The World Ecotourism Summit  
Quebec City, Canada, 19-22 May 2002  

Theme A:  
Ecotourism Policy and Planning:  
The Sustainability Challenge  

Cambodian experience in Ecotourism Planning:  
The sustainability challenge within the specific context of Cambodia.  

By  

H.E. Mr. VENG Sereyvuth  
Senior Minister, Minister of Tourism  
Royal Government of Cambodia

Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  

It is indeed a great pleasure and honour for me to participate in the World Ecotourism Summit and have the opportunity to share with you the Cambodian experience in Ecotourism Planning: the sustainability challenge within the specific context of Cambodia.

Introduction  

1. The Royal Government of Cambodia has defined Cambodia as a “Culture and Nature Tourism”. Tourism development policy is formulated within the framework of the national development plan. It provides that tourism will be developed in a sustainable manner without degrading the social and cultural environment.

2. Our ecotourism destinations have now become well known among national and international tourists who visit Cambodia such as the Great Lake (Tonle Sap) region, the northeast highland ecotourism destinations, coastal ecotourism and other renowned ecotourism destinations. It would be the most relevant tourism activities in the future for the industry. Therefore, we must be careful in planning because the ecosystem is unique and fragile.

Current status of Ecotourism practices in Cambodia  

3. Since more and more tourists are eager to discover nature and culture in its real form, the Royal Government of Cambodia is very keen to exploit this recent trend in international tourism. Conservation and preservation of natural and cultural resources are considered as an important responsibility of the nation.
4. Ecotourism, through a new concept, has been included in the National Tourism Policy with due importance. Cambodia prepared a Master Plan for tourism development whose policy emphasizes the coordination among various ministries and agencies of the government.

5. In Cambodia, the Department of Forestry plays a key role in the preservation of natural resources in the reserved forests and national parks. They authorized to ensure sustainable development of forest and wildlife resources through implementation of government policies. In addition, the Government has enacted laws to ensure pollution free environment and these are implemented by the Ministry of Environment.

6. Ecotourism is relatively a new concept in Cambodia, but there are developments in this area. Public and private tour operators are playing a pioneering role to promote ecotourism through package tours. At the same time, they educate and create awareness among the visiting ecotourist, and the local community. However these activities are yet to be organized and integrated properly and fully.

7. The Government supplies ongoing activities to improve the sustainability of ecotourism; requires the development of ecotourism strategies; clarifies jurisdictional mandates and responsibilities among agencies involved in ecotourism planning and management; and strengthens enforcement of rules, regulations and guidelines.

Sustainable Ecotourism Plans

8. Ecotourism has the potential for development in local areas that offer ecologically interesting natural environments, which are often combined with settlements of ethnic peoples. Because it normally tends to be in small scale, ecotourism can usually be developed within the scope of local resources, but technical assistance to the local community is often required to ensure proper development and management. Also, some financial assistance may be necessary to help the communities for involvement in sustainable development of ecotourism.

9. The National Tourism Development Plan is a means of guiding tourism development in Cambodia in a sustainable manner. While the definition of ecotourism still varies among different groups of people, the key elements in the definition are tourism based on nature and culture. It is low impact and emphasizes economic opportunities for local communities.

10. Tourism as an industry, relies on the quality of certain resources to attract people to an area yet the activities of the visitors or the industry itself often degrade the attractions in some way. Sustainable tourism seeks to avoid the destruction of the basic attractions, so that the benefits associated with tourism are retained indefinitely.

Developing community based ecotourism

11. Ecotourism is a sector that focuses on the natural environment and often involves local communities, sustainability issues are thrown into sharp relief. This means that we must take care to avoid negative impacts on local habitats and communities visited and where possible ringing benefits to them.
12. The main objective is to promote conservation within the community through their engagement in ecotourism. It is important to fully understand the current threats to conservation and how this is affected by the existing community activity.

13. Ecotourism planning with community and stakeholder of ecotourism whose roles are vital to the overall conservation effort, namely: the Government, local communities, private sector, protection manager, Non-Government and International Organizations. It must be community involvement and working together on an agreed strategy by ensuring environmental and cultural integrity.

14. Developing a community-based project includes marketing and promotion with quality products through working with experienced private sector operators and through networking. While tourism is basically a private sector led-activity, a regulatory framework needs to be put in place. The private sector involves themselves from the conceptualization and design of ecotourism programme to its implementation.

15. Strengthening benefits to the community and the environment in terms of delivery of social, economic and environmental benefits include providing technical support and monitoring performance and ensuring the continuity.

*The role of communities in sustainable tourism*

16. Local communities often provide attractions for tourist through their cultural or social heritage or through their personal qualities such as friendliness and hospitality offered to visitors. The cultural heritage, social customs and personal attributes of the community are part of tourism products and assets of the tourism industry as much as the natural, environmental attractions and must be protected in the same way. It is necessary to gain the support of local communities for tourism activities and to ensure that they participate in tourism where appropriate.

*Land use planning*

17. Conservation and sustainable development has become an important agenda in the country’s overall development programme. The Royal Government of Cambodia has formulated various national environment related policies to ensure sustainable development. The government also formulated a National Conservation Strategy to provide the framework for comprehensive resources management and utilisation.

18. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is often required and should be a requirement for any ecotourism development project in the areas such as coastal resort, recreational facilities in national parks and islands. Basic steps in impact assessment and management are identified in different ways to minimize or eliminate each impact and choose the best way to put them into action.

19. Although the original objective of ecotourism was conservation of natural environments it has the capacity to deliver several other benefits for the community development and conservation advocacy through education and interpretation of the natural environment.

*Understanding and working with communities*
20. Successful tourism depends on the community’s acceptance, support and on-going involvement. Therefore, the significance of understanding and working with communities for the policy and planning, the operators, and the guides who act as a “bridge” between tourist and the community are crucial. The local communities study the impacts, options and possibilities of ecotourism development before they decide on it as the roadmap to economic growth.

21. Clear objectives must be defined and determined acceptable limits of ecosystem changes, develop and implement management plans, and contact communities about tourism development. However, some concerns that the communities have about tourism development include the following:

- What tourism can be expected (both negative and positive aspects)
- Employment opportunities, and labor practices and constraints
- Protection of the natural environment and change of land use in the area
- Access to communications and transportation
- Impact from tourism operations and the protection against negative social and cultural impacts

22. The measures to carry out for those concerned are to establish carrying capacity standards so that there is no over development of tourist facilities or over use of the environment by visitors. More over the small scales tourist facilities in environmentally suitable locations should develop with local design and use of local building material, energy saving devices and proper disposal of waste material.

23. The community can be further encouraged to participate in tourism through Marketing Promotion & Awareness Programme development by providing them job and income from tourism, arrangement of village tours for appreciation of local cultures.

Managing risk, health, and safety in ecotourism

24. Ecotourism activities often have the potential to place the health and safety of tourists at considerable risks. This is because some ecotourism activities are situated in natural and/or in unfamiliar areas where there are numerous hazards. The careful management and planning can reduce the chances of negative outcomes. Health, safety and risk management are vital considerations and can offer some advice on how to minimize the risks.

Programme at national level implication and future direction

25. The Ministry of Tourism of Cambodia has undertaken measures, not only to regulate through its various laws and policies but also in setting up and identifying institutional agencies responsible for the implementation and enforcement of its laws and policies to ensure the sustainability of ecotourism development in the county.

26. The Ministry of Tourism firmly believes that the public sector should first make a firm commitment and undertake initiative to ensure sustainable development of ecotourism so that the private sector and other players in the tourism industry can follow suite. We continue to provide well-trained tour guides who will give accurate information to tourist about biological diversity, conservation and techniques to observe good measures during tours.
27. As good partners, the Non-Governmental and International organizations will act as intermediaries between private sector and communities to assist in developing technologies and products using local resources; provide training and advocacy; collect relevant information and organize community groups to manage ecotourism projects. They facilitate exchange of information and experiences, ensure an integrated planning for ecotourism.

28. In the meantime, the Royal Government of Cambodia diversifies tourism destinations, especially in developing ecotourism by improving infrastructure such as:

- Open water-routes with the neighbouring countries in order to use the potential ecotourism attraction of lower and upper Mekong river and ecotourism attraction along coastal areas
- Cooperation under the project of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region for developing ecotourism, especially along the East-West Economic Corridor and the Southern Coastal Corridor.
- Rehabilitation of provincial airports, national roads to the North Eastern Provinces and road access to major ecotourism sites.

Conclusion

29. In conclusion, discovering and developing the above mentioned potential eco-tourism destinations in Cambodia would definitely be an invaluable asset to the Cambodian national tourism industry. Of course, it is also noted that while there is a great need for development in the tourism industry, however, we are also concerned for the conversation of our cultural environment and natural environment too.

30. Ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism. It is best understood as a process not as a product. Just as sustainable tourism is a process for the management of tourism over time, ecotourism was intended a process for the management of tourism “for the benefit of conservation”

31. This is the task that lies before us. Difficulties should not be underestimated and success should not be taken for granted. Tourism can be a powerful tool to sustain heritage, though it needs great care and sensitivity in planning, development, management and marketing to be economically as well as socially viable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We welcome the opportunity to share these challenges and opportunities with you. Thank you for your interest and attention.

Biographical Note

Mr. VENG Sereyvuth was born in Prey Veng Province, Cambodia on 31 May 1960. After graduating from Victoria University, New Zealand with a degree in Bachelor of Arts in Political Science in 1988, he worked as Deputy Director of the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Funcipec Party from 1987-1991.
In 1991-1993, he joined the Secretariat Member of the Supreme National Council for Cambodia. From 1993-1997 he was appointed as Co-Minister of the Office of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Tourism. From 1998 to present, he is currently a Senior Minister, Minister of Tourism. H.E. Mr. VENG Sereyvuth has been a Member of Parliament from 1993-2003.