

**TO DO! 2013**

**Contest Socially Responsible Tourism**



**Award Winner**

**CHAMBOK COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM  
PROJECT**

represented by:

**Mr. Va Moeurn, Executive Director, Mlup Baitong  
Mr. Om Sophana, Organisation Manager, Mlup Baitong  
Mr. Touch Morn, President Management-Committee, Chambok CBET**

**Phnom Penh / Chambok  
Cambodia**

**Award Rationale  
by  
Birgit Steck**



# 1 INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Institute for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.), the author visited Cambodia from 17th to 23rd November, 2013. She spent three days in the capital, Phnom Penh, and four days in the project location Chambok community, where she spoke with inhabitants, people directly involved in tourism and others less directly involved in the tourism activities of the Chambok Community Based Ecotourism Project (CBET), and others:

CBET Management Committee President:	Mr. TOUCH Morn
CBET Deputy President:	Mr. ROS Ven
Women group/cook leader:	Mrs. SAO Run
Women group book keeper:	Ms. SOK Chanthy
Guide:	Ms. SAT Srey Touch
First English speaking guide:	Mr. PHUN Thy
Ticket seller:	Ms. KHAT Savin
Ticket seller and waste manager:	Mr. NGIN Hong
Traditional dance teacher:	Ms. HUOT Sokhoeun

While in Chambok, she stayed in one of the 37 established home stays and visited various other accommodation facilities in local family houses. Apart from the touristic "must see", such as a walk to the water falls and a performance by a traditional dance group one evening, she enjoyed the varied Khmer cuisine of several women's cooking groups. During her stay, she was also introduced to the techniques of paddy harvesting, of traditional Khmer noodle production, of cooking rice in bamboo in an open fire and of new vegetable cultivation.

Some of the tourists shared their impressions of their experiences in Chambok. The Cambodian PhD student VEN Seyhah told the author his experiences from a recent empirical survey conducted with regard to the opinions of the local population about the tourism activities in the community. The Cambodian incoming agency "PEAK Adventure Travel Group" based in Siem Reap and two tour operators in Phnom Penh, "Bons Voyages" and "ApsaraTours", talked about their experiences with "Chambok Community Based Ecotourism". The Ministry of Tourism added the tourism statistics of Cambodia and explained a recent initiative for a "Community Based Ecotourism Law" that was also influenced by the "Chambok model project" (supported, among others, by the Asian Development Bank and Wildlife Alliance). Executive Director, Mr. VA Moeurn, and the Project and Organisational Manager in charge, Mr. OM Sophana, and other team members of the Cambodian NGO Mlup Baitong facilitated deeper insights into the development of the project.

The author recommends awarding the **CHAMBOK COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM PROJECT** a TO DO! 2013.

## 2 BACKGROUND AND SETTING

### 2.1 Cambodia – An Overview

During preparation of the journey, it already became evident that the country of Cambodia and its inhabitants are proud of their thousand year old history. The high culture of Angkor and its heritage are not only reflected at the tourist centres, but also in the everyday life in this South East Asian country. Traditions and Buddhist values are alive all over the country. Yet, decades of war, civil war, and genocide are not forgotten. After more than twenty years of democratic opening, Cambodia now seems to be a stable country (and tourism destination). Formally, it is a democracy, officially, however, a constitutional monarchy.

In an area a bit more than half the size of Germany, between the 10th and 15th parallel of northern latitude, there is a tropical monsoon climate and a diverse fauna and flora. The country has huge expanses of water. Lake Tonle Sap is the largest inland water body with

the largest fish population in South East Asia. During the rainy season from May to November, it expands sevenfold. Water in abundance once formed the basis of the high culture of Angkor and of the still common depiction of Cambodia as the "rice bowl of Indochina". An important life line is the Mekong which runs through the country from North to South and which in Phnom Penh shares its river bed with the Tonle Sap River over one kilometre. Both rivers then flow south (towards Vietnam) separately.

Despite its huge natural wealth and diversity, with an average per-capita income of 934 US\$ (2012), the country continues to belong to the group of Least Developed Countries (LDC). One third of the 15.3 million inhabitants live below the poverty line. With a state of development higher than Thailand's before the coup in 1970, Cambodia was called an "Asian Switzerland". The twenty years of civil war that followed made the country one of the neediest countries in the world:

*"The doctrine of economic self-sufficiency fanatically implemented by the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot, accompanied by the politics of collectivisation, resulted in a massive economic decline. The consequences of the destruction of infrastructure were extreme and continue to have implications up to the present. Under the pro-Vietnamese government from 1979, the basic economic situation did not improve much either; foreign trade was restricted almost exclusively to the Soviet Union and the states of the Comecon. The Paris Peace Agreement of 1991 was not only the foundation for a comprehensive new political start, but also triggered a complete change in foreign trade, from a state-directed economy to a market based economic order, from central to private foreign trade and from an Eastern to a Western orientation. What was important was above all the change to trade in hard currency in 1991 which initially entailed a reorientation of Cambodian trade to the Asian markets (especially Thailand, China/Hong Kong, Singapore, and Vietnam).*

*An important sector is the dynamically growing shoe and garment industry with currently (2012) about 300 factories and 350,000 workers, 90 percent of them women. In 2011, Cambodia exported shoes and textiles worth 4.2 million US\$, which was about 85 percent of total exports. (...) Cambodia has large oil and natural gas reserves which are confirmed (up to two billion barrels of oil and 28 billion m<sup>3</sup> of natural gas), offshore in the gulf of Thailand. It is not yet clear, however, when exploitation will start. The economy continues to be dominated by agriculture. 75 percent of all Cambodians still work in agriculture.*

*Despite significant efforts for reform and massive donor support, the country's economic foundations remain weak. This is above all due to the high costs of energy, a very limited pool of skilled labour, and a lack of constitutional structures."<sup>1</sup>*

Cambodia's tourism is booming: the main attractions in the country, such as the largest sacral building world wide, Angkor Wat, the capital Phnom Penh, and Sihanoukville on the coast will for the first time have attracted up to four million international visitors in 2013. The statistics by the Ministry of Tourism even suggest that these preliminary estimates are rather conservative: between 2009 and 2010, international tourist arrivals increased by 16 percent, then by 15 percent, and between 2011 and 2012 by 24 percent. If the figures for 2013 are confirmed to amount to four million tourist arrivals in Cambodia, this means they almost doubled as compared to 2007 with two million visitor arrivals.

76 percent of all guests are from the Asia/Pacific region: 411,000 Koreans, 334,000 Chinese, 254,000 Laotians, 201,000 Thais and 179,000 Japanese came to Cambodia in 2012. The Vietnamese, however, have by far the largest share: Between January and December 2012, 763,000 people visited the neighbouring country to the West, however, not so much in order to enjoy the beach life in the South or to explore the archaeological park of Angkor. Rather, the main attraction are the Cambodian casinos on the border, since gambling is prohibited in Vietnam.

As compared to Asian visitors, European guests play only a minor role, their share is only 17 percent. With close to 121,000 tourists in 2012, the largest group of European visitors came

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Markus Karbaum in: <http://liportal.giz.de/kambodscha/wirtschaft-entwicklung/>

from France, even though Air France discontinued flights from Paris to Phnom Penh via Bangkok. During the same time frame, only 73,000 Germany went to Cambodia. There is still a lack of good quality and at the same time moderately priced offers. New, attractive tours remain scarce, but will probably be in great demand in the future.

### **3 CHAMBOK COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM**

#### **3.1 The NGO Mlup Baitong**

Mlup Baitong (literally "Green Shadow") is a renowned Cambodian non-governmental organisation (NGO). Founded in 1998, it is engaged in information and education against deforestation of the whole country and works for the protection of natural resources. With 65 employees, Mlup Baitong has meanwhile earned a good reputation for the successful implementation of its projects: breaking the vicious circle of poverty among local families, who are on the one hand strongly dependent on the preservation of their natural sources of livelihood, and are on the other hand often forced to continue to destroy them and/or are in danger of being displaced by other, more powerful users. For Mlup Baitong, all projects with the poor rural population follow above all a participatory approach; aiming at a close cooperation with the local administration, local councillors, forest authorities, and schools.

In their current five year plan (2010-2015), Mlup Baitong concentrate on the following five focus areas of work:

- Improve livelihoods
- Community-based forest management
- Improve the environmental situation in the communities
- Community-based ecotourism
- Environmental awareness, media and consultancy services

In the field of ecotourism, Mlup Baitong has emerged as a pioneer in Cambodia. Upon request from the tourism ministry, the organisation currently supports Community Based Ecotourism (CBET) in three communities in different parts of the country: Chambok CBET, Preah Rumkel CBET, and Boeung Anlung Pring CBET. In all three locations, visitors have the opportunity to get to know the Cambodian culture and the unique and almost pristine nature in the respective places. For the members of the local community in income-scarce forest areas, this is an important possibility to generate additional income and to also contribute to community development and forest conservation.

Mlup Baitong has received various national and international awards for the CHAMBOK CBET project (from UNDP and USAID, among others).

#### **3.2 The Project**

Kampong Speu province, to which Chambok belongs, lies west of the capital of Phnom Penh and is accessed by the national highway leading to the coast. The region originally had a dense forest cover. As the soil is generally unsuitable for agriculture, people traditionally live on using the forests: illegal logging, production of firewood and charcoal as well as hunting of wildlife. In the past, population growth and good market opportunities in the cities led to large-scale deforestation and partly destruction of natural sources of livelihood, which in turn leads to increased impoverishment of the local population.

In order to protect the existing forest and ensure a sustainable source of income and livelihood for the people, Mlup Baitong conducted feasibility studies on various income alternatives in 2002. Chambok's location on the fringe of the Kirirom highlands and in relative proximity to the national highway (88 km from Phnom Penh via national highway, plus 20 km of dirt road) and to the attractive waterfalls and other beautiful natural sights located there resulted in a potential for ecotourism.

Upon the initiative of the community members themselves and supported by various training programmes by Mlup Baitong, paths were established, the first tour guides were trained, and more basics for tourism services were developed. As early as January 2003, the Chambok ecotourism resort was opened to visitors.

The project activities financed by various foreign donors<sup>2</sup> between 2002 and June 2010 included five main components which are closely interrelated and complement one another:

- **Construction and maintenance of tourism infrastructure:** hiking trails and steps, small bridges, ticket cabins at the entrance, shelters, an information centre, a restaurant with a kitchen, a parking lot, a playground, and sales stalls.
- **Capacity Building/education and training** of the members of the management committee in the fields of general environmental awareness; project planning, implementation and monitoring; study visits to different ecotourism projects in Cambodia and abroad.
- **Training for tourism services and their management:** ticket fees, bullock cart riding, bicycle rental, guiding tourists, preparing food, selling souvenirs, traditional dance, accommodation in home stays; marketing with tour operators and agencies.
- **Measures on environmentally friendly tourism:** waste collection and recycling, setting up forest patrols to contain illegal forms of use.
- **Support for women's groups:** Setting up of self-help groups and savings groups to establish small businesses (catering for guests, production of souvenirs, bicycle rental).

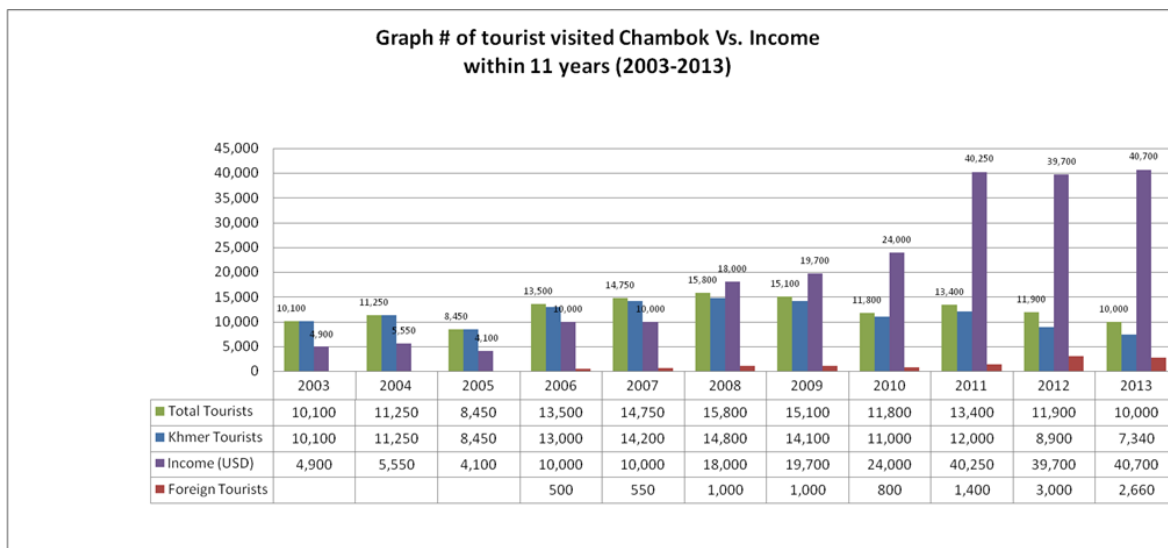
### 3.3 The Ecotourism Activities in Figures

In 2013 (by early December), 10,000 people had visited Chambok CBET. 75 percent of them were Cambodians, the rest were international tourists from about 30 different countries. During this period, the ecotourism project generated close to 30,000 Euros (appr. 41,000 US\$).

With a total of 136,050 tourists, the visitor statistics over a period of eleven years included both excursionists as well as guests staying over night. As a positive development, a strong increase in revenues can be noted, while the number of tourists remained more or less stable or increased only moderately: from 10,000 tourists in the first year to more than 15,000 tourists in the years 2008 and 2009. Since the beginning of the project, the annual revenues increased tenfold. This may also be due to the significant rise of the number of foreign tourists who pay other entrance fees (3 US\$ = 2.19 €) than Cambodian visitors (1500 Riel = 0.27 €) and more often stay over night, consume more meals in the community (instead of bringing their own picnic) and make use of other tourism services.

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<sup>2</sup> Oxfam Novib, Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, Oxfam Great Britain, Keidanren Nature Conservation Fund, Asian Development Bank, Blacksmith Institute, Canada Fund, McKnight Foundation UNDP, EU, IUCN NL.



From a development perspective, the project can – in financial terms – be considered profitable. The tourism revenues presented in the chart add up to 216,000 US\$ over the project duration of about eleven years.

Mlup Baitong's total expenditures for the project, with financial support of the foreign organisations mentioned under 3.2, amounted to 261,000 US\$ between 2002 and 2010. Assuming that the positive development of the revenues through ecotourism activities will continue, the break even point can be expected by the end of 2014. It can be assumed that after twelve years the project will have recovered the project expenditures.

Apart from the financial success, other long-term outcomes for the community of Chambok can be noted:

- Contrary to many concerns, the eco-tourism site has remained clean: Unlike elsewhere in the country, there are no places full of garbage. Plastic and other waste is being collected and recycled or disposed of in other ways.
- More than 1,100 hectares of forest are managed in a sustainable manner. Forest fires, illegal logging and hunting of wildlife are under control.
- Before the project started, there were 72 charcoal pits in the area, which have now disappeared. This has stopped the daily logging of hundreds of trees.
- The forest authorities have for several years been observing a natural reforestation of the area. Even precious wood trees have started to grow again in the forest.
- Empowerment: The community members and above all the management committee have acquired a lot of new qualifications; the concerns of the community and its members are being discussed and decided in the committee.

## 4. EVALUATION AGAINST THE TODO! CONTEST CRITERIA

### 4.1 Taking into account the different interests and needs of the local people through participation

Mlup Baitong began the project with intensive consultations with the members of the community of Chambok. Many workshops focussed on forest resource use and possible advantages and disadvantages of using the area for ecotourism. Many discussions took place in order to assess different tourism models and options and their possible impacts. At the beginning of the project, all nine villages of the community of Chambok with their 750 families were part of the decision making process.

The community members clearly decided in favour of controlled ecotourism and elected a management committee of 13 community members in order to coordinate future steps of the ecotourism project. In the management committee, the forest authorities and the local administration have one seat respectively. The committee has undertaken to recruit at least three female members.

The step by step procedure with the different project activities was from the onset aimed at a transition phase in which all management tasks without exception would be handed over to the management committee. Since June 2010, all the responsibility lies with the community of Chambok, who organise all the ecotourism activities themselves.

In the meantime, Mlup Baitong has discontinued its financial and institutional support and has since then assumed merely an advisory role.

Since the project started, the members of the community and above all the management committee have become significantly more self-confident and have virtually surpassed themselves: Illiterates and people who had not completed primary school have turned into English speaking tour guides, female chefs and tourism managers who take their lives and the work into their own hands and stand up for their rights.

All the organisation, the billing of groups of visitors as well as business agreements with tour operators are handled by the management committee and/or their president, Mr. TOUCH Morn.

The committee also decides on the distribution of overnight guests to the home stays and discusses new tourism products and the overall development of the community with regard to all the tourism activities. It seems to be important that in these decisions and discussions the balance between the preservation of natural resources and the tourism activities with their benefits for the whole community continues to be emphasized. The management committee is regularly being reconfirmed through democratic elections.

#### **4.2 Enhancing the awareness of the local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development**

At the beginning, in the numerous discussions on the risks and opportunities of tourism development, Mlup Baitong acted as a facilitator raising awareness on various issues in the field of nature and environmental protection. Furthermore, the members of the management committee could also experience mainstream tourism themselves, but also ecotourism projects in Cambodia and/or in neighbouring Thailand. On the basis of this and other information, the implications of tourism development in the village were assessed and the decision was made in favour of developing an ecotourism product, consciously differentiating it from other common tourism products offered elsewhere, which neither take into account the protection of natural resources nor the fair involvement of the local population.

#### **4.3 Participation of broad local population strata in the positive economic, social and cultural effects of tourism**

The project is explicitly aimed at making the benefits of tourism activities attractive for all the members of the community, including 400 out of 750 families in Chambok who are not directly involved in the tourism activities.

For example, about 20 percent of the revenues from tourism feed a community fund that finances individual projects for Chambok as a whole, and that also helps to mitigate social bottlenecks. Among other things, it supports

- **Water supply for all households through water pipes and active forest conservation.** Not until functioning water pipes supply water to the houses all year round do other economic activities such as crop cultivation, animal husbandry, and fish farming become feasible. Water supply allows for more time and energy for other activities. This especially applies to women who no longer have to walk all the way to the river to fetch water.



- **Sustainable use of forest products:** bamboo cane, bamboo shoots, rattan, mushrooms, wild vegetables, traditional medicine
- **Maintenance of community infrastructure/traffic routes:** bridges, paths
- **Remuneration for forest patrol guards**
- **Training in foreign languages** for the management committee and local guides
- **Philanthropic support of community projects** by individual tourists and/or tourist groups (construction of a school library, school kitchen, support of individual students for their further education at schools/educational institutions, etc.)
- **Support of socially underprivileged families in need,**

The project thus successfully contributes to poverty alleviation in the community.

#### **4.4 Guarantee of the attractiveness of jobs in tourism or of income opportunities for the local people**

In order to prevent dependencies on the tourism business, the community did from the onset purposely not create any full time jobs. Tourism offers an additional income for individual households, to complement revenues from agricultural activities (mainly from paddy cultivation), the natural forest remains protected.

About 750 families live in the nine villages of the community of Chambok, 350 of them are directly involved in tourism activities. In a strictly regulated rotational system, the women's groups organise themselves to do the cooking and in this way distribute – depending on the size of the group - the cooking tasks and the revenues earned from catering to the tourists. A total of 350 women are involved in these activities either as chefs or as assistants and/or in catering management. The 37 accommodation facilities in the houses (home stays) also work according to a rotational system.

Other activities such as tour guiding, ox cart ride, or ticket and/or souvenir sales, waste collection, forest patrols or similar tasks are being remunerated on the basis of daily rates and/or time and effort. The individual service providers take turns according to a sophisticated system. Surveys conducted by Mlup Baitong have shown that the average share of tourism revenues in total household incomes is between ten and 13 percent.

Educational and training programmes (English classes, etc.) for children and youths are now being organised by the community themselves. They try in various and innovative ways to learn as many new things as possible (e.g. by recruiting volunteers) and have again become more independent from Mlup Baitong's support.

The guides who were the first ones to be trained serve as examples for the youths growing up with tourism activities. There are regular meetings of the 43 members of the "Youth Club" during which the expertise of experienced tourism service providers is passed on to the next generation.

#### **4.5 Strengthening local culture and cultural identity and avoiding/minimising any social and cultural damage caused by tourism**

In their ecotourism project the community understandably relies on the beauty of the natural environment, but also intentionally includes its cultural heritage. This does not only include traditional dance, but also interesting insights – especially for urban Cambodian tourists – into the natural, agricultural life in Cambodia with traditional and now also increasingly innovative methods of cultivation as well as the unadulterated processing of common food (e.g. the traditional production of rice noodles). Regular meetings of the management committee as well as joint activities in the community promote team spirit and at the time a critical reflection of the community's own culture.

The tour guides also make sure that the "dos and don'ts" in the community are being observed. This is also supported by a brochure published by the Tourism Ministry, "*A guide to socially responsible behaviour for visitors to Cambodia*".

#### **4.6 Environmental sustainability**

In as early as August 2002, the Ministry of Environment was won as a supporter of the project. After all, 70 hectares of the "*Community Conservation Area*" are located within the national park. Rules and regulations were jointly established in order to define the work of the committee as well as the sustainable use of natural resources for everybody in a binding manner. The entire project area encompasses 161 hectares of forest, 750 hectares of "*Forested Community Protected Areas*" and 300 hectares of "*Community Forest*".

The additional incomes from tourism as well as the various side effects mentioned above (cf 3.3) that benefit all the community members prevent a non-sustainable use of the forest and the protected areas. The joint patrols have significantly reduced illegal logging and poaching. This has in the meantime led to the return of animal species which were originally endemic to the area, but had been absent for many years, including wild peacocks and wild boars. A community-owned tree nursery ensures the successful reforestation of three hectares of forest.

After visiting Cambodia and its neighbouring countries, something is found missing in Chambok: There is no garbage scattered around. One of the pillars of the project remains the collection and disposal of plastic waste, which elsewhere spoils the landscape and represents a danger for human beings and animals.

#### **4.7 Participation of women and men in planning and implementation processes – improvement of gender relations**

75 percent of the tourism service providers in Chambok are women. There are eight women in the CBET management committee (out of 15 members in total, and thus significantly more than the "at least three women in the committee" stipulated earlier).

Apart from providing food for the tourists, the women's organisation contributes intensively to gender equality. Whether from tourism or from the micro-enterprises that the savings group was able to finance the additional income empowers women in their families. Women report a decrease in domestic violence and an increase in respectful gender relations. Girls and young women are increasingly active in tourism – outside the kitchen. Their self-confidence had already been strengthened in the traditional dance troupe, they learned to naturally deal with strangers in the community, their curiosity was piqued to get to know other cultures, and they have got experience with different foreign languages.

In the Youth Club, young women and girls also prepare for their role as tour guides and increasingly demand their natural right to education and training. Unfortunately, among the 43 members of the Youth Club, only nine are girls.

A significant advantage of the income and employment opportunities in the villages is that they prevent emigration from the villages to the cities as cheap labour in the shoe and textile industries. 90 percent of the employees in these industries are poor women without education and without other income opportunities.

#### **4.8 Ensuring economic and institutional sustainability of the project**

From the onset, the project was aimed at **ownership** and **empowerment**. A lot of time and energy was invested in education and awareness raising. Step by step, more and more responsibility was placed in the hands of the community itself an/or in the hands of the CBET management committee. After a well planned transition phase, Mlup Baitong completely withdrew from the project and now provides advice only upon request from Chambok CBET.

The project is **economically sustainable** because the total investments and the costs of running the project are relatively low. The *return on investment* of the total project costs has almost been reached. The income from tourism steadily increases and stabilises at an economically sustainable level. However, the total number of visitors slightly decreased. The community might have to work on their marketing and product diversification in order to continue to maintain quality standards and to be able to compete with the increasing number of similar ecotourism projects in Cambodia in the future.

The **direct and/or indirect participation of all the families in Chambok** ensures social redistribution and a broad-based acceptance of the project on the long run.

The **institutional sustainability** is based on the solidly established management committee and on the commitment of its president. A long, proven and tested cooperation with the local authorities and ministries strengthens the local organisational structure.

## 5 CONCLUSION

With regard to its sustainability, its economic profitability and its cost-benefit-ratio, the Chambok Community Based Ecotourism Project is a positive example for a successful community based ecotourism project – against prevalent scepticism in the development community and in the tourism sector.

That is one of the reasons why in the past few years countless national and international delegations visited Chambok as an example of *best practice*. Among others, the UNDP Regional Center Colombo described the project as one of the best examples of CBET in Asia and documented it in a publication.

In the national context, Chambok CBET has for some time served as a model for many other similar initiatives in the country. With the many lessons learnt, it also influences the current process for the introduction of a special "community based ecotourism law" (*CBET law*) in Cambodia.

It can be assumed that the TO DO! 2013 award for socially responsible tourism can generate additional, well-deserved attention in parts of the tourism industry as well as in the relevant expert communities.

## 6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite all the success of the project as mentioned above, and despite the increase in revenues from ecotourism activities, some areas remain in which improvements can and partly must be made.

The ratio between visitor numbers and tourism revenues shows that future efforts must be made to attract more (paying) international visitors. Apart from suitable marketing measures, this also requires effective quality management of the tours and activities already offered as well as a diversification of attractive adventure products in other parts of the villages. When it comes to catering to a larger number of international groups of visitors, a bottleneck identified in a discussion with the management committee is the urgent training of English speaking guides.

Restricting the CBET management committee's leadership on one person entails medium and long term risks. Building leadership among young people in the community remains another challenge of long term sustainability.


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