculation and development, all of which threaten heritage resources. Furthermore, seasonality,

weather and accessibility leave livelihoods vulnerable to external factors. A drop in visitor numbers due to international events, such as SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), political or social unrest, time lags in start-up and attracting visitors to a location, and fluctuating climatic conditions, are identified as constraints that could potentially affect tourism development (Barling, 2005; Bauld, 2007; Chheang, 2010a, 2011; De Lopez, 2003; De Lopez et al., 2006; Kaynak & Kara, 2012).

Little information exists about how ecotourism addresses those whose livelihoods have been deemed environmentally destructive (e.g. people engaging in illegal logging and fishing) (Neth, 2008) or the volatility of tourism in Cambodia (Azad & Chheang, 2009). Tourism is usually considered as a subset of broader resource management and community development issues, which limits its full consideration as a potential driving force for economic and livelihood improvement. The literature identifies challenges to ecotourism and recommendations for addressing these challenges in specific cases (e.g. Bauld, 2007; Bécherel, 2008; Franklin, 2012; IIED, 2011), but there is unclear direction for general policy. Where clear advice is given, it is generally in the grey literature, and it includes the need for: preparing best practice manuals in Khmer; developing networks to link knowledge; building capacity for research; integrating tourism and existing livelihoods (Community Based Natural Resources Management Learning Institute [CBNRM], 2009); improving the value chain (Bauld, van Strien, & Salng, 2011; Dwyer & Thomas, 2012); defining the status and management of natural assets for tourism (De Lopez, 2001, 2003, Diggle, 2006; Gaughan et al., 2009); ensuring effective stakeholder engagement (De Lopez, 2001; Franklin, 2012; Walter & Reimer, 2012); clearly defining land rights; ensuring strong governance support; paying for ecosystem services (Clements et al., 2008, 2010); and developing economic corridors (Alampay & Rieder, 2008; Krongkaew, 2004), which is reflected in the government's adoption of the "hubs and spokes" model of tourism development (RGC, 2012).

Ecotourism has been used as a justification for heavily funded, large-scale infrastructure projects, despite objections from locals (Pleumarom, 2002). Meanwhile the unmanaged "tourist gaze" of ecotourism can affect culture and can lead to "pre-packaged ethnic stereotypes" and loss of cultural integrity (Carter & Beeton, 2008; Reimer & Walter, 2012). Ellis (2011) proposes that tourism is dependent on growth, and that niche tourism markets, such as ecotourism, are generally small by nature, but as they grow, the volume of tourists increases and more traditional tourism markets follow, often to communities ill-prepared to respond to the demand. As such, sustainable tourism may not be the remedy to sustainable development as purported, because development goals fundamentally conflict with sustainability goals and benefits cannot accrue to communities. Given that rates of tourism growth in Cambodia are forecast to keep rising, there is a need to clarify how ecotourism initiatives will cope with growing numbers of tourists and stay true to sustainable ideals.

Calls for greater community engagement for sustainable outcomes

The Cambodian Government asserts that tourism development should support poverty reduction, and benefits should be directed to those who live near the tourist attraction (Bécherel, 2008; RGC, 2012). There is a consensus in the literature that community participation in tourism development is essential in achieving these goals (Bith, 2011; Conway, 2008; Dowley, 2007; Franklin, 2012; Neth, 2008; Neth & Rith, 2011; Tiranutti, 2007). Communities need to be empowered in tourism development decision-making and in the management of tourism operations (Alampay & Rieder, 2008). This is omnipresent

in the literature that addresses ecotourism (Clements et al., 2008; Maxwell, 2009). For example, it is claimed that the Chi Phat CBET project in Koh Kong Province has engaged the community, resulting in less logging and hunting, greater environmental awareness in the community, and a focus on local culture, which benefits the whole community (Reimer & Walter, 2012; UNWTO, 2012). However, the support provided to the CBET project by the conservation NGO Wildlife Alliance underwrites tourism livelihoods (previously supported by logging and hunting), and illegal logging and hunting remain largely monitored by NGO-funded joint patrol and law enforcement activities. The asserted economic and social benefits of CBET lack verification in the literature and are probably still far below what can be obtained currently from exploitation of natural resources in the short and long term.

The challenges of facilitating community involvement are well documented. The long-term effects of war and major trauma are evident in post-traumatic stress disorder and identified as barriers to effective communication and collaboration (Ellis, 2011). These challenges are exacerbated when communities are not properly informed about the impacts of development (Pleumarom, 2002). Community engagement towards sustainable outcomes through tourism in Cambodia is constrained by economic imbalance between what tourism can deliver and what exploitation delivers now, whatever the legality of the activity.

Stakeholder perceptions and values as drivers of tourism success

As elsewhere, stakeholders in Cambodia perceive tourism from different viewpoints. This is a salient point as demand for tourism is partly determined by the attitudes of local people towards tourists (Kaynak & Kara, 2012). Furthermore, local people's perceptions of community and of the benefits or harm that tourism can bring, also influence tourism success (Ellis, 2011). Despite tourism's contribution to economic growth in Cambodia, doubt exists at a local level regarding the perceived benefits that tourism brings, as tourism dollars often do not flow to local communities (Chheang, 2010b). Although the vast majority of tourists to Cambodia visit the Angkor temples, Siem Reap Province is one of the poorest in the country (Clements et al., 2008). The literature suggests that economic benefits are not flowing to local people, and lack of education and understanding of tourism reinforces feelings of powerlessness that discourage participation (Ellis, 2011). At a governance level, perceptions of what constitutes sustainable development are also a cause for concern, as environmentally damaging projects are being approved despite an environmental rhetoric. An example is the government-supported plans for a golf resort located within a national park near the Cambodian–Vietnamese border at Bokor (Pleumarom, 2002). This development proceeded despite the national park classification guidelines that emphasise ecosystem protection and recreation activities that do not significantly harm the environment (Kowalczyk, 2009).

Communities generally accept ecotourism developments because the perception of ecotourism is that it can help local social, economic and environmental needs (Bith, 2011). While ecotourism benefits may be obvious to some, they are not always clear to all community members. For example, despite the successful Tmatboey Ibis Project (Clements et al., 2008), villagers in nearby Prek Toal have limited understating of the connection between tourism and environmental conservation (Conway, 2008); while at Yeak Laom Lake, increased visitor numbers and income did not translate to perceptions of empowerment of the Tampuan people (Bith, 2011). Some community members argue that their views are rarely heard, that local elites reap the economic rewards, and that the

adverse impacts of tourism are borne by the community, including loss of community bonds, cultural integrity and lifestyles (Chheang, 2010b). While concern for the social impacts of tourism are identified in the Cambodian literature (e.g. the disruption of subsistence livelihoods, the reliance on an industry susceptible to external influences, unequal distribution of wealth), an examination is lacking of how local Cambodians experience tourism and how this might affect their engagement with tourism (Conway, 2008).

Most tourists visit Cambodia for cultural history and natural experiences, yet there remains a mismatch between the ecotourism products offered and consumer demand (Chens, Sok, & Sok, 2008). In a country where the major inbound markets are East Asian (56% of all visitors) (King et al., 2009), Western perspectives of the tourist experience do not recognise the diversity and aspirations of local people. Guidebooks such as Lonely Planet narrowly frame Cambodian culture in a colonial context that focuses on “affordability, authenticity and tragedy” (Tegelberg, 2010, pp. 505–506). With this Western bias, little attention is given to the motivation and expectations of tourists from Asia (Winter, 2007). There is a danger of product development for a market that is difficult to access, while the existing markets go unsatisfied.

Cultural heritage as a key tourism attraction

Cultural heritage and tourism are closely related, and learning about local culture, art and history, trying local cuisine and meeting local people are of high importance to some tourists, especially Western markets (Bauld et al., 2011; Chheang, 2008; Winter, 2004a). Tourism has the potential to reinvigorate Cambodian cultural identity, some of which was lost during foreign occupation and conflict (Chheang, 2009a). Although tourists to the Angkor complex provide significant economic benefits for Cambodia, the pressures on water supply and cultural and natural features have resulted in negative environmental and social consequences (Clements et al., 2008; De Lopez et al., 2006; Gaughan et al., 2009), including unregulated development, sewage pollution, stress on physical structures, noise pollution, increased prostitution, demand for illegal drugs, and displacement of local peoples for land development purposes (Barling, 2005; MRC, 2010; Tegelberg, 2010). There is also concern that the marketing of the Angkor temples has commoditised Cambodian culture at the expense of the local population (Winter, 2004a).

Cultural heritage is the main attractor of tourists to Cambodia, and it has helped re-establish Cambodia’s national identity after decades of conflict (Chheang, 2008; Winter, 2007, 2008). However, a holistic appreciation of culture and history in its broader sense is lacking, and it ignores contemporary Cambodian society. The tourist focus on the architectural splendour of the Angkorian era neglects smaller sites that could be presented by local communities, as well as pre-Angkorian history, the colonial era and the times of conflict and events that have shaped modern Cambodia. In addition, the meaning and significance of Angkor Wat as an architectural wonder has been embraced at the international level; however, the significance and relevance of the site(s) to Khmer culture is diminishing as local communities increasingly see the temples primarily as sites for international visitors, as tourism objects, rather than part of their contemporary culture (Tegelberg, 2010; Winter, 2007). Socio-cultural meaning, and therefore sustainability, is at risk.

Foreign investment shaping Cambodia’s tourism future

International lending and donor organisations play a significant role in shaping tourism in Cambodia (Heikkila & Peycam, 2010). As part of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS),

Cambodia receives financial support from a range of international organisations, such as the ADB, United Nation institutions, ASEAN and countries such as China, India, Japan, the United States of America and the European Union (Chheang, 2010a). While the ADB initiates, facilitates and manages major infrastructure projects in the GMS (Krongkaew, 2004), foreign investors generally drive tourism development (Pleumarom, 2002).

The ease of establishing foreign business in Cambodia has resulted in foreign owned businesses accounting for a significant market share (King et al., 2009). Thus, much of the revenue generated from tourism is leaked to private foreign businesses rather than returning to local economies (Azad & Chheang, 2009; Barling, 2005), with potential losses of more than 20% in 2006 (King et al., 2009). While the growth of tourism in Cambodia is one of the highest in the world, the impact on the national and local economies is much smaller and it remains one of the poorest countries in South-East Asia (Chens et al., 2008; Kaynak & Kara, 2012). The UN Human Development Index (HDI) shows that social development is not growing at the rates of economic development. In 2011, Cambodia ranked 139 out of 187 countries on the HDI, and it still very much relies on foreign aid (ADB, 2012b; Chhun et al., 2012).

Local communities believe that tourism should result in jobs and social development, yet benefits often go to foreign companies (Chheang, 2010b). Azad and Chheang (2009) warn that although Cambodia increasingly relies on tourism for economic and social development, few studies have examined the volatility of tourism to external shocks, how income leakage can be stemmed, or how local investment might be stimulated and facilitated. Fundamental to sustainable tourism is the equitable distribution of benefits, particularly to local communities and the disadvantaged. Without stimulating local community investment and ownership of tourism ventures, it is unlikely that this sustainable tourism ideal will be achieved.

Discussion

The Cambodian Government, through its Ministry of Tourism, has established a strong policy platform for achieving a sustainability vision. Its self-evaluation and insight is exemplified in its *TDSP 2012–2020*, but neither its five fundamental principles, nor its strategies are fully informed by third party critical review of tourism performance. The means by which the public and private sectors can achieve the vision remain ill-defined. In contrast, issues for tourism identified in the *National Strategic Development Plan Update 2009–2013* (RGC, 2010) are much better informed by the literature and identified as barriers to sustainable development (see Bauld, 2007; Chheang, 2008; Kaynak & Kara, 2012; Neth, 2008). While the government recognises that tourism has value as a development strategy (Barling, 2005; Bécherel, 2008), it is crucial for policy-makers and government to understand the core strengths and weaknesses of Cambodia as a tourist destination and to formulate strategies accordingly (Chens et al., 2008). Current regulatory frameworks make it difficult to enforce regulations so as to protect tourism assets and the environment (Reimer & Walter, 2013), and continued land concessions to national and transnational corporations undermine sustainable outcomes (Keating, 2012). Indeed, initiatives of ministries other than the Ministry of Tourism and supported by bilateral/multilateral aid or loans, often exclude how tourism might be integrated into transitioned livelihoods. The failure to integrate tourism as an alternative livelihood consideration has set in motion development of other industries that destroy tourism assets, making it increasingly difficult to establish sustainable tourism businesses. Hummel and van der Duim (2012) note that how sustainable tourism is measured in terms

of success is debatable, and has not been translated into figures such as increased job numbers or increased incomes at the local level. The myopic, but well-meaning, investments of foreign aid agencies in health and well-being continue to ignore sustainable livelihood issues that tourism can help address. For example, tourism is a growing economic sector, but local community-based products that can bring economic independence to the poor and are recognised by the tourism sector remain largely unsupported as poverty alleviation strategies and rationales for improved education. This is partly due to a lack of cohesive cross-ministerial vision from government and an inability to allocate aid assistance for multi-sector benefits, which are largely determined by the policies of the foreign aid agencies. The emphasis remains on immediate humanitarian relief, infrastructure development, governance and education, with little understanding of the role tourism can play in providing a rationale for these investments that can reduce the aid dependency of remote poor communities.

The published literature on Cambodian tourism is often characterised by a lack of continuity of experience with local context and constraints. Emphasis on the focal attraction of the Angkor Wat complex comes at the cost of full consideration of the economic and social dimensions of tourism. The call for sustainable tourism, without thorough consideration of the strategic capital requirements, and foundation infrastructure needed to support the promulgated ideals, results in a lack of traction for it. Tourism in Cambodia competes with resource exploitive, immediately high-yielding industries. Despite rapid tourism growth, no examples were identified in the literature where (sustainable) nature- and culture-based tourism has had a competitive edge over alternative resource uses.

Emerging destinations, such as the coastal provinces, Phnom Penh and surroundings, and the potential nature- and culture-based tourism experiences of the north-east, have been considered only cursorily, with no clear guidance given on how to address the increasing pressure, other than the repeated mantra that development must be sustainable. The literature specific to ecotourism is focused on the Western-centric tourism experience rather than addressing the existing and probable future growth in the East Asian market and the implications for product development and sustainable outcomes.

Ecotourism is seen increasingly as a tool for economic development and environmental conservation, yet it presents a paradox, as growth of the sector usually puts pressure on the destination and resources that it is trying to protect, and investment returns are low. Post Pol Pot, Cambodia retained many of its ecological assets, which represent a foundation for ecotourism. However, these are rapidly being eroded because returns from exploitation are high and immediate. In addition, foreign aid has emphasised infrastructure development, community health, governance, education and agricultural self-sufficiency. While these are worthy and humanitarian-based investments, they have also stimulated conversion of natural capital, hence eroding ecotourism and nature conservation potential. Consequently, the high expectations of ecotourism are currently not being realised, partly because of a lack of human capital and tourism experience in local communities and on-ground development does not facilitate ecotourism. In addition, evidence in the literature of a link between ecotourism and delivery of environmental and social benefits is tenuous at best.

Uneven regional development still sees Siem Reap and Angkor Wat, and a few other places, receiving most tourist visitation. As new destinations emerge, they will need to have carefully considered and well-documented sustainable tourism strategies and policies in place that recognise and protect local physical and cultural assets and values if they are to avoid the issues that have characterised the well-established destinations. The gap in the literature regarding emerging or potential tourism destinations in Cambodia is

large. The coastal provinces and the north-east can only benefit from the hindsight gained regarding the lack of effective preparation for tourism visitation to Siem Reap and Angkor Wat.

Community engagement is crucial for the success of sustainable tourism initiatives as part of strategies to alleviate poverty, protect the environment and improve the well-being of communities. The problem for Cambodia is the lack of financial and human capital related to tourism for engagement to be meaningful. Promulgating this ideal will not result in engagement unless communities have the capacity to fully understand the tourism system, market needs, the process of product development and marketing, as well as the financial capital to invest in tourism products.

The international tourism investment community is well aware of the potential of Cambodia and is (and has been) working towards securing land for tourism development. International aid investments in infrastructure assist these investors but do not necessarily assist local or community product development and service delivery, and rarely ecotourism developments. High foreign investment rates in Cambodian tourism means that leakage is a concern that can leave communities vulnerable to exploitation and missing an equitable share of the benefits of tourism.

Conclusions

The sustainable tourism vision for Cambodia is poorly defined in the literature in terms of how it can be operationalised. In simple terms, sustainable tourism would be where the Cambodian nation and communities are advantaged economically. Sustainable tourism would provide a rationale for heritage protection, support broader environmental protection initiatives, and contribute to community well-being. It would also provide a rationale for social cohesion, economic security and retention of desired cultural traditions. This suggests the need for Cambodian investment in tourism at multiple levels, but this is constrained by the lack of local capital, financial and human, and by a focus on large high-end developments that gain the attention of limited government resources.

Perhaps international aid should give greater attention to small-scale investments that provide local communities with the needed resources to develop and add value to local products and services through tourism. It also suggests that natural and cultural heritage resources need to be far greater used for tourism product development in order to make these resources meaningful to local communities and challenge the emphasis on short-term destructive exploitation. The corollary to this community focus is to encourage investment in centralised development (e.g. accommodation in tourism hubs) to direct tourism development away from sensitive areas but provide the infrastructure to support community-based products.

The perceptions, values and attitudes of all stakeholders, including local communities, investors, NGOs, government and tourists, determine whether sustainable tourism initiatives will succeed. The literature addresses some of the natural and cultural asset issues for tourism and their management. What are clearly missing are assessments of economic, social, and political issues that constrain sustainable tourism. Exploration of the perceptions and experiences of the dominant Asian market is absent as well as the broader perspectives of communities, especially of women, youth, the poor and the disengaged. Studies of emerging tourist locations, especially in the coastal zone, are needed to guide policy and development. This needs to be addressed with local input and informed by experience in related economies. Similarly, consideration of the sustainability of tourism

in the larger centres and hubs (e.g. Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville and Siem Reap) is required, not just for tourism but for the centres themselves and commerce generally.

Understanding national regional and local context is crucial to achieving the sustainability vision and expectations of tourism. While this is recognised by a few authors, it is not generally reflected in government policy and the broader literature, which presents idealistic visions that are difficult to convert to on-ground action. Deeper analysis of the Cambodian context and consideration of its needs, recent history, poverty levels and current power structures are needed to inform policy and strategic actions if sustainable tourism is to be offered as a viable alternative to current tourism practices.

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