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## Establishing Community-Based Eco-Tourism through People-Centred Development: A Case of Pearing Biodiversity Conservation Centre in Siem Reap Province, Cambodia

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### Executive Summary

- ❖ People-centred development is very practical for eco-tourism in Cambodia because it supports community development, natural resource management and local livelihoods.
- ❖ Chreav commune can develop hybrid-combined cultural and eco-tourism products because it is just 13 km away from Siem Reap city, and it is located in the Tonle Sap Lake. Visitors could enjoy the nature's beauty, watch birds and gain knowledge about local people's livelihoods.
- ❖ The Biodiversity Conservation Centre was registered as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) at the Ministry of Interior (MoI), so it cannot extend its services. By law, the Community-Based Eco-tourism (CBET) must register at the Ministry of Environment (MoE). As a result, the Biodiversity Conservation Centre cannot improve infrastructure and diversify tourism products in the areas that the MoE manages.
- ❖ In the future, eco-tourism in Chreav commune could be improved by (1) upgrading the poorly-performed indicators of the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index; (2) consulting with relevant agencies for a possibility to legalise Pearing Biodiversity Conservation Centre as CBET; (3) improving the necessary infrastructure to provide more attractive tour services; and (4) enhancing services through accountable and transparent CBET management.

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## **សេចក្តីសង្ខេបអត្ថបទ**

- ❖ ការអភិវឌ្ឍន៍ដែលផ្តោតទៅលើប្រជាជន (people-centred development) គឺមានភាពសមស្របសម្រាប់អេកូទេសចរណ៍នៅក្នុងបរិបទប្រទេសកម្ពុជា ពីព្រោះវាបានគាំទ្រដល់ការអភិវឌ្ឍសហគមន៍ ការគ្រប់គ្រងធនធានធម្មជាតិ និងលើកស្ទួយជីវភាពរបស់ប្រជាជនមូលដ្ឋាន។
- ❖ ឃុំជ្រាវ គឺជាឃុំមួយដែលមានសក្តានុពលខ្លាំង សម្រាប់ការអភិវឌ្ឍផលិតផលទេសចរណ៍ដោយរួមបញ្ចូលគ្នារវាងទេសចរណ៍វប្បធម៌ និងអេកូទេសចរណ៍ ពីព្រោះតំបន់នេះមានចម្ងាយត្រឹមតែ ១៣ គីឡូម៉ែត្រប៉ុណ្ណោះពីក្រុងសៀមរាប ជាពិសេសសហគមន៍មួយនេះមានទីតាំងស្ថិតនៅលើបឹងទន្លេសាបផងដែរ។ អ្នកទេសចរណ៍អាចរីករាយនឹងសម្រស់ធម្មជាតិ ទស្សនាបក្សាបក្សី និងឈ្វេងយល់អំពីជីវិតរស់នៅរបស់ប្រជាជនក្នុងតំបន់។
- ❖ ដោយសារតែមជ្ឈមណ្ឌលអភិរក្សជីវៈចម្រុះ ត្រូវបានចុះក្នុងបញ្ជីជាអង្គការមិនមែនរដ្ឋាភិបាលនៅឯក្រសួងមហាផ្ទៃ មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលនេះមានដែនកំណត់ក្នុងការពង្រីកសេវាកម្មរបស់ខ្លួន។ តាមបទដ្ឋានផ្លូវច្បាប់សហគមន៍អេកូទេសចរណ៍ (CBET) ត្រូវតែចុះឈ្មោះនៅក្នុងក្រសួងបរិស្ថាន។ ជាលទ្ធផល មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលអភិរក្សជីវៈចម្រុះ មិនអាចកែលម្អនូវហេដ្ឋារចនាសម្ព័ន្ធ និងធ្វើពិពិធកម្មផលិតផលទេសចរណ៍នៅក្នុងតំបន់ដែលគ្រប់គ្រងដោយក្រសួងបរិស្ថាននោះឡើយ។
- ❖ នាពេលអនាគត វិស័យអេកូទេសចរណ៍នៅក្នុងឃុំជ្រាវ អាចត្រូវបានធ្វើឲ្យប្រសើរឡើងតាមរយៈ៖
  - (១) ការពង្រឹងសុចនាករដែលបានអនុវត្តន៍មិនបានល្អនៃសន្ទស្សន៍ការប្រកួតប្រជែងទេសចរណ៍ និងការធ្វើដំណើរ
  - (២) ការប្រឹក្សាយោបល់ជាមួយស្ថាប័នពាក់ព័ន្ធអំពីលទ្ធភាពធ្វើឱ្យមជ្ឈមណ្ឌលអភិរក្សជីវៈចម្រុះពារាំង ក្លាយជាសហគមន៍-អេកូទេសចរណ៍ដោយស្របច្បាប់
  - (៣) កែលម្អហេដ្ឋារចនាសម្ព័ន្ធចាំបាច់ សម្រាប់បង្កើនសេវាកម្មទេសចរណ៍ដែលមានការទាក់ទាញ និង
  - (៤) ពង្រឹងសេវាកម្មរបស់សហគមន៍អេកូទេសចរណ៍ (CBET) ដោយគណនេយ្យភាព និងតម្លាភាព។

## Introduction

Cambodia is blessed with rich history, culture, and nature. Therefore, in the National Strategic Development Plan (2019–2023), the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGoC) promotes Cambodia as the natural and cultural tourism destination. Moreover, the RGoC recognises the importance of linkages between sustainable tourism and conservation of culture and natural assets (MoP 2019). Hall and Ringer (2000) have optimism that Cambodian tourism, with its unique cultural and natural assets, is competitive, compared with countries in the region.

At present, sustainable tourism becomes one of the top development plans, and the Ministry of Tourism has set an annual target of 30 million tourist arrivals by 2030. In 2018, international tourists' arrival stood at 6.2 million, increasing from 2.0 million in 2007 (MoT 2018). Tourism and hospitality have a significant impact at the macro-economic level contributing more than 18.7% of GDP growth in 2019 and creating 620,000 jobs or 6.4% of total employment in 2018 (MoP 2019).

Unfortunately, the global COVID-19 pandemic has caused a quick deceleration in economic growth. Tourism is the first and hardest-hit sector in Cambodia (World Bank 2020). During the first four months of 2020, only 1.16 million foreigners visited Cambodia, falling 52% if compared with the same period in 2019. An estimated loss of COVID-19 impact is up to 3 billion U.S. dollars in tourism revenue (Huaxia 2000).

This article examines community-based eco-tourism at Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Centre. It aims to promote a combined hybrid cultural and natural tourism development. People-centred development applied by Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Center is used as a case to describe how community-based eco-tourism (CBET) should be established in the future.

## Methodology

This policy paper was prepared based on a field trip to Pearaing Community of Chreav commune in Siem Reap between 17 and 19 July 2020. An interview with a key informant with the Biodiversity Conservation Centre's management team and in-depth interviews with tour guides were conducted to collect qualitative data and information. Besides, field observation was also made to explore the attraction sites and bird-watching station at the Chreav commune to explore potentials and assess the problems in promoting eco-tourism in the commune. Besides, desk review of documents and reports available at Biodiversity Conservation Center were also made to analyse insights and details of eco-tourism development in Cambodia.

## Diversifying Cultural and Natural Tourism Products in Cambodia

Cambodia ranked 98 among 140 countries in the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index, reducing from 101 in 2017 (World Economic Forum 2019). The report also highlights Cambodia's best performance in prioritising travel, price competitiveness, international openness, natural resources, cultural resources and business travel, air transport infrastructure, tourist service infrastructure, human resources, and labour market. The Tourism Development Strategic Plan (2012–2020) promotes tourism growth and puts its efforts to diversify tourism products, which was previously centred in Angkor Wat. Therefore, the RGoC and the private sector have worked to advance technologies to improve the opportunity and move to the next level in smart tourism development. In recent years, technology has played a significant role

and given the opportunity to reach the free independent traveller market. Other technology permits tourists either in small groups or individually to apply technology to arrange travel bookings and arrangements, rather than depend on traditional tourism arrangements through tour operators (OECD 2017).

Table 1 illustrates the types of tourism products in Cambodia, which are categorised into cultural heritage; political, cultural and commercial hub; southern tourism corridor or coastal zone; and north-east eco-tourism sites. Yet, the Angkor Wat temple complex remains the main attraction, accounting for 60% of total international arrivals by air. Cambodia earned US\$ 60.3 million from entrance fees during the first seven months of 2017, increasing 68% over the corresponding months in 2016 (World Bank 2017).

**Table 1. Type of tourism products in Cambodia**

Type of products	Attraction sites	Provinces
Cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Angkor complex</li> <li>• Preah Vihear temple</li> <li>• Anlong Veng historical site</li> <li>• Great Lake and its peri-zone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Siem Reap</li> <li>• Preah Vihear</li> </ul>
The political, cultural and commercial hub	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The capital city and four-converging river</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phnom Penh</li> </ul>
Southern tourism corridor or coastal zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ecotourism, biodiversity and Cardamom mountains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sihanoukville</li> <li>• Kep</li> <li>• Kompot</li> <li>• Koh Kong</li> </ul>
North-east eco-tourism sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mekong River, dolphins, natural spectacles, culture and tradition of ethnic minorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stung Treng</li> <li>• Kratie</li> <li>• Kompong Cham</li> <li>• Kandal</li> <li>• Prey Veng</li> </ul>
Great Lake peri-zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eco-tourism, culture and rural livelihoods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kompong Chhnang,</li> <li>• Kompong Thom</li> <li>• Pursat</li> <li>• Battambang</li> <li>• Siem Reap</li> </ul>

Source: Ministry of Tourism 2012.

Cambodia is a year-round destination, depending on the interests and preferences of tourists. In recent years, there has been a progress in diversifying destinations, especially to the coastal region, whose potentials for eco-tourism remain untapped. Meanwhile, in its Strategic Plan, the RGoC admits that eco-tourism needs improvement as part of a vision for sustainable development in the tourism sector. Tourist destination diversification efforts have positively boosted tourists to coastal areas, receiving 15% of the total international arrivals, increasing 10% a year ago. Eco-tourism is incipient, with only a 2% share of total arrivals, although the tremendous potential exists. There is a plan to promote eco-tourism, mostly in the north and northeastern parts of Cambodia, with an introduction to wildlife adventure parks, trekking, and more. Besides, given the recent construction expansion, other emerging urban areas (beyond Phnom Penh and Siem Reap) are becoming more tourist-friendly destinations. The improving tourism infrastructure, facilities, and accessibility will help diversify tourism destinations. There are several new and rising attraction sites in Sihanoukville, Battambang, and Kampot.



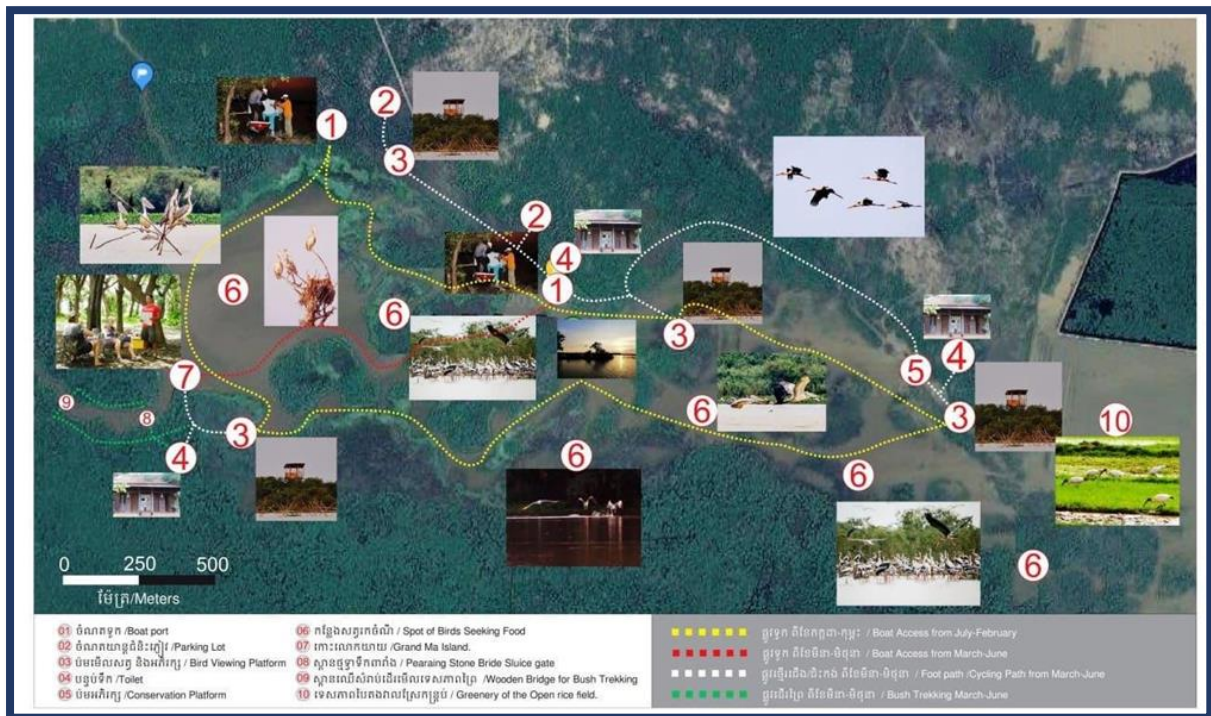
## People-Centred Development in Eco-Tourism Establishment

The CBET exists by establishing protected areas to contribute to local income generation, community development, and the protection of natural resources (UIAA 2018). Yeak Laom Lake of Ratanakiri province is the first CBET site established in 1998 (Lonn 2013), and there are now 55 CBET sites in 16 provinces (Toko 2016). NGOs, with fund from with foreign donors, support the establishment of almost all the CBETs (Phe 2019). Participatory and people-centred approaches are integrated.

In the context of sustainability, Sriskandarajah et al. (1991) believe the people-centred development is a measure of the relationship between the community as learners and their environments, rather than an externally formulated goal to be accomplished. People-centred development focuses on enhancing self-reliance, social justice, and participatory decision-making in local communities (Korten 1994). Today, governmental agencies, universities, and think tanks are gradually playing more roles in supporting community development where people-centred development also frames to work with them. In the Cambodian context, people-centred development is very practical for eco-tourism. The approach has helped support community development and natural resource management, and improve local livelihood quality.

Siem Reap province is always an international destination. While the Angkor Wat temple complex remains the cultural attraction site, eco-tourism can also be an alternative option. An American Tripadvisor in 2021 listed eco-tourism sites in Siem Reap province, such as Chong Kneas, Kampong Phluk, Kampong Khleang, and Peaiaing Biodiversity Conservation Center (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Site map of Peaiaing Biodiversity Conservation Centre**



Source: Peaiaing Biodiversity Conservation Centre.

As the stunning Ramsar site and part of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve of the Tonle Sap Lake, Prek Toal bird sanctuary of Battambang becomes a must-visit eco-tourism site. Tourists are more convenient to access the site through Siem Reap province. Prek Toal is located in Battambang province in the Northwest of Cambodia. However, Prek Toal can be reached by National Road 5 from Siem Reap city on a 1/2 hours drive. From Battambang city, tourists can take a boat which takes between six and nine hours to reach the site.

Learning from Prek Toal, the Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Centre established in 2015 aims to become another major international tourist site and one of the largest waterbird colonies in South-East Asia. This eco-tourism site is situated 13 km southeast of Siem Reap city and lies in the enormous Natural Dam (Beong) of Pearaing. It is a freshwater dam located 2 km north of Tonle Sap Lake and has a fantastic bird-watching spot accessible by all types of vehicles. In particular, the Chreav commune records it as the safest and greenest area in the province. There are hundreds of fish species, wetlands, water birds, and the seasonal flooded freshwater swamp forest habitats, which are something attractive to tourists.

Appreciating the potential of the natural assets in the Tonle Sap Lake, the local community registered Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Center at the Ministry of Interior (MoI) as a local NGO on 22 September 2016. In response to the centre's request to operate eco-tourism at the site, the Ministry of Environment (MoE) issued a letter to advise this NGO to explore the possibility of establishing CBET under the protected areas with the Provincial Office of Environment and local authorities.

As part of a more substantial decentralisation and deconcentration (D&D) process, people-centred development applies the CBET as a form of responsible tourism that supports livelihood development. The linkages between people-centred development and local income generation emphasise natural resource management in Cambodia. In the Chreav commune, the centre has mobilised local resources to operate tourism services and create alternative livelihoods from the existing agricultural dependency. Local resources such as labour, credits from saving groups, and boats are voluntarily mobilised to arrange boat trips and offer other eco-tourism services. The centre is also working with the community to create various types of tourism products and do marketing for national and international visitors. For example, alternative livelihoods, including guide service, food delivery, and handicraft sale made from eco-tourism, have helped reduce the burden on natural resources and agriculture. Table 2 describes the strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat of Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Center.

The Biodiversity Conservation Centre's establishment is to mobilise local financial and human resources for operating services. The centre also works to raise awareness among local villagers to get involvement with natural resource management and with income generation activities. At the moment, 139 members from the Chreav commune are working to conserve and protect birds, fish, and the flooded forests with their heart and mind, love, energy, and voluntarism. While services from eco-tourism generate income for local villagers, advocacy and awareness establish a participatory process, social justice, and decision-making of local villagers. Moreover, the Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Center has operated and led the local people in the communities by creating self-reliance, self-confidence, self-development, and self-management for protecting the natural resources (Figure 2).

**Table 2. SWOT analysis of Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Centre**

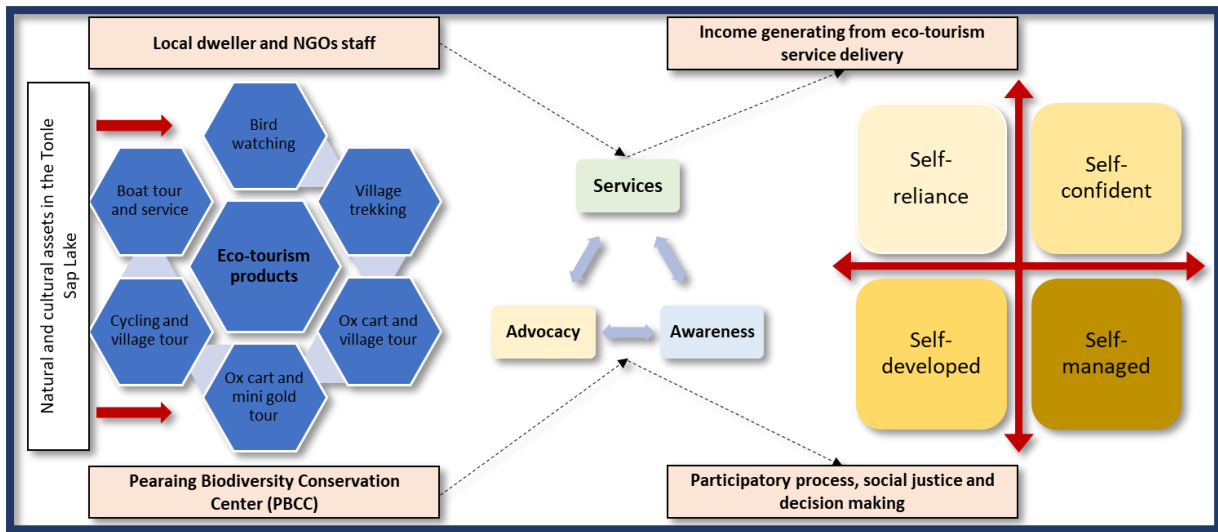
<b>Strength</b>	<b>Weakness</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unique water-based ecological resources with magnificent view of inundated forest, fish and waterbird species</li> <li>- A culturally and historically significant pond made by a herd of elephants</li> <li>- A preferred eco-tourism destination listed by Tripadvisor</li> <li>- Active community engagement in service delivery and natural resource protection</li> <li>- Close proximity to Siem Reap city and accessible by all kind of vehicles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inadequate infrastructure (i.e., the road to Pearaing, toilets, a tower for bird watching, and food stores)</li> <li>- It is registered as a local NGO, not as a CBE, so it has limited authority to expand services and infrastructure development.</li> <li>- Not fully accountable and transparent enough to the community and members of the centre.</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A potential candidate for 100 Model Village development project</li> <li>- Potential to have an international significance by IUCN</li> <li>- International organisations and donors such as UNESCO, World Bank, and ADB are interested in it.</li> <li>- Highly competitive compared with other eco-tourism sites in Siem Reap</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An alternative destination only after cultural tourism, not an independent tourist destination</li> <li>- The tourism industry is fragile due to the pandemic and regional instability</li> <li>- Climate change posing significant impacts on the ecological system</li> </ul>

*Source: Authors' analysis from fieldwork data in Siem Reap province in 2020.*

It is very challenging for the centre to expand its services because of legal constraint, insufficient infrastructure, and limited financial and human resources. By law, the CBET must be registered at the MoE, but this centre was registered as an NGO at the MoI. As a result, the centre cannot deliver tourism services comprehensively like the CBET. During boat tours, the tourists can stop at islands to relax and watch birds, but the centre is not allowed to construct necessary infrastructure, even toilets, chairs, tables, and a quay. Without those infrastructures, the tourists find it not convenient enough for relaxing and enjoying the view.

Moreover, the road connecting the river bank must be repaired because it is affected by the annual floods of the rainy season. The existing local resources are not able to build a high-quality road. Moreover, the capacity of the centre staff and local people are still limited in eco-tourism management and hospitality. Some of the centre's services are not yet attractive, for example, homestay and food services. As the site is not so far from the provincial city of Siem Reap, visitors prefer to take a half-day trip rather than an overnight stay. Hygienic food service is also not widely available, and it is a crucial concern to attract international tourists.

Figure 2. People-centred development and eco-tourism in Chreav commune



Source: Authors.

## Policy Implications for Promoting People-Centred Eco-Tourism Development

Chreav commune has a unique tourism site that can be promoted as a hybrid-combined cultural and eco-tourism product. The tourist site has a very high potential because it is just 13 km southeast of Siem Reap city, and the visitors can immensely enjoy watching the nature, birds and water. The Ministry of Tourism promotes both cultural and eco-tourism, but the cultural one is dominant. Simultaneously, the current model separately distinguishes the cultural or natural tourism industry. The TECHO 100 Model Villages, a new development model, is a hybrid-combined cultural and eco-tourism product. Therefore, the CBET should integrate both cultural and natural assets for promoting eco-tourism. Strong support of the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Tourism is crucial for establishing CBET by identifying potential protected areas and improving tourism products. The Ministry of Tourism should also raise awareness and build capacity about rules and regulations of eco-tourism management. Simultaneously, the Pearing Biodiversity Conservation Center could not register as a CBET under the MoE because it was initially registered as an NGO under the MoI. As a result, it is challenging for the Biodiversity Conservation Center to operate because it cannot expand its services or infrastructure development in the area managed by the MoE.

People-centred development is very crucial in promoting eco-tourism development, and practitioners, planners, and policymakers should pay attention to the following:

- **Improve poorly-performed indicators of the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index.** The Cambodian tourism industry should have more competitive indicators, i.e., ground and port infrastructure, business environment, and environmental sustainability, which need to be improved. International, regional, and national stability and peace are essential for attracting international tourists to Cambodia.



- ***Consult with the relevant stakeholders for a possibility to legalise Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Center as CBET.***

The establishment of CBET is a transfer of rights to the local community for resources management. Under people-centred development, local people have the authority in decision-making, ownership, and rights to sustainable natural resource management for their livelihood improvement. When Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Center registered as a local NGO, the centre has limited authority, capacity, and support to improve eco-tourism service delivery. In this regard, all key stakeholders should consult with each other for the possibility of legalising Pearaing Biodiversity Conservation Center as CBET.
- ***Improve the necessary infrastructure for more attractive tour services.***

A concrete road should be constructed to connect the village to the river bank where the boats are parked. The concrete road can withstand the annual floods. However, it still needs regular proper maintenance. Besides, the centre should be allowed to construct the necessary infrastructure to attract more tourists.
- ***Enhance services through accountable and transparent CBET management.***

After legalising the centre, the management structure should be revised to ensure accountability and transparency. Members of the management team must be reelected among the local people. Moreover, the awareness of new regulations and laws and capacity building on eco-tourism should be promoted to provide better services to attract more and more tourists.

*The opinions expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.*

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