

**Report of Visit to Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia
Banteay Srey Commune, Siem Reap Province
28-29 January 2006**

by Sophal Ear* & Chamnan Lim**

28 January

We began our visit at 3pm at the office of NKFC in Siem Reap town. Mrs. Ravynn Karet-Coxen (RKC) kindly briefed us on the Foundation, presenting the dossiers/programs for fundraisers in London, NYC and “Rostro in Angkor” which, unfortunately, had to be cancelled. We learned about the foundation’s achievements in providing support to the 2000 plus families in Banteay Srey. We were impressed by the dedication displayed and looked forward to going out to the field.

We proceeded to the site of the proposed conservatory where a dedication ceremony was slated to start at 5pm. The ceremony was unlike any other we had attended in our three years in Cambodia and an important milestone in the development of the conservatory. It was surreal to witness monks chanting followed by traditional Khmer dance performances in the middle of a large (nearly one hectare) field, with hundreds of villagers watching, which later became thousands as the night moved on. The enchanting ceremony introduced the concept of the conservatory to the villagers and offered them a preview of its potential.

VIP guests included the Governor of Siem Reap Province and the commune chief responsible for the donated land. We had a chance to talk to the Governor. He explained the wonderful work of the foundation in helping the villages to improve their lives. He expressed his gratitude to RKC for her hard work and passion for Banteay Srey commune. Since the donated land is adjacent to a pagoda complex, these will complement one another culturally and spiritually.



The program began with a traditional Buddhist blessing, followed by speeches (Princess Rattana Norodom, Secretary of State, Ministry of Tourism, kindly sent a speech emphasizing tolerance and acceptance of individuals with HIV/AIDS in the context of the conservatory and the arts). The Governor made a few ad-lib remarks stressing the importance of the conservatory. He asked a question to the villagers to raise their hands if they wanted to become dancers. And instantly almost everyone

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raised their hands and cheered with excitement.

This was followed by an artistic performance composed of several traditional dances. The dancing was beautifully lit by the high-beams of NKFC's pick-up truck and most memorable for having taken place in the middle of a field surrounded by palm trees bathed in the light of a sunset. The performance offered villagers a glimpse of what the conservatory could offer. We noticed some younger members of the audience mesmerized by the performance and others already starting showing their talent.

A number of feature films were projected onto a large screen in the middle of the field. Films included a documentary of NKFC's activities, BBC World Trust clips on HIV/AIDS, and a screening of a 1998 film by His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk, personally picked by His Majesty for the event. Indeed, there was a magical atmosphere to the evening. There were now several thousand people watching, milling around, and selling food. We were told that participants hailed from long distances by foot and were from disparate villages. This also became a perfect opportunity for street vendors. They came with a variety of local snacks and fruits. The various features were not only entertaining but they imbibed moral and educational values. We took our leave when the final feature, a Khmer-dubbed Thai martial arts film was shown. Sixteen NKFC staff members and their families helped organize the event and the exiting caravan featured nearly a half dozen motorcycles and the NKFC pick-up truck.



29 January

After yesterday's memorable matinee and soiree in the "country", we were ready to make our visit to the villages supported by NKFC. Our visit started at 10am with RKC and her staff (totaling a dozen individuals). The visit gave us an important hands-on perspective on the variety of support and interventions NKFC provides. Below are some highlights of our visit and some suggestion for the foundation.

One village we passed by was Chey village with 113 families. We visited one family whose head of household was disabled (missing a hand). Despite his disability, he had already planted a vegetable garden in his backyard and was tending it when we visited. He grew green beans and morning glory, among other legumes. The family's home was raised and made of wood. This is an indication of the family's relative wealth—given that an adjacent neighbor lived in little more than a hut. Another neighbor had several pigs and a pond populated by ducks.



Suggestion: While NKFC does not target its interventions, it may be useful to consider calibrating resource allocations towards those more in need. Development action should be based on some notion of social justice, although this inevitably creates tensions.

A problem noted immediately was the unkempt state of the yards surrounding a few of the private properties. This was remedied by a collective trash collection

effort by the dozen team members present. The trash was then burnt.

Suggestion: While burning of trash is the most prevalent method of waste disposal, it is environmentally damaging (especially to air quality). One alternative would be to bury it. This is of course more time consuming and requires a greater effort. Of course, if collection is a problem, expending further effort may be unrealistic.

We were pleased to see that NKFC instruction included some advanced techniques for fertilizer creation—with alternating layers of manure and foliage.

Inspections of homes followed—with particular emphasis on hygiene. The sentiment was somewhat akin to a social worker making a visit to her charges or “cases”. We learned that there is an NKFC agent for each village charged with rounding-up villagers for training.



Well number 59 was inspected. It appeared recently dug and was encircled by lemongrass to keep mosquitoes away. Stationary water is often a dengue/malaria focal point. The wells are inspected annually for any poisonous chemicals. RKC pointed out that villagers had to undergo training on the usage of the well before construction. The foundation usually does not give things to the village without proper training of how to use it and explanation of what it is for. Latrines are awarded to individual families, while the wells are shared among several families. This method is commendable in that it helps villagers to understand what they are getting and how to maintain it.

A further important requirement of NKFC is for co-financing in-kind by beneficiaries. This builds-in ownership and is an important element to maintenance down the line.

The UK and US-funded School buildings were subsequently visited. It was noted that the buildings had suffered some wear-and-tear. Several of the wooden shutters were missing

pieces. It was pointed out that while NKFC is responsible for significant maintenance expenditures; day-to-day maintenance is the responsibility of the authorities. The schools, built with Khmer architectural elements in mind had a double roof to keep the classrooms cool. The building's red color was intended, and succeeded, in lessening the contrast of otherwise white-walled schools rising from the landscape (and being eye-sores). We noticed a garden next to school building where students learn how to grow legumes.

Following lunch at Banteay Srey Prasat Restaurant, we visited the NKFC Training Center. The center had a demonstration garden and a well. It also had open demonstration halls for meetings and workshops. There were also pig and fowl enclosures; however no animals were kept on the premises. The structures' roofs showed some spaces requiring repair.

Conclusion

While our visit was extremely brief, we gained a tremendous appreciation for NKFC's work in Banteay Srey commune, Siem Reap Province. The conservatory, while only at a conceptual stage at this time, has the potential to transform the cultural life of the commune and, if managed properly, can provide important livelihood opportunities for villagers. While it is clear that NKFC's interventions have had a positive impact in the 12 years since the Foundation's creation, areas of further improvement could include (1) impact evaluation of the interventions through experimental design¹ (as opposed to trial



and error) to be carried out by external evaluators and (2) the establishment of a good practices bible for subsequent adoption or scaling-up by other entities interested in learning from NKFC's significant development experience. Much of NKFC's success can be attributed to strong leadership by its Founder Chairman. Nurturing dedicated leadership for subsequent years will be crucial in order to consolidate the gains already made on the ground.

We are extremely grateful to Mrs. Ravynn Karet-Coxen and the entire staff of the Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia for their tremendous generosity throughout our stay in Siem Reap. We hope this brief report will be useful to the furtherance of the Foundation's work.

¹ Randomly selected villages in the commune would receive interventions, while others (serving as a control group) would not. This creates a baseline for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions.