



# Transforming a Legacy of Genocide: Pedagogy and Tourism at the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek

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## About ICTJ

The International Center for Transitional Justice assists countries pursuing accountability for past mass atrocity or human rights abuse. ICTJ works in societies emerging from repressive rule or armed conflict, as well as in established democracies where historical injustices or systemic abuse remain unresolved.

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## Table of Contents

Background.....	4
The Visitors Survey.....	6
Method.....	7
Results of pilot survey.....	8
“Shocking” and “raw”.....	8
A positive characteristic of the site: “low-tech” and “simple”.....	9
A negative characteristic of the site: “anachronistic” explanations.....	9
Learning about the Khmer Rouge period: a focus on brutality.....	10
Expectations.....	11
Appropriateness of behavior.....	12
Never again.....	12
Bringing more Cambodians to the site.....	13
The representation of the “victim”.....	13
The representation of “perpetrator”.....	13
Return visits.....	13
Considerations for the future of the site as a public memorial dedicated to teaching about the past.....	13
Two additional considerations.....	17
Appendix 1—ICTJ and the Memory, Memorials, and Museums program.....	20
Appendix 2—Some reflections on tourism at sites of genocide and mass atrocity.....	21
Appendix 3—Considerations for Future Visitors Surveys.....	23
Appendix 4—Survey.....	24

## Background

From November 15 to 17, 2007, ICTJ carried out a pilot survey of visitors at Choeung Ek, one of Cambodia's notorious "killing fields." Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge government killed some 20,000 people here, the majority of whom first had passed through the notorious Tuol Sleng prison and detention center.<sup>1</sup>

Choeung Ek is one of the estimated 500 killing fields found throughout Cambodia. In 1980, one year after invading Cambodia, the Vietnamese found mass graves at this site. Since then, a total of 8,985 skeletons have been exhumed from the site. The remains were treated with chemicals so they could be preserved and displayed in a memorial.<sup>2</sup> Of the 129 mass graves discovered, 86 remain untouched.<sup>3</sup>

In 1988, the Cambodian government's ministerial and municipal authorities created a new memorial at the site. They moved the skeletal remains to a concrete stupa, or Buddhist shrine, and erected explanations of Choeung Ek's tragic history.

Since then, little has changed within the site itself, except for the addition of a few signs near the entrance. The entrance donation is \$2 for foreign visitors, and free for Cambodians. Guided tours are available in English (with tips accepted).

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<sup>1</sup> There are many excellent written works on Choeung Ek. However, the particular focus of this report on the practical experiences and impressions of visitors to the site is unusual, and even perhaps unique. Many of the other works focus on more theoretical aspects of the site, such as the use of memorial sites in nation-building, or more historical aspects, such as the role of Vietnamese museologist Mai Lam in the creation of the museum at Tuol Sleng in the 1980s. David Chandler's 1999 book, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press), is essential reading, even though it focuses on Tuol Sleng. Other works include Meng-Try Ea, "Cambodian Memorialisation: Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial" (Documentation Center of Cambodia, draft manuscript, Aug. 14, 2006) and Rachel Hughes, "Memory and Sovereignty in Post 1979 Cambodia: Choeung Ek and Local Genocide Memorials," in Susan E. Cook, ed., *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda: New Perspectives*, (New Jersey: Transaction Books, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Wynne Cougill, "Buddhist Cremation Traditions for the Dead and the Need to Preserve Forensic Evidence in Cambodia," Documentation Center of Cambodia in [www.dccam.org/Projects/Maps/Buddhist\\_Cremation\\_Traditions.htm](http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Maps/Buddhist_Cremation_Traditions.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Williams, "Witnessing Genocide: Vigilance and Remembrance at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* V18 N2, (Fall 2004) 234-254.

Between 2004 and 2008, two important changes had occurred at Choeung Ek. First, the dirt road that linked Choeung Ek to Phnom Penh about six miles away had been paved, thanks to a project funded by the Asian Development Bank.<sup>4</sup> This greatly improves accessibility, as Choeung Ek is now only about a half-hour away by tuk-tuk – and even less time by car – from the biggest hotels in Phnom Penh. The other important change was that the rights to develop the site had been granted to JC Royal, a Japanese company that is also responsible for the road’s maintenance. A company spokeswoman said that JC Royal created a nonprofit organization to manage the site. Some profits go to charity, including a scholarship fund for poor university students.<sup>5</sup>

The site is now one of the top five or six most popular tourist sites in the Phnom Penh area alongside other attractions like the Royal Palace and the National Museum. Local tuk-tuk drivers list Choeung Ek as one of the destinations to which they expect to take tourists regularly.

### **The International Center for Transitional Justice**

ICTJ’s Memory, Memorials, and Museums (MMM) Program is interested in strengthening the potential of public memorials such as Choeung Ek to contribute to justice by broadening democratic space and prompting constructive civic dialogue about the past<sup>6</sup>. ICTJ’s approach therefore focuses on the communicative/educational power of public memorials and, borrowing from philosopher John Dewey, is deeply committed to experiential learning for an informed citizenry, while simultaneously recognizing and respecting the important emotive and sacred power these sites have for many visitors.

In order to confront the complex legacies of past atrocity, ICTJ believes that multifaceted, creative and interlocking strategies should always be considered, although the final combination must be determined by what is appropriate to the specific cultural and historical context. ICTJ believes that perpetrators of past crimes must be held accountable, as is clear in international law and in courts such as the Extraordinary Chamber of the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)<sup>7</sup>. Additional measures must be taken to deal with the past, including efforts to collectively remember past human rights abuse and atrocity through the creation of *public memorials*<sup>8</sup> about past human rights abuse, crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide (or about the social movements that sought to confront these).

The term *public memorial* is used here as shorthand to include many different forms of monuments, memorials, sites and museums, as well as initiatives that re-classify these to give them new messages and narratives.

The idea of *public* in this phrase is meant to evoke the idea of a civic space where “people can discuss matters of mutual concern as peers and learn about facts, events and other people’s opinions, interests and

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<sup>4</sup> Asian Development Bank Contracts Award recorded in January 2006; BBC report, Guy De Launey, “Killing Fields Deal Hits a Delay,” April 7, 2005 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/4419671.stm>).

<sup>5</sup> In an interview and discussion on Nov. 12, 2007, Ros Sophearavy, deputy director of Choeung Ek, said the site is managed by the nonprofit arm of JC Royal; however, the Phnom Penh municipality authorizes all initiatives. The nonprofit runs the scholarship program. In 2005 to 2006 it gave awards to 30 students, and in 2007 to 2008, 120 students.

<sup>6</sup> To get a sense of the theoretical rationale for the MMM program, see Louis Bickford, 2008, “Memoryworks/Memory Works”, manuscript, ICTJ, 2008 and Sebastian Brett, Louis Bickford, Liz Ševčenko, and Marcela Rios, 2008, “Memorialization and Democracy: State Policy and Civic Action,” ICTJ.

<sup>7</sup> For information about the ECCC, see the websites for the Documentation Center of Cambodia (<http://www.dccam.org>) and the ICCTJ (<http://www.ictj.org/en/where/region3/642.html>).

<sup>8</sup> For a definition and discussion of the meaning of the term “public memorial” see Sebastian Brett, Louis Bickford, Liz Ševčenko, and Marcela Rios, 2008, “Memorialization and Democracy: State Policy and Civic Action,” ICTJ.

perspectives.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, public memorials can be “critical forums for ongoing dialogue on past traumas and their legacies” and can thus help to “ensure against future suppression of human rights.”<sup>10</sup> ICTJ is particularly interested in identifying the ways in which public memorials might achieve this potential.<sup>11</sup>

Public memorials are important components of a holistic transitional justice approach. They seek to confront the legacies of atrocity by drawing on representations of the past to learn lessons about democratic citizenship and human rights. They are primarily tools of human rights education in its broadest sense, combining public art, civic space, and the power of memory to build better societies in the future. The obligation to memorialize past atrocity is also an emerging norm under international law<sup>12</sup>.

## The Visitors Survey

The purpose of the visitors survey was to understand why people were coming to this site, what they got out of their visits, and whether they were affected by the experience in tangible ways. Did it make them understand the Khmer Rouge period better? Did it cause them to reflect on mass atrocity? Was visiting the site a spiritual experience? Might visiting this site propel them to stop potential future episodes of crimes against humanity? In a discussion with Deputy Director of the site Ros Sophearavy on Nov. 12, 2007, moreover, Sophearavy explained what she wanted ICTJ to accomplish with the survey: to “help us improve this site to attract more tourists.” Despite the ethical and operational challenges that tourism at sites of genocide presents (see Appendix 2), ICTJ set out with this as one of its primary goals in conducting the survey.

The project was driven by a sense that Choeung Ek, as a major site for both public education of Cambodians about their past and for international tourism, was not reaching its potential, especially in terms of educating visitors about the Khmer Rouge period and about genocide and crimes against humanity more generally. This survey therefore aims to provide some concrete clues about how to improve the site that could be shared with key interlocutors, including the manager, the nonprofit arm of JC Royal,<sup>13</sup> and other relevant organizations such as the Documentation Center of Cambodia and the Ministry of Fine Arts and Culture.

Additionally, as an institution that works with public memorials to past atrocity and human rights abuse, ICTJ had a second goal. ICTJ itself would benefit from a better understanding Choeung Ek, informing ICTJ’s work with other public memorialization projects. Choeung Ek represented an especially interesting case study, as it raised questions related to genocide tourism, transitional justice and the role of public memorialization in dealing with past societal traumas.

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Cohen, “Trust, voluntary association, and workable democracy,” in Mark E. Warren, ed., *Democracy and Trust*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 216.

<sup>10</sup> Liz Ševčenko, “The Power of Place: How historic sites can engage citizens in human rights issues,” Minneapolis: The Center for Victims of Torture’s New Tactics in Human Rights Project, 2004, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> The definition of *public* used here raises a bit of a chicken-and-egg question, which comes first, democratic space or public memorials. Some of the memorials represented here, such as Derb Moulay Cherif in Morocco, can be seen as efforts to liberalize and democratize public spaces by fostering public conversations about the past that ideally lead to conversations about the present and future.

<sup>12</sup> See Veronica Hinstroza Arenas, “Historical Memory in South America: does regional experience support a regional customary obligation to remember the past?” Dissertation (unpublished) for LL.M in International Human Rights Law, University of Essex, UK, Law Department, and submitted October 15, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Interview and discussion on Nov. 12, 2007, with Choeung Ek’s Deputy Director Ros Sophearavy.



Hundreds of thousands of people each year visit Choeung Ek's infamous killing fields outside of Phnom Penh. Between April and October of 2006, 200 to 300 visitors came per day. From October to March, that number increased to between 400 and 500. In 2007, the low season saw 300 to 400 per day, and 400 to 600 people came daily during the high season, site administrators said.

Photos, left to right:

1. The tree against which executioners beat children to kill them.
2. A guide gives a tour standing inside the stupa in front of a shelf full of skulls and bones; shelves like this fill eight stories.
3. The stupa from a distance.

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## Method

Over the course of four days in November, ICTJ senior staff member Louis Bickford conducted a survey with over 20 questions (see Appendix 4) with the assistance of three English-speaking Cambodian university students.<sup>14</sup> The team conducted the interviews between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. Bickford returned on subsequent occasions that month and in January 2008. In total, the team interviewed 72 visitors to Choeung Ek. The majority were foreigners. Seven were Cambodians, and were interviewed in Khmer. Two interviews were conducted in Spanish, and the rest were in English. The team asked everyone for permission to use their names. No one refused to be interviewed. In fact, most people were happy to talk, and a few commented that the interview itself was a useful learning experience because it allowed conscious reflection on what they'd just experienced.

### Summary findings

Choeung Ek has enormous potential to teach its visitors about the history of Cambodia, and specifically to draw out lessons from the tragedies of the Khmer Rouge period. It is a powerfully emotional place that has spiritual and mystical elements—a location still haunted by the ghosts of the thousands who died there.

The single most important observation from the survey is that, despite some of the complicated questions swirling around the notion of genocide tourism (see Appendix 2), most interviewees believed that they would be better global citizens as a result of visiting Choeung Ek. Visitors seemed genuinely changed by

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<sup>14</sup> The author thanks Huong Sok En, Moeng Theara, and Tep Sokunvannary for their assistance.



this experience. One said, “This makes me wonder about situations like Darfur,” and others said they would pay more attention to news about genocide. A number of people said, “I hope I would stand up against something like this if it happens in the future.” While it is almost impossible to measure whether the site produces such positive results directly, it would be well worth exploring.

Our survey yielded two additional observations. First, it is very clear that this site can be improved to better meet some of the stated goals of its managers—namely, to bring more tourists and to teach those tourists about a terrible period in Cambodian history. Some of the improvements would be very inexpensive. For example, a map could be posted at the entrance and some of the narrative plaques could be updated. These and other recommendations are listed in detail below.

Second, it is relevant that most visitors are international tourists. They come to the site because it has been mentioned in a guidebook or another source of information for tourists. They do not know much in advance about the Khmer Rouge period. This is also discussed in more depth below.

## Results of pilot survey

The pilot survey provides a basic sketch of why people come to this site, what they hope to get out of it, whether they do indeed get that, and what they think might be improved.

We interviewed people as they were leaving Choeung Ek, near the exit inside the site. Most had spent about 30 minutes at the site. Men and women were equally represented, and ranged in age from 16 to 69. Almost everyone came in groups of two or three. Interviewees were of different nationalities, and included Australians (14), Cambodians (7), New Zealanders (7), Americans (6), Spaniards (4), and three or fewer people of other nationalities, including Canadian, Danish, German, Indian, and French. We did not interview any of the Japanese and Koreans who came to the site on tour buses because of language constraints. This is one important shortcoming of the survey that should be rectified in a later iteration.

Almost all respondents suggested that Choeung Ek was a profoundly disturbing place that evoked difficult and complex emotions. We saw a number of respondents sobbing, and some of them talked about how intense the visit had been. Canadian Patrick McManus, 47, was visibly choked up while he explained, “This is a powerful and sad place. I cannot believe that these things happened in my own lifetime.”

When asked, “What do you believe the purpose of this memorial site is?” and “Does it accomplish that purpose?,” the two most common answers were that it is a place “to educate both international visitors and Cambodians” and that it is a location for “preserving memory” about the Khmer Rouge’s atrocities.

Other visitors remarked that such a site stood as a place to mourn the loss of life. Visitors also repeatedly commented on how difficult it was to believe that such atrocities actually took place, but that the site successfully proves that they did.

### “Shocking” and “raw”

One dominant set of responses focused on the ways in which Choeung Ek was “shocking,” “disturbing” and “raw.” It is clear that what we might call the shock value of the site is part of its effectiveness. Many commented on the visceral power of the skulls, bone fragments and clothing remnants that made the experience particularly real and different. One respondent said, “Whatever they do to change this site, do



not remove its rawness”; another said, “It is so raw here. I will never be able to forget it. That is what makes this experience so powerful.”

A few respondents said their guides dug up bone fragments or teeth and gave them as grim mementos. Although the visitors found it distasteful, only one really complained. Others said that it added to the rawness or the disturbing nature of the place. Similarly, some were intrigued that a number of undisturbed grave pits remain.

A smaller number of respondents commented that there were probably ways to keep some of the site’s power without displaying the human remains. One person suggested the use of model skulls and photos of all other bones so family members of the victims could bury or cremate the remains. An Australian couple said that while they were aware of the debate about the appropriateness of displaying human remains, it would be a shame if the actual skulls were removed; the husband, Anthony Adair, said, “It is the skulls that make this place so incredibly disturbing. But I’m not sure that you necessarily need the skulls, the actual skulls, in order to experience the power of this place. Perhaps it could be done through art or photography.” His wife, Anne, added, “Yes, I suppose so, but it wouldn’t really be the same, I’m afraid.” Both ultimately agreed that it was important to leave this site as it is.

A number of tourists equated the rawness of the site with what they assumed was a locally appropriate way of dealing with such a tragedy. Anthony Adair said, “The worst thing would be for a bunch of well-meaning international NGOs to come in and redesign this place in ways that are not culturally appropriate.”

### **A positive characteristic of the site: “low-tech” and “simple”**

A similar set of comments focused on the importance of maintaining a low-tech site unsullied by “fancy gizmos,” in the words of one American in her 20s. Visitors seemed worried that if technology came to Choeung Ek, the result would diminish the simplicity that makes this place what it is, said one respondent.

A few respondents said the site was well-run and did not need to change. These visitors felt that the place should be preserved in its original form and should not become more modern and artificial. One visitor commented that if it became too modernized, it would not reach the hearts of visitors in the same way.

### **A negative characteristic of the site: “anachronistic” explanations**

A number of people commented that the content and form of the explanations of what occurred at the site were very old. Most were written in the 1980s and reflect the political climate of that period. In this sense, many of the explanations are outdated and also questionably accurate according to more current scholarship.

The purpose of the site has changed since the 1980s. However, the site has not been updated to reflect that change. As many commentators have written, the original purpose of the site—as a public memorial—was to contribute to a consolidation and legitimization of the post-Khmer Rouge regime. Beginning in 1979, the newly installed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1993), embattled by Cold War politics and needing to shore up its support both internally and externally, wanted to demonstrate as vividly and unambiguously as possible the horrific crimes committed by the earlier regime. In fact, the secretive nature of the Khmer Rouge meant that many in the internationally community, for example, did not

believe, or *chose* not to believe because of the polarization of the Cold War, the extent of the Khmer Rouge's brutality. The goal of the new government was to construct a master narrative that not only rejected the Khmer Rouge but hinted ominously at the possibility, and consequences, of their return. , as Judy Ledgerwood puts it<sup>15</sup>, the “most important message” of these sites “was powerful in its simplicity”. The central message of the government was “you must support us because to fail to do so might result in the return to power of the Khmer Rouge”.

This background helps to explain the harsh tone of signage at the site, the horrific descriptions of torture and death of victims, and the unambiguous condemnation of the Khmer Rouge throughout the site. But it does not adequately explain why new narratives have not also been added. For example, there are basically no examples at the site of historical description or analysis of the Khmer Rouge period, of the identity of the perpetrators, or of the stories of the victims. These might have been seen as inappropriate or difficult to construct in the 1980s, but could easily be assembled today. Most importantly, it is clear from this survey that many visitors would appreciate seeing new narratives at the site<sup>16</sup>.

## Learning about the Khmer Rouge period: a focus on brutality

Approximately three-quarters—a surprisingly large figure—of the respondents said they had not known the history of the Khmer Rouge before coming to the site, which suggests that their knowledge of that period will largely be formed by the educational experience they have at Choeung Ek (as well as to the Tuol Sleng Genocide museum, where almost all respondents had either already visited or planned to visit). Doris Doty, an American in her 60s, said, “Thankfully, the site exists because then you will never forget it. Also, we never knew about it, and we American people never did anything about it.” As a couple from San Francisco pointed out, “This is definitely not in our textbooks in school in the United States.”

So, if visits to Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng are the primary exposures most visitors have to the Khmer Rouge and the period from 1975 to 1979, it is important to ask what they learned. As will be discussed below, it is a different but equally important question to ask what the site's proprietors want to communicate about the Khmer Rouge.<sup>17</sup>

Respondents almost unanimously highlighted that they had learned about the brutality of the regime and the details of the ways that people died at Choeung Ek. “It is amazing that such evil has existed in my own lifetime,” said James Ronart, a New Zealander in his 60s on an organized tour. “The tree where they bashed children's heads - that is incredible.”<sup>18</sup>

Although the narratives at the site do not explicitly compare the Khmer Rouge to other perpetrators of genocide, three or four respondents made the link, suggesting that the site made them think of the Nazis

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<sup>15</sup> Judy Ledgerwood, “The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative”, in David E. Lorey, William H. Beezley, (eds) (2002), *Genocide, Collective Violence, and Popular Memory* (San Francisco: Scholarly Resources). p 112.

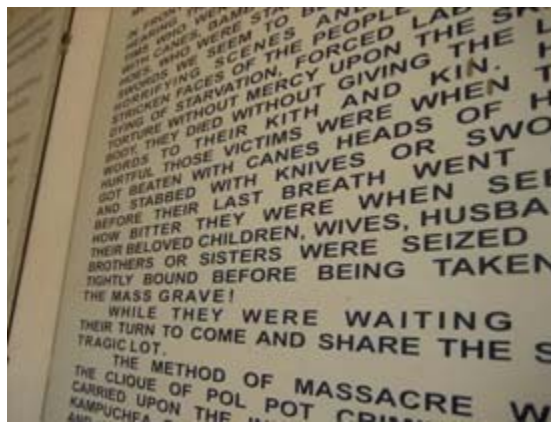
<sup>16</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the old narratives should be removed. It would be possible to include both the old narratives and the new narratives at the site. See Ivan Karp, Corinne Kratz, Lynn Szewaja, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (2006), *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), especially Part III, “Remapping the Museum”.

<sup>17</sup> According to many visitors, guidebooks such as those published by Lonely Planet are important additional sources of historical information.

<sup>18</sup> An anonymous American man in his 40s said, “I didn't realize that Khmer Rouge recruited young boys ... 8 and 14 to work for them and brainwashed those children.”

or other regimes. An Indian man in his 30s said, “I am stunned by the evil represented here. It is like Hitler, Stalin. I had no idea.” Pilar Gutierrez, a Spaniard in her 20s, compared the period to the Spanish Civil War, saying that the Cambodian genocide was even worse.

None of the respondents said they had learned much about the Khmer Rouge itself, such as how it came to power, who belonged to it, what the ideology was, and how the members exercised power. Nor had people learned much about the victims’ stories. Representations of both victims and perpetrators are “thin”—that is, there is not a deep or nuanced discussion of either group. Victims are presented as nameless people who suffered tragic deaths but have no other story. Perpetrators are also represented as nameless individuals who committed gruesome crimes or were members of the “Pol Pot clique,” named for the country’s brutal leader. These are both subjects that could be important components of the site. It seems clear from interviews that what people take away from the site concerns only the grim details of the victims’ deaths.



Choeng Ek’s narrative —told through signs like the one above —is the story of the brutal moments before and during the deaths of victims. Today, this narrative is at the core of how visitors experience the site.

The fact that the perpetrator is essentially invisible at Choeng Ek is not dissimilar to the treatment of perpetrators at other similar sites around the world. Peter Novick, for example, has explored the ways in which representations of the Holocaust, beginning in the 1960s, have focused more on “Jewish victims rather than German perpetrators”<sup>19</sup>. Still, many respondents lamented the absence of more comprehensive information at the site about both victims and perpetrators. For example, a Danish visitor argued, “It is important that the site provide accurate information to both local and international visitors about the Khmer Rouge and its ideology and power structure during the genocide” so that these events would be “better understood and never be forgotten.”

## Expectations

Most people did not have specific expectations of Choeng Ek. There are pros and cons to this. On one hand, the shock value was enhanced by not having expectations. On the other hand, knowing more about the site in advance would potentially help with issues related to inappropriate behavior (see below) and also lay the groundwork for an enriched experience, both emotionally and educationally.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Novick (1999), *The Holocaust in American Life*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin), p. 144.

## Appropriateness of behavior

Many visitors were uncertain about how to act at the site, especially in response to the human remains. For example, a San Francisco couple phrased their concerns as a question to the interviewer: “Is it OK to just be stepping on bones and clothing? Shouldn’t there be a wooden walkway alongside the grave pits or some other way to prevent people from crunching the bones under their feet?”

What constituted appropriate attire for visitors to the site was also an issue. Because of Cambodia’s climate and the fact that many visitors came to the site unaware of what to expect, many visitors wore shorts, tank tops, and other casual or revealing clothing. This clearly bothered some other visitors, who felt it was disrespectful. At the stupa, a sign asks visitors to show respect and remove their shoes and hats, but very few other rules address clothing at the site.



This sign provides guidelines about behavior at the site, but many respondents had not seen it. Many visitors we interviewed wondered whether their behavior was appropriate. Some commented that other people’s behavior was not appropriate. Examples of “inappropriate behavior” included stepping on human remains, being “disrespectful” and wearing revealing clothing.

## Never again

Many visitors expressed hope that Choeung Ek would be a tool for ensuring that genocide does not happen again. For example, Gary S. Cleary, an Australian human resource manager in his 50s, said, “Even though the world knew about what happened in Cambodia during that time, they did nothing. Hopefully, having this here will help prevent it from happening again.” “We are grateful to the Cambodian government to open this site as public and let us visit here,” said an Indian man in his 30s. “The Cambodian government is right to do this so we can learn and never repeat these horrible things.”

Perhaps the most explicit reference to this causal logic was an anonymous Canadian visitor who said, “George Bush and also [former] Khmer Rouge’s leaders should come here so they can witness the results of their own irresponsibility.” Ole F. Vinther, a Danish social worker, said, “All people should come here ... especially all people involved in governments around the world.”

## Bringing more Cambodians to the site

A number of people commented that the site seems to attract only international tourists. This is not entirely accurate, as Cambodians do visit the site. Some come at less popular hours, like early in the morning. Some come for special ceremonies, and others come in groups organized by NGOs such as Documentation Center of Cambodia or the Center for Social Development.

Nonetheless, the majority of people who visit are foreigners. The site's deputy director, Ros Sophearavy, reports that in the past year, the average number of foreign tourists per day has increased to about 500 from between 200 and 300.<sup>20</sup>

## The representation of the “victim”

Victims at this site are represented as a vague aggregation of grim experiences. None are individually named, and no victim's biography is recounted. There are no stories told about the victims' experiences since all died and were unable to tell their stories. Nor is there an attempt to imagine the details of an individual victim's story. A few visitors commented that they would like to have heard more details about the victims.

## The representation of “perpetrator”

The perpetrator is represented as a barbaric “genocidal clique” without further definition, biography, or images. A few visitors commented that they learned extremely little about the Khmer Rouge, either as a political movement or as a collection of individuals with specific biographies.

## Return visits

Most people were visiting the site for the first time and said that they will not return a second time to Choeung Ek. They said “they had seen it once, and that was enough.” Others said that they would only return if something new was added that made it worth seeing a second time.

One way to encourage return visits would be to consider activities or programs that could be run from the site, such as educational events.

## Considerations for the future of the site as a public memorial dedicated to teaching about the past

Although most visitors surveyed described Choeung Ek as “well organized,”<sup>21</sup> many made suggestions about how the site could be improved. Getting to Choeung Ek was easy and convenient; most people

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<sup>20</sup>“Tourism boom at Cambodia's ‘Killing Fields:’ company official,” Agence France-Presse, Dec. 14, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> The repeated use of this exact phrase on the interview sheets—although the phrase was not on the survey itself—seems to be a result of the way that some of the interviewers interpreted the respondents' answers. The phrase appears only in a number of survey forms filled out by the three Cambodian students, suggesting that it is a common one in Khmer, or at least among these three individuals.

simply asked the driver of their tuk-tuk or car.<sup>22</sup> Visitors generally felt satisfied on a practical level with most aspects of their visit. Most people considered Choeng Ek one of the “must-see” sites in Phnom Penh.

A large percentage of respondents noted that the site needed improvements in terms of information available, comfort, navigability and accessibility. Perhaps the most consistent comments involved enhancing the educational potential, with some concrete suggestions for doing so in low-tech and appropriate ways. Other suggestions had to do with general design questions, appropriate behavior and language (only English and Khmer are consistently represented).

Consistent comments and recommendations gathered from the surveys included:

➤ **Increase the amount of accurate information provided at site**

The majority of interviewees indicated that they were interested in learning more about the victims, perpetrators, the period of Cambodian history and the events at Choeng Ek. They wanted to know why the genocide happened.

- Twenty-six respondents felt strongly that more information should be provided. This includes more information on the events that took place at Choeng Ek before and during the Khmer Rouge regime.
- Some people felt that the narrative explanations were outdated and should be replaced with more interesting, new ones.
- One respondent said that the narrative explanations themselves could form a new exhibit about how history was interpreted in the 1980s.
- One person suggested that a direct link be made with “how we know, or hope, that this won’t ever happen again in Cambodia.”

➤ **Represent the victims of the site more fully**

The victims are largely represented at this site as the silent, faceless victims of gruesome brutality. In addition to more specific information about the victims, a number of people recommended finding ways to create more personal connections with them. Suggestions included:

- Mounting photos or paintings of the victims near graves.
- Posting information about the daily life of Cambodians in the area and showing either videos or slides that depict daily life under Pol Pot.
- Showing or telling stories about the victims.
- Displaying artifacts from the victims other than the scraps of clothing that litter the site.

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<sup>22</sup> It would be interesting to consider a training session on genocide sites for tuk-tuk drivers since they often act as interpreters for many tourists.



➤ **Clarify the details about the site itself**

Some 30 people said there is very little guidance for anyone who does not hire a guide. They felt disoriented and lost within the site. They did not know which way to go, if they were leaving the boundaries of the site or if they were stepping on grave pits.

While most people saw this as a problem, at least three individuals saw this as a strength because it made visitors feel disoriented “in a way that makes the experience appropriately uncomfortable and lost,” in the words of one respondent.

Respondents noted:

- The site should have a large, clear map posted at the entrance. Alternatively, smaller, brochure-like maps could be available at the entrance. The map could be used as a reference guide to the entire site. One person suggested that this map could be drawn by a local artist.
- Once inside the site, by contrast, the minimal interpretation and scarcity of narrative detail was acceptable.
- Some of the English translations on the signs should be reviewed and possibly rewritten to ensure clarity.

➤ **Provide more guides for the site**

Many respondents used a tour guide at the site and reported that they found it useful.<sup>23</sup> However, they also listed the following as ways to improve the guidance at the memorial site:

- Supplying more trained guides at the site to provide information and answer questions.
- Educating and hiring local people to be guides to promote ownership of the site in the communities.
- Providing pamphlets containing information about Choeung Ek. Respondents noted that there were no pamphlets about Choeung Ek on site. Only a few had guidebooks that described it.
- Preparing packets of information for guests that choose self-guided tours.

➤ **Provide guidelines for appropriate behavior**

A number of people commented that they were not sure if they or others had behaved appropriately, referring explicitly to the almost inevitable likelihood of stepping on bone fragments. Comments included:

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<sup>23</sup> In a future survey, it would be beneficial to ask more in-depth follow-up questions about the specific positive and negative aspects of using guides. This would be useful when training guides.



- Some visitors felt it would be more “respectful” to have wooden walkways along the grave pits, so that people could still experience the pits without stepping on bone fragments or clothes.
- A German couple said a sign should be posted indicating what behavior was appropriate at the site. They specifically mentioned the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe, located in Berlin, that has a list of “don’ts” for visitors. When they were told that such a sign did exist at Choeung Ek’s entrance, they said they had not noticed it.
- Respondents noted that guides do not discuss appropriate behavior. On the contrary, in some ways they may promote inappropriate behavior; they have been known to give bone fragments they’ve unearthed to visitors. It would be helpful if guides began tours with a discussion of expected behavior.
- One visitor raised the concern that policing people’s behavior might detract from the experience.

➤ **Make accommodations for children as visitors**

Most respondents felt the site was appropriate for all ages. However, a few expressed reservations about bringing young children because it could be traumatic. At least two respondents suggested that the site provide child-friendly educational materials for young visitors.

➤ **Involve local children**

A number of local children spend time at the site begging or asking to have their photographs taken. A few respondents voiced concern for these children and asked for more information about them. They noted:

- Site administrators should consider ways to incorporate local children, such as asking them for their stories and their impressions of the site.

➤ **Preserve the gravesites**

Several respondents said that the specific gravesites could be better maintained and preserved by:

- Trimming the grass.
- Capping the pits to preserve their physical integrity and prevent erosion. If concrete is used, then it should be discreet.
- Placing fencing around some of the sites for protection.

➤ **Improve aesthetics and landscaping**

Since many visitors to Choeung Ek view it as a memorial or place of mourning, several (especially Cambodians, it should be mentioned) suggested improvements to the landscaping. Respondents said:

- The site should have more flowers and trees.

➤ **Provide services for visitors**

The site has minimal services for visitors. Basic necessities such as toilets could be improved, a number of respondents said. Guests also noted some other services that could be improved:

- Several visitors suggested that the site should include more tables and chairs where people can rest.
- One visitor suggested the addition of a restaurant or cafeteria on or near the site.
- One Cambodian visitor suggested that the drink and souvenir prices were too high for local visitors. The prices should reflect the fact that the site’s tourists include locals as well as foreigners who may have more money.
- Several respondents remarked that the bathrooms needed to be cleaned regularly and should be checked for toilet paper, soap and other necessities.

## **Two additional considerations**

The following two recommendations did not come directly from the survey, although they resonate with a number of respondents’ answers. Rather, they come from the author’s personal experience both at the site and in the field of memorialization in the context of transitional justice. The two recommendations are to consider Choeung Ek a place of “truth-telling” and to incorporate visitors into the site as more than passive recipients of information.

### **Choeung Ek as a place of “truth-telling”—a place of “why”**

Choeung Ek and similar sites throughout Cambodia could become important places of truth-telling about the Khmer Rouge period. Harnessing the power of place and the intensity of the tormented history of this particular site, Choeung Ek could try to grapple with why the genocide happened. This is perhaps the most difficult but necessary question to address concerning the Khmer Rouge.

Choeung Ek cannot answer this question. But by making small changes to the site—some of which, like providing a fuller story about victims, are already mentioned above—Choeung Ek could begin to work toward some of the same goals that truth commissions try to accomplish.

Cambodia has never had an official truth commission, and it seems unlikely that one ever will exist—at least not a formal, state-endorsed, blue-ribbon truth commission such as those in Chile, Peru, Timor-Leste or South Africa. But this does not mean that efforts to seek the truth are not under way.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps most

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<sup>24</sup> Numerous attempts to deal with Cambodia’s past have emerged over the years. In 1982 and 1983, for example, “Hundreds of thousands of survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime wrote and signed petitions as part of a massive effort on the part of the Vietnamese-installed Peoples’ Republic of Kampuchea (‘PRK’) government to appeal to the United Nations (‘UN’) to recognize the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge and remove Khmer Rouge representatives from Cambodia’s UN seat. This vast collection of victim’s petitions is known as the *Renakse* records and is sometimes commonly referred to as the ‘million documents.’” See William J. Schulte, “The History of the *Renakse* Petitions and Their Value for ECCC Proceedings,” *Searching for the Truth*, Documentation Center of Cambodia, Khmer/English edition, December 2007.

importantly, the Documentation Center of Cambodia has been referred to as an “unofficial truth commission” for its prodigious efforts to collect information about the period between 1975 and 1979.<sup>25</sup>

Truth commissions that have existed in other countries have tried to engage societies in difficult conversations about their pasts, often by asking existential questions about what it means for a society to go through difficult periods of brutality, conflict and mass atrocity. By focusing on victims’ stories and hearing their voices, truth commissions have provided a way for societies to look at themselves in the mirror and seek to understand themselves better.

In order to do this, we must consider ways Choeung Ek can address the past and generate conversations about the Khmer Rouge period. This would most likely be accomplished through programming and activities at the site.

The site can also play an important role in forging links with other transitional justice mechanisms. In 2006, for example, the establishment of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal—known as the Extraordinary Chamber of the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)<sup>26</sup>—showed the challenges of grappling with the past. This hybrid tribunal of Cambodian and international judges, prosecutors, and staff held its first hearing in November 2007 on the case of Tuol Sleng’s former administrator, Kaing Guek Eav or “Duch.” Since the prison is now a museum, Duch’s upcoming trial could be an important adjunct to its existence.<sup>27</sup> Choeung Ek will almost certainly be a component of the trial.

### **Incorporate visitors as active participants**

A second recommendation is to think of visitors as actively interested participants. Currently, visitors walk through the site and take in information about the brutality of the killing fields. Visitors are passive recipients.

There are two reasons to incorporate visitors more actively. First, it would help to improve the site itself by creating a way to get visitors’ input. Our interviewing team found that visitors actually had a lot to say about the site when asked.

Second, it would enhance their experiences and perhaps encourage them to return. In some instances, such as the interview we had with Anthony and Anne Adair, the conversation became a wide-ranging one that people were excited to have.

### **Accomplishing goals**

The exact *goals* of the site are unclear, and this makes it hard to measure whether or not they are being reached. If indeed the goal is to teach about the period, then the methods would involve programming and pedagogy. One way to clarify these goals is to ask visitors what they hope to get out of an experience of visiting the site.

In order to elicit better routine feedback from visitors, the site administration needs ways to conduct regular surveys in various languages. Administrators also should put suggestion boxes in certain places and provide ways for visitors to make recommendations about programming. Choeung Ek administrators should consider options such as having a permanent team of interviewers at the exit that asks a set of

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<sup>25</sup> See Louis Bickford, “Unofficial Truth Projects,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, (November 2007).

<sup>26</sup> See [www.eccc.gov.kh](http://www.eccc.gov.kh).

<sup>27</sup> November 2007 was a busy month for the fledgling tribunal. During the author’s visit, three more of the Khmer Rouge’s top leaders —Ieng Sary, Ieng Thirith, and Khieu Samphan—were arrested.

questions designed to elicit deep thinking about the site, setting up a video- or audio-recording booth at the exit,<sup>28</sup> inserting various places within the site where visitors can write or record thoughts or opinions or an interactive Web site or blog for visitors.

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<sup>28</sup> One example of this type of information-gathering project is StoryCorps, a nonprofit organization that records and archives interviews between two people. For more information, see StoryCorps' website at <http://www.storycorps.net/>.

## Appendix 1—ICTJ and the Memory, Memorials, and Museums program

ICTJ ([www.ictj.org](http://www.ictj.org)) is an international, nongovernmental, nonprofit organization closely associated with the global movements for human rights, democracy and peace. ICTJ is governed by an independent board of directors and receives funding from more than a dozen governments, including Canada, Japan, Germany and Sweden, as well as from philanthropic foundations such as the Ford Foundation (U.S.) and the Rousing Trust (U.K.).

The organization is particularly concerned with confronting the legacies of past human rights abuse, atrocity and crimes against humanity. In this sense, ICTJ's engagement with projects in Cambodia, including Choeung Ek, emerges from a deep abhorrence of the Khmer Rouge's policies, a belief that the period of 1975 to 1979, as well as episodes of social violence after 1979, can only be characterized as evil and wrong, and a deep commitment to learning from the terrible crimes committed at that time. ICTJ takes its cues from movements around the world that have called for "Never Again" to genocide and crimes against humanity.

## Appendix 2—Some reflections on tourism at sites of genocide and mass atrocity

Tourism that involves going to the sites of genocide, crimes against humanity or what Hannah Arendt called “radical evil” is obviously complicated, and for some it is distasteful. Some commentators call it “dark tourism” and lament the fact that human beings are so morbidly drawn to evil.<sup>29</sup> Others consider this kind of tourism to be voyeuristic,<sup>30</sup> and still others consider it a pathological but logical extension of



More than a million people each year visit Angkor Wat, one of the biggest tourist destinations in Asia. Whether Choeung Ek should be seen as a similar destination is complicated indeed.

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unfettered capitalism<sup>31</sup> Or commercialism<sup>32</sup>. Finally, there is an important stream in scholarly and practitioner literature that fears sites of evil can all too easily be transformed into Disney-like theme parks, robbing them entirely of educational or spiritual meaning.<sup>33</sup>

Given the undeniable fact that tourism always runs the risk of trivializing, commercializing, inadequately understanding and poorly representing the objects of its attention, it is important to outline ICTJ’s criteria for a project that involves genocide tourism.

The two most important criteria from ICTJ’s perspective are:

- That one of the project’s main purposes and top priorities is to educate about past atrocity and to draw lessons from the past in hopes of creating informed, democratic citizens.

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<sup>29</sup> See John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, eds., *Dark tourism: the attraction of death and disaster*, London: Continuum Books, 2000.

<sup>30</sup> See Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> See Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory (Cultural Memory in the Present)*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> See Marita Sturkin’s treatment of the phenomenon of kitsch in Marita Sturken (2007), *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press).

<sup>33</sup> See Andreas Huyssen and also Wilton Corkern, “Heritage Tourism: Where Public and History Don’t Always Meet,” *American Studies International*, Vol. 42, 2004.

- That the project is done in a way that legitimate representatives of victims and survivors believe honors the experiences of victims. In this sense, public memorials should never speak in the name of victims without consulting and collaborating with their representatives.<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, ICTJ associates itself strongly with the UN's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism,<sup>35</sup> especially the direct reference in the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to Article I, which calls for tourism to contribute to "mutual understanding and respect between peoples and societies." ICTJ believes that one of the most important elements of sites of memory is their educational value.

ICTJ also associates itself with the International Cultural Tourism Charter adopted by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) at the 12th General Assembly in Mexico in October 1999.<sup>36</sup> In particular, this document reminds us that tourism can have the positive effect of "educating the community and influencing policy,"<sup>37</sup> and Article I puts great emphasis on the importance of interpretive and educational programs as cultural tourism at its best.

Finally, ICTJ has collaborated closely with the Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, a network of museums and organizations focusing on social memory and human rights.<sup>38</sup> With that organization and the Latin American Social Sciences Faculty (FLACSO-Chile), ICTJ has produced a report about memorialization and democracy that has useful guidelines for sites such as Choeung Ek, based on input from designers, artists, NGOs, and others involved in the creation of similar public memorials around the world.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This criterion is always more complicated than it might appear, because there are often multiple representatives of victims, each with a claim on legitimacy, who articulate widely divergent visions of how best to address the past through public memorialization. In Cambodia, there is yet a further wrinkle, since almost the entire population can reasonably claim to have been negatively impacted, or victimized, by the genocide in some way.

<sup>35</sup> For full text, see [www.world-tourism.org/code\\_ethics/pdf/languages/Codigo%20Etico%20Ing.pdf](http://www.world-tourism.org/code_ethics/pdf/languages/Codigo%20Etico%20Ing.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> For full text, see [www.international.icomos.org/charters/tourism\\_e.htm](http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/tourism_e.htm).

<sup>37</sup> Introduction, "The Charter Ethos," p. 1, [www.international.icomos.org/charters/tourism\\_e.htm](http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/tourism_e.htm).

<sup>38</sup> Liz Ševčenko, "The Power of Place."

<sup>39</sup> See Sebastian Brett, Louis Bickford, Liz Ševčenko, and Marcela Rios, "Memorialization and Democracy: State Policy and Civic Action," ICTJ 2008.



## Appendix 3—Considerations for Future Visitors Surveys

This was a pilot survey conducted over four randomly selected days in November 2007. Its results are anecdotal, but they provide a good sketch of why people come to the site. To bolster these preliminary findings, there are at least two ways that the methodology of the study could be improved in future iterations.

- A rich source of untapped data lies in interviewing the visitors from Japan and Korea. While many visitors came from these countries, we could not interview them because of language limitations. If this survey is conducted again, interviewers should include, at a minimum, fluent speakers of Korean and Japanese. Ideally, fluent speakers of French, German, Spanish, and Thai would also be available.
- More training for the interviewers would also be ideal. The interviews conducted by the lead interviewer usually lasted 30 to 40 minutes and tended to be conversations rather than the 10-minute question-and-answer sessions the other interviews led. The lead interviewer's data were therefore substantially richer and more complex. In fact, a disproportionate percentage of the results discussed below come from the lead researcher's interviews. To avoid this discrepancy in the future, there should be a longer training session for all interviewers to clarify exactly what the researchers hope to achieve, a discussion of how to obtain information through back-and-forth questioning and a conversation about scientific standards of survey methodology.

## Appendix 4—Survey



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### **Visitor-Use Survey** Choeung Ek, January 2008

Louis Bickford  
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#### **Introduction**

We are working with Professor Louis Bickford on a research project, trying to determine who comes to this site and why they come. Dr. Bickford is the head of the Memory, Museums and Memorials (MMM) Program at the International Center for Transitional Justice with offices in Belgium, Indonesia, South Africa, and the United States, among other places. Professor Bickford is also writing a book about memorials and genocide. If you have a few minutes, we would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview you. This is an anonymous interview. The information obtained here may be used in a published article or book, or it may be used to develop another survey for future use in Cambodia.

#### **Survey**

1. Why did you visit Choeung Ek today?
2. What are your impressions of this place?
3. What did you expect to find here?
4. Were your expectations met?

5. What do you believe the purpose of this memorial site is?
6. Do you think it accomplishes that purpose?
7. Who do you think should come to this site?
8. Should schools be brought here? What ages?
9. Before you came, did you know anything about the history commemorated here?
10. While visiting the memorial, did you learn anything?
11. What did you learn?
12. Do you intend to do anything differently as a result of visiting this site?
13. Has coming to this place changed you in any way? Could you explain how?
14. If you were in charge of designing this site, would you do anything differently? Why?

(additional informational details)

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15. How much time did you spend overall?
16. Did you find the site easily?

17. Did you use a guide/docent?
18. Did you take and read a flyer or any materials?
19. Did you buy anything here?
20. Where are you going after this visit?
21. Will you come back?
22. When and why?

Data

Gender:

Age (estimate):

Permanent city and country of residence:

Other relevant details/observations: