

Planned Theme Park Poses Risks to Cambodia's Angkor Wat, Culture: Residents, NGOs

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Tourists visit Angkor Wat temple in Siem Reap province, March 5, 2020.

 AFP

A theme park project to be built on the outskirts of Siem Reap city in Cambodia by a Hong Kong-listed casino operator poses risks to the nearby iconic Angkor Wat temple complex and the local culture, residents and civil society groups warned as the plan was unveiled.

Last week, NagaCorp, which is registered in the Cayman Islands and operates NagaWorld casinos in the capital Phnom Penh under an exclusive license from the government, revealed plans to construct a 75-hectare (185-acre) “Angkor Lake of Wonder” theme park it has compared to California’s Disneyland.

The resort—the first phase of which is expected to cost some U.S. \$350 million and be completed in 2025—will include a “China Town” and water park, as well as an indoor theme park, and will be built by an as-of-yet unnamed Chinese state-owned enterprise, the company said in a press release.

According to last week’s announcement, Cambodia’s government in May granted NagaCorp a 50-year lease on land around 500 meters (one-third of a mile) south of the Angkor Wat complex, which drew some 5 million visitors annually before the coronavirus pandemic. Under the terms of the deal, NagaCorp will not pay any rent in the first seven to 10 years and around U.S. \$450,000 each year after, with a five percent increase every five years.

While NagaCorp said that the “non-gambling” project will help to increase the number of visitors to Siem Reap and more generally promote tourism in Cambodia, residents and civil society groups expressed skepticism about the benefits it would bring to the local community and called for more transparency from the government.

Speaking to RFA’s Khmer Service, Pech Pisey, executive director of Transparency International Cambodia, said he fears that the value of artifacts in the 12th century Angkor complex—designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1992—will depreciate if the project goes ahead.

“I am not against development, but any development should be appropriate according to the culture in the area,” he said.

“I think it is better to develop and preserve the Angkor area as a tourist site, not as an entertainment zone that could impact the culture heritage sites of our ancestry.”

Calls by RFA seeking comment from Siem Reap governor Tea Seiha, who is the son of Defense Minister Tea Banh, and Long Kosal, spokesman for the APSARA Authority that manages the Angkor Archaeological Park, went unanswered.

RFA was also unable to contact government spokesman Phay Siphan, although he told the Voice of Democracy last week that the project was approved because NagaCorp has been a long-term investor in Cambodia and earned the country’s trust. He added that the project would bring jobs to the region.

Call for transparency

Cambodians appeared generally supportive of the project during a call-in show with RFA's Khmer Service, provided it does not negatively impact the country.

Phnom Penh resident Leng Chentha told RFA that if the theme park provides jobs and other benefits to people in Siem Reap she would support it, but not if it leads to the loss of jobs for Cambodians and “destroys the beauty of Angkor Wat.”

“If the investment, in the long run, diminishes Angkor Wat's identity, I would not support it,” she said, calling on the government to provide additional information about the project.

Siem Reap tour guide Puy Leng told RFA that if the project “brings more tourists to Angkor Wat, I'm fine with it.”

Ty Leng, a villager from Siem Reap, said the theme park is a good thing for the area, “but we don't want a casino” to end up being part of the project.

“If they create more facilities for tourists, like hotels and entertainment parks, to draw them to the area, that would be beneficial to us.”

But Hay Vanna, a Cambodian migrant worker in Japan, warned that “the government often says one thing and does another,” and called for a better explanation of what NagaCorp's plans include.

“I'm afraid they won't do as they say,” he said.

Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson, the founder of domestic environmental watchdog Mother Nature, said the building of a “China Town” in Siem Reap will “destroy the value of this cultural heritage site.”

“The Cambodian government said it will not build casino facilities in Siem Reap—will it dare to swear to that?” he asked, warning Cambodians not to be “fooled” by what Prime Minister Hun Sen promises.

“Why don't they build this somewhere else? A referendum should be held to see if people support project investments in Siem Reap. I believe the majority of Cambodian people would not support this. They might end up holding demonstrations.”

China has stepped in to wield significant influence in Cambodia as relations between Phnom Penh and Western governments have waned amid concerns over the country's human rights situation and political environment.

Concerns about the project in Siem Reap follow several years of Chinese investment into Cambodia's port city of Sihanoukville, where Cambodians

regularly chafe at what they call unscrupulous business practices and unbecoming behavior by Chinese businessmen and residents.

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