



Song Saa Conservation and Community Program

Introduction and description

Background

The Song Saa Conservation and Community program forms an integral part of the Song Saa Private Island project, supporting a model for coastal development that protects the natural environment, while simultaneously fulfilling the livelihood needs of local communities and the aspirations of investors and guests.

Underpinning this goal is a vision of Song Saa Private Island as an exemplar for development in Cambodia where the triple bottom lines of sustainability – ecological, social and economic well-being – are achieved and integrated. Program wide, this comprises:

- Supporting the protection, enhancement and restoration of the environment and community fabric in all the activities we undertake.
- Collaborating with local communities to promote sustainable environmental, social and economic outcomes
- Implementing a model for development in Southeast Asia that is innovative and cutting edge in terms of its commitment to environmental, social and economic bottom-lines.



The Conservation and Community Program forms an integral part of Song Saa Private Island, providing the foundations for a development with exemplary triple bottom line credentials. These focus on ensuring that Song Saa Private Island projects improve the condition of the environment, communities and economies around them. The first part of the Conservation and Community program focuses on environmental conservation; the second, on supporting the experiences and encounters of resort guests with the local environment; and the third on the promotion of community focused sustainable livelihood initiatives.

The Song Saa Program – Environmental Conservation

The protection and sustainable management of Song Saa Private Island’s natural assets is an imperative of the development and is the primary focus of the Conservation and Community team. This team comprises four full-time staff, who include experienced marine biologists and scientists, who work alongside other Song Saa Private Island personnel, government and non-government organizations, conservation authorities and community leaders, to maintain the aspects of the natural environment – clear water, vibrant fish and coral life and unique land animals - that make Song Saa special. The conservation and education program has four key prongs, which together create a comprehensive marine and coastal conservation and education initiative.

1. Marine Reserve Management, Research and Monitoring

The program has established a marine reserve covering one million square meters, extending 200 meters from the outer edge of the reefs that fringe both of the islands of Song Saa. This reserve is a *first* for Cambodia, inspiring, we hope, further marine protected areas in the future. The reserve is being managed to international standards and studies are underway to significantly expand its boundaries.

A key factor in the development of this reserve had been the collaboration with local communities. Partnering with a fisheries group from Prek Svay, the value of the reserve has been discussed and recognized, while income alternatives to replace opportunities foregone by its creation have been developed. The understanding and support for the initiative has been demonstrated by the commitment of the local fisheries committee to patrol the demarcated area and undertake the education of local fishers on its rules.



Figure 1: School of red coats, a fish species found in abundant numbers off the shores of Song Saa Private Island.

In conjunction with Cambodian authorities, Song Saa Private Island's marine biologists are engaged in marine surveys, which are gathering data on the health of local reefs, fish stocks and other saltwater species. Water quality and sediment levels are also being monitored to keep a record of the health of the surrounding marine environment. Collectively, these provide a database that can be used to benchmark the condition of the local marine environment and allow the recording of change and improvement.

2. Land Conservation Initiatives

On the islands of Song Saa a plant and animal study has been completed, which identified bat-breeding colonies, roosting sites for hornbills, sea eagles and owls, and microhabitats for orchids and lichens. Management plans are now in place to preserve these species and their habitats, while opportunities are being explored to extend this work to other species associated with the ecosystems of Song Saa Private Island and the Koh Rong archipelago.



Figure 2: White bellied sea eagle feeding off Song Saa Private Island.

3. Research and Learning Incubator

A core part of the conservation program is the development of a learning center for marine field research and education – a Cambodian first. Through alliances with national and international universities including James Cook in Australia and Victoria University in New Zealand, the program is bringing together Cambodian and foreign students and researchers to undertake pioneer marine research in the nation. An exciting initiative, investigations are currently underway on crab farming and mangrove ecosystems, while studies of sea turtle and sea horses are proposed for later in 2011.

Human-based research, focusing on economic and social aspects of development, will also be championed through the incubator and investigations are now underway to identify suitable partners for this research sector.

Forthcoming visits from New Zealand and North American researchers promise to bring more focus onto the marine environments of the country which, combined with a domestic intern program, will ensure that the capacity of the Cambodian scientific community is nurtured and empowered by the project.

4. Environmental Education

The conservation program has an evolving education component focused on raising the awareness and understanding of environmental issues and opportunities amongst local communities. An innovative first for the area was the recent completion of a leaflet entitled *Conserve Your Marine Environment*. Printed in Khmer and English this has

become a center point in efforts to increase the knowledge and understanding of marine conservation amongst the inhabitants of local fishing villages in the Koh Rong archipelago. A similar education program, devoted to sanitation, is also underway and links to the waste management livelihood project described in the community section.

THE SONG SAA PROGRAM - GUEST EXPOSURE & EXPERIENCE

The Conservation and Community team support opportunities for guests to Song Saa Private Island to see and experience the natural and human world around the resort, through exposure and encounter experiences. On the islands of Song Saa and the larger nearby island of Koh Rong, for example, opportunities exist for sea kayaking and birding tours, combined with swimming and cultural encounters. In the marine area, diving, snorkeling and beach trekking options exist.

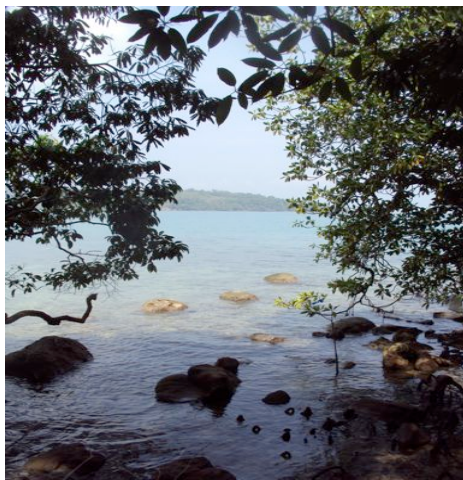


Figure 3: The waters around Song Saa provide the opportunity for an array of encounter experiences with the natural and social worlds of coastal Cambodia

In support of these activities the Conservation and Community team are collaborating to develop a series of interpretative materials, including a field-guide and newsletter, which will provide guests with an insight into the world they can experience around Song Saa. A focus for this interpretative process will be the development of a discovery and education center, where a combination of a touch tank, posters, film and other materials will be used to reveal the world of and beyond the resort's shores. A up-close encounter experience is also being developed through the placement of a series of artificial reefs around shoreline accommodation on the islands.

It is also anticipated that some guests may wish to take the opportunity, during and after their visit, to support specific conservation projects within Cambodia. The opportunity to offset the carbon costs of their holiday, for example, is being investigated through linkages to an international blue-carbon program. Other guests, inspired by the beauty and uniqueness of Cambodian wildlife may wish to support the conservation of an icon species associated with the wider Song Saa environment, and this opportunity is now being investigated with a particular interest in the Sarus Crane.



Figure 4: The Sarus Crane, the world's tallest flying bird, is listed as endangered, but found in the wetlands around Southwest Cambodia

The Song Saa Program - Community Support

The Song Saa community program seeks to weave together the needs of local peoples, with the opportunities created by the development of Song Saa Private Island and its conservation program. The focus here is given to the support communities through activities that promote sustainable livelihoods and processes that create *enabling conditions* that generate and support community well being.

The development of these conditions is based on mutual processes of support, understanding and collaboration; working with government and community institutions, networks and norms to achieve tangible and positive outcomes. Much of the present focus is with the village of Prek Svay, on the nearby island of Koh Rong, which is the largest settlement in the area, with 148 families.

The following livelihood projects are either underway or being developed to support the Song Saa livelihood's program:

1. Hospitality Training Centre

A key feature of the Song Saa livelihood program will be the development of a hospitality-training centre. This will be a regional first, providing a facility where people from Prek Svay and the wider Koh Rong archipelago can obtain expert training in the provision of hospitality services, including language training and courses in ecotourism and restaurant management.

A unique feature of the centre will be the direct route it will provide into potential employment opportunities with Song Saa Private Island. This will offer a goal for student's to aspire to, representing an employment opportunity both unique and traditionally unavailable to Cambodians from coastal communities.

2. Aquaculture

Drawing on past experience with crab and fish farming in Prek Svay, trials are underway to develop an effective community-based crab-farming operation. Previous efforts at

crab farming in Prek Svay encountered a number of problems, much of it based on a lack of understanding of aquaculture principles. In response, working collaboratively, villagers are partnering with members of the team to create a new and innovative design for village crab-farms.

It is planned to extend aquaculture to options for the farming of sea bass, another popular regional fish farming species, which shows excellent opportunities for supplementing village incomes through sales to Song Saa Private Island.

3. Agriculture

The Song Saa Private Island Conservation and Community team is building alliances with local organizations to investigate and develop community-based agriculture opportunities, centered on the propagation of local vegetables, fruit and berries for sale to Song Saa Private Island. A special focus of these activities will be the encouragement of organic methods, removing the emphasis on herbicides and chemical fertilizers, which are ultimately expensive and damaging to human health and the environment.

Importance of Markets to Livelihood Schemes

Research on livelihoods and sustainability in coastal Cambodia has shown the importance of market accessibility to the success of support programs. Lack of markets and high transport costs have regularly, for example, undermined livelihood initiatives undertaken in other parts of the coast. In the case of Prek Svay the issue of markets is removed as a constraint as the Song Saa Private Island offers a ready buyer for produce.

4. Solid Waste Management

The Conservation and Community team are working with the community of Prek Svay to manage the flow of solid waste from the village and nearby beaches. While contributing to the health of the village, the activity is providing an income stream through the provision of incentive payments to the village waste collectors. It is anticipated that the sale of recyclable materials will also provide an additional income stream for the community.



Figure 5 (left) Community waste management collection event, Prek Svay. Figure 6 (right) Community waste education event, Prek Svay

Mr. Chan Ren and the Solid Waste Management Team of Prek Svay

Mr. Chan leads the dedicated team of five that manages the flow of waste from the village of Prek Svay, the largest settlement in proximity to Song Saa Private Island.

An inhabitant of Prek Svay for twenty years, Mr. Chan formerly made a living fishing the waters that surround Song Saa Private Island; however age and declining catches caused him to find an alternative living. Says Ren of his new occupation: *“I was selected by the village chief to lead the solid waste management group. I think the project is good. A clean village will encourage tourists and improve our health”.*

Mr. Chan is especially excited about the development, in cooperation with Song Saa Private Island, of a solid waste management center. A focal point of the waste management program, the facility includes a sorting area for recyclable materials, a composting area for organic wastes, and a well supplying water for the cleaning of equipment.

The center is illustrative of the collaborative approach being taken by Song Saa Private Island in its work with local communities, where partnerships are encouraged through joint contributions. In the case of the solid waste center, for example, villagers have donated the land on which the facility is being built while Song Saa has provided financial support for the building of the center.

A special event to mark the blessing and opening of the Solid Waste Management Centre is scheduled for April of 2011.



Figure 8: Mr Chan (left) and the other members of the Solid Waste Team of Prek Svay.

5. Water security and sanitation

A reoccurring problem for coastal communities is the provision of safe domestic water supply and the protection of this supply from contamination. Further, community health is recognized as a core component of sustainable livelihood maintenance. Why? Because families that incur ill health from water borne diseases are less able to work and often need to borrow money to meet the cost of medical treatment. This can generate a cycle that spirals a family downward into poverty.

It is intended to work with the community and local providers to develop environmentally sensitive water treatment and waste reticulation systems, drawing on constructed wetlands, gravity flow and solar tertiary treatment as potential management options.

The resulting systems will not only provide an effective means for water management but the associated wetlands could offer environments for unique livelihood activities such as snail and frog rearing.

6. Education and Health Care

Although not direct livelihood activities, the availability of education and reliable health services are core *'enabling conditions'* that provide the platform for the success of any livelihood scheme.

Planned English language courses, for example, will enable villagers to participate in employment opportunities generated by Song Saa Private Island. Provision of reliable health care, meanwhile, can cancel out the negative effects that illness places on family budgets and well-being (as noted above).

In support of these two components Song Saa Private Island is investigating options, with an investor and local authorities, for the erection of a secondary school at Prek Svay. As there is no secondary school in the vicinity, the development of this facility will benefit a large part of the Koh Rong archipelago. Health care needs, meanwhile, require investigation and assessments should be completed by late 2011.

Summary

The vision for Song Saa Private Island is an ambitious one – a high-end and exclusive resort complex that improves the environment, condition of local communities and the economy in which it is situated. Behind this vision is the appreciation that no development can call itself genuinely sustainable if it does not commit to these values. For Song Saa Private Island, where the vision is to tread lightly, with care and consideration, the commitment to these bottom-lines is not an aspiration, it is a requirement.

Appendix 1:

How Livelihood Support Works:

Overcoming the Dilemma of the Last Pandas

A way of visioning how livelihood support contributes to sustainability is through a simple analogy called *the dilemma of the last pandas*. The setting of the dilemma features a family that is locked in an imaginary room. In the room they lack food, water, health care and sanitation: in a practical context they lack the livelihood opportunities to provide for their wellbeing. Sitting in another corner are the last pair of panda in the world.

Even though the family may be aware of the consequences of eating these animals, their situation - the immediacy of their livelihood needs - compels them to kill and eat these unique creatures. The consequences of the situation are tragic: the pandas are no more and the family is only able to temporarily starve off starvation. Meanwhile, future livelihood opportunities, such as from ecotourism, are foregone.

Using the analogy as an explanation the 'room' represents the environment in which the family lives, which includes the pandas as part of its ecology. The family's situation suggests that this environment cannot sustain them and compels them to commit unsustainable behavior.

Livelihood support looks to break families out of this cycle. Drawing from the themes of the analogy, it offers alternatives that permit families to escape the 'room' and the constraints and unsustainable behavior it generates. Literally 'opening the door' out of the room. The outcome is removal of the need for people to destroy their environment to survive, allowing the likes of pandas, their ecosystems and the fabric of life to be sustained.

In short, *livelihood support* facilitates sustainability.