



TOURISM POTENTIAL OF TIGER REINTRODUCTION IN CAMBODIA: LINKING CONSERVATION WITH ECONOMIC FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

Cambodia's tourism sector has shown strong post-pandemic recovery, driven largely by its globally renowned cultural heritage sites. The country's protected area network and high biodiversity offer opportunities for diversification beyond cultural tourism. This paper assesses the potential for tiger reintroduction – specifically in the Cardamom Mountains Landscape – to catalyse a new, sustainable wildlife-based tourism economy. Cambodia welcomed 6.7 million international visitors in 2024, generating USD 3.6 billion – figures that underscore the importance of exploring additional tourism products. This study estimates that tiger-based tourism in the Cardamoms could generate USD 5–7 million annually within a decade, create significant local employment, and contribute up to 2 per cent of national tourism GDP. Complementary mechanisms – such as wildlife levies, regulated safari zoning, community-based ecotourism models, and strong governance – could ensure equitable benefit sharing and long-term financial sustainability. By integrating biodiversity conservation with strategic tourism expansion, tiger reintroduction presents a unique opportunity to Cambodia to revive a lost species, stimulate rural economies, and position itself as an ecotourism destination in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Wildlife-based tourism, Cardamom Mountains Landscape, Nature-based tourism development

INTRODUCTION

Nature-based tourism, including ecotourism, is a significant and rapidly expanding segment of the global tourism industry, generating billions of dollars in revenue annually. It is a growing market that is economically important and plays a crucial role in protecting biodiversity and supporting local communities (Samal & Dash, 2023; World Bank, 2024). The global ecotourism market was estimated at USD 172.4 billion in 2022 and is projected to reach USD 374.2 billion, with a growth rate of 13.9 per cent by 2028 (MarketResearch.com, 2023). For developing countries with abundant natural resources, for example in South Asia and Southeast Asia, nature tourism provides an opportunity for economic growth and development (Christie & Crompton, 2001; OECD, 2009; United Nations Environment Programme, 2011, 2013).

Wildlife tourism is a component of nature-based tourism defined as “tourism undertaken to view or encounter

wildlife” (Duffus & Dearden, 1990; Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001). Wildlife tourism raises awareness about benefits from nature and produces economic benefits that can support protected area management and conservation initiatives (Balmford et al., 2009; Hudson & Lee, 2010; Roe et al., 1997). Wildlife tourism can offset conservation costs (Lindsey et al., 2005), create incentives to conserve wildlife through revenue sharing (MacKenzie, 2012) and positively affect local communities' attitudes towards conservation (Infield, 1988). Wildlife tourism destinations often use mega-herbivores and large carnivores as flagship species for promotion (Skibins, 2012). Flagship species, which are often charismatic animals, are able to inspire a connection with nature to increase political and public support for conservation, raise finances and improve public recognition of a site or tourist destination (Dalerum et al., 2008; Skibins et al., 2013; Walpole & Leader-Williams, 2002; Xiang et al., 2011)



Cardamom forest © Jimmy Borah

The tiger (*Panthera tigris*) is considered one of the most charismatic flagship species globally. Its conservation plays a critical role in promoting forest protection, raising public awareness, and mobilising financial and community support for broader ecosystem conservation. Latest estimates suggest that approximately 5,500 wild tigers remain globally, occupying only a small fraction, around 7–8 per cent, of their historical range (Global Tiger Forum, 2023). Of the 13 tiger range countries, there is no evidence of breeding populations in Cambodia, Vietnam (Walston et al., 2010) and Laos (Rasphone et al., 2019). Key factors in the demise of tiger populations are loss of habitat, destruction of individuals because of their threat to human populations and domestic animals, and take for the wildlife trade in tiger claws and traditional medicines. Exacerbating these issues is the tiger's solitary behaviour and natural low population density. Thus, in any consideration of reintroduction of tigers, it is necessary to ensure a sufficiently large and remote area of suitable habitat with large prey species, security of human populations, preferably without large farm animals and the ability to manage the threat of poaching. These ecological prerequisites are assumed to be met at the sites we consider and therefore not discussed in detail.

In a significant and commendable step, Cambodia became the first country to acknowledge national extirpation of tigers in the 21st century (despite tigers likely having gone extinct in Laos and Vietnam in the preceding years) and started to develop clear steps for recovery. Tiger reintroduction was identified as critical in

the Cambodia Tiger Action Plan (CTAP) endorsed in 2016 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF). The Eastern Plains Landscape in Mondulkiri Province and the Cardamom Mountains Rain Forest in Koh Kong province were identified in the CTAP as candidate landscapes for tiger reintroduction due to their large, contiguous forest cover, healthy and recovering prey bases, and historical presence of tigers. The Eastern Plains offers expansive dry forests, while the Cardamoms provide dense rainforest, strong ecological connectivity, and secure core zones with low human–livestock interaction. These landscapes meet the essential ecological and security conditions necessary for sustaining a viable tiger population. However, the Cardamom forest habitats will limit direct wildlife visibility compared to open habitats; therefore, habitat augmentation (e.g. grassland patches, waterholes) may be required.

Nestled in the southwestern part of the Indochina peninsula, Cambodia is one of the fastest-growing economies in Asia. Much of the country's landscape is characterised by a low-lying central plain surrounded by uplands and low mountains. Dominant features include the seasonally inundated Tonle Sap, Southeast Asia's largest freshwater lake, and the Mekong River, which traverses the country from north to south. Cambodia has one of the world's most extensive protected area networks; more than 75,000 km², or approximately 41 per cent of the country's area, and connected through a system of biodiversity corridors (Ministry of Environment, 2017).

Described as one of the “great game-lands of the world; a Serengeti of Asia”, the plains of northern and eastern Cambodia support a diverse and abundant megafauna of ungulates, predators and scavengers (Tordoff et al., 2005; Wharton, 1957). Cambodia, however, suffered substantial political instability and conflict throughout the 20th century escalating during the Lon Nol (1970–1975) and Pol Pot (1975–1979) regimes (Chandler, 2000). There is evidence of declines in the regional population and distribution of large mammal species including tiger, leopard (*P. pardus*), Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*), banteng (*Bos javanicus*), Eld’s deer (*Cervus eldii*) and hog deer (*Axis porcinus*) (Duckworth & Hedges, 1998; Loucks et al., 2008).

Although the primary destination for tourists in Cambodia is more focused on cultural heritage sites and rural landscapes, we argue that livelihood and cultural heritage tourism can be complemented with wildlife tourism, extending the opportunity to generate higher revenues, which can directly and indirectly contribute to the economy and GDP of the country and alleviate poverty in remote areas. In this paper, we assessed the possibility of using tigers as flagship species to promote wildlife-based tourism in more remote areas and diversify Cambodia’s offer as an internationally attractive destination.

METHODS

This study adopts a desk-based analytical approach to assess the potential for tiger-based wildlife tourism in Cambodia. Data were compiled from multiple secondary sources, including government reports (e.g. Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Environment of the Royal Government of Cambodia), published literature, and international datasets on tourism trends and conservation economics.

Tourism statistics, including international arrivals, domestic visitation, and revenue figures, were obtained from official national reports for the period 2019–2024. These were used to analyse pre-, during and post-COVID trends in Cambodia’s tourism sector. Provincial-level

tourism data for Koh Kong were similarly derived from Ministry of Tourism datasets and used to establish baseline visitation patterns.

Future projections (2025–2030) were developed using a trend-based approach, applying percentage growth rates observed in recent years to estimate visitor increases under a business-as-usual scenario. Economic projections for tiger-based tourism (e.g. revenue generation, employment, and visitor spending) were derived using comparative benchmarks from established wildlife tourism models in India and Nepal, adjusted to reflect Southeast Asian ecological and tourism contexts.

All projections presented in this study are indicative and based on a set of assumptions, including stable tourism growth rates, gradual infrastructure development, and effective governance and enforcement mechanisms. The analysis is intended to provide a scenario-based assessment of potential opportunities rather than precise forecasts.

RESULTS

Cultural tourism trends in Cambodia

Cambodia’s tourism sector experienced a significant rebound in 2024, welcoming approximately 6.7 million international tourists; an increase of nearly 23 per cent from 2023. This surge generated an estimated USD 3.6 billion in revenue, underscoring the country’s tourism sector as a vital pillar of its economy. The primary international source markets included Thailand (32per cent), Vietnam (20 per cent) and China (12.7 per cent) (Ministry of Tourism, 2024). Additionally, domestic tourism remained robust, with millions of Cambodians exploring local attractions. Tourism now contributes significantly to Cambodia’s GDP and plays a key role in employment and rural development. The Ministry of Tourism continues to prioritise sustainable and diversified tourism products and experiences, including wildlife and ecotourism, as core to its strategic growth agenda.

Cambodia is famous for the Angkor Wat World Heritage Site, one of the most important archaeological sites in

Table 1. Overview of international tourist arrivals and revenue at Angkor Archaeological Park before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

Period	International visitors	Ticket revenue (in USD)
PreCOVID (2019)	~2.2 million	~99 million
During COVID	2020: 400,889 2021: <200,000	2020: 18.65 million
Early recovery	2022: 287,454	11.5 million
PostCOVID	~798,069 in 2023	13.52 million
By end 2024	~1,023,688 in 2024	~47.8 million

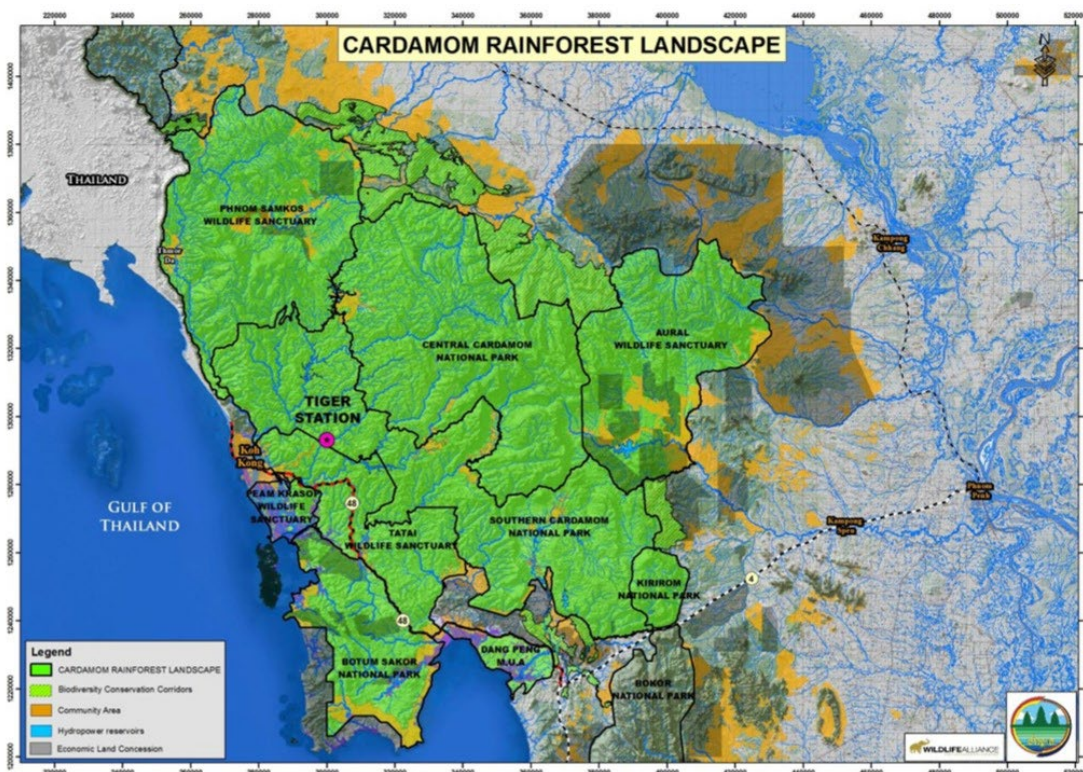


Figure 1. Major protected areas in the Cardamom rainforest landscape (Source: Ministry of the Environment/Wildlife Alliance)

Southeast Asia, located in the northern province of Siem Reap. Stretching over 400 km², Angkor Archaeological Park contains the remains of the different capitals of the Khmer Empire, from the 9th to the 15th century. One of the premier tourist destinations nationally, it welcomed 1,023,688 international tourists in 2024, generating USD 47.83 million in revenue, a 28.27 per cent increase from the previous year (Table 1; Ministry of Tourism, 2024).

Wildlife tourism trends in Cambodia

The province of Koh Kong, located in south-western Cambodia, is a predominantly natural landscape with approximately 85 per cent forest cover, making the region significant for biodiversity conservation (Muñoz et al., 2024). Three major protected areas – Central Cardamom Mountains National Park (401,313 ha), Southern Cardamom National Park (410,392 ha) and Botum Sakor National Park (171,250 ha) – form the core of southwestern Cambodia’s conservation landscape. Botum Sakor lies entirely within Koh Kong province, while the other two extend across provincial boundaries (Figure 1). Together, they account for approximately 88 per cent of Koh Kong’s total land area and hold significant biodiversity value (Ministry of Environment, 2017).

In recent years, the landscapes of Koh Kong Province and the Cardamom Mountains have emerged as growing destinations for ecotourism in Cambodia (Ministry of

Tourism, 2024). These areas are rich in biodiversity and natural attractions, hosting a variety of critically endangered and endemic species, including the Siamese crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*), pileated gibbon (*Hylobates pileatus*), sun bear (*Helarctos malayanus*) and Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*). Wildlife experiences in the region are based mostly on forest treks, community-based ecotourism projects, and guided tours within protected areas such as Botum Sakor National Park and Central Cardamom Mountains National Park. The Chi Phat community ecotourism initiative and Trapeang Rung village are notable examples where local communities have successfully linked conservation with tourism towards improved livelihoods (Carter et al., 2013).

In 2024, Koh Kong attracted more than 511,000 visitors, including 492,000 domestic and 19,000 international (Ministry of Tourism, 2024), representing 1.75 per cent of Cambodia’s total national tourism volume (29.22 million). Projections suggest that by 2030, the province could welcome nearly 1.5 million visitors, accounting for 3.7 per cent of the national total (Table 2).

Visitors typically stay between three to five days, participating in jungle safaris, kayaking, bird watching, and volunteering in conservation activities. As infrastructure develops and with tiger reintroduction,

Table 2. Visitor numbers and national tourism share for Koh Kong province, Cambodia (2023–2030)†

Year	Koh Kong domestic tourists ('000)	Koh Kong international tourists ('000)	Total Koh Kong ('000)	Cambodia domestic tourists (million)	Cambodia international tourists (million)	Cambodia total tourists (million)	Koh Kong share of national tourists (%)
2023	311	6	317	18.74	5.45	24.19	1.31%
2024	492	19	511	22.52	6.70	29.22	1.75%
2025	856	55	911	24.55	7.24	31.79	2.87%
2026	921	60	981	26.02	7.67	33.69	2.91%
2027	1,012	66	1,078	27.06	8.13	35.19	3.06%
2028	1,220	70	1,290	28.14	8.54	36.68	3.52%
2029	1,310	76	1,386	29.00	9.05	38.05	3.64%
2030	1,400	80	1,480	30.15	9.56	39.71	3.73%

† Note: Figures for 2023 and 2024 are actual; figures from 2025 onward are official projections by the Ministry of Tourism of Cambodia. Source: Tourism Statistics Department, Ministry of Tourism (2025).

wildlife tourism is expected to become one of the most valuable economic drivers in the province, based on the types of experiences currently only offered in India (USD 200–500 per person for three days) (Lyngdoh et al., 2017).

Can tigers help?

Cambodia's formal plan to reintroduce wild tigers into the Cardamom Mountains Landscape would make it the first country in Southeast Asia to do so in over a decade. The plan includes initially translocating one male and three female tigers from India, supported by strong bilateral cooperation and guided by IUCN translocation protocols (Global Tiger Forum, 2023; IUCN/SSC, 2013). This bold initiative is expected to transform the region into a high-value ecotourism hub, based on the Chitwan model in Nepal, as well as comparable multi-day wildlife experiences in Southeast Asia (e.g. Thailand and Malaysia). In Chitwan, tiger presence has directly contributed to the creation of over 6,000 jobs and significantly improved local infrastructure (Thapa et al., 2017). Beyond economic benefits, the tiger's return would be a beacon for conservation in Cambodia, galvanising national and international support and elevating the country's global profile in biodiversity conservation and restoration.

Tiger habitats also hold a wide range of non-consumptive recreational opportunities such as hiking, birdwatching, wildlife viewing and related pursuits. These activities have flow-on secondary effects to tourism support sectors, which influence the livelihoods of many people residing near such areas (Verma et al., 2015). The Cardamoms Landscape shares certain ecological characteristics with the Central Indian Highlands, of which Kanha Tiger Reserve (KTR) is a representative example (Verma et al., 2015), although differences in

vegetation structure and visibility conditions necessitate context-specific tourism approaches. Unlike the more open forest–grassland mosaics of central India, the dense tropical forests of Southeast Asia, such as those in Khao Yai National Park, Thailand, present lower wildlife visibility and require context-specific tourism models (Lynam et al., 2013). It is estimated that the KTR provides flow benefits worth USD 2.3 million (~USD 1,120 per hectare) annually. One of the important services originating from KTR includes recreation value or revenues from tourism related activities, which generate USD 5.3 million per year. Various other important ecosystem services originating from KTR include gene pool protection, provisioning of water to downstream regions, fodder in buffer areas, habitat and refuge for wildlife and sequestration of carbon (Verma et al., 2015).

Similar revenues can be generated for the Cardamoms Landscape in Cambodia with careful and meticulous planning, which ultimately would contribute to the country's GDP and support mixed livelihoods for local communities. Successful frameworks for tiger-based wildlife tourism already exist, particularly in India and Nepal, where structured tourism models have contributed to conservation financing, community livelihoods, and protected area management (Karanth & DeFries, 2011; Thapa et al., 2017) which, if appropriately adapted for the Cambodian physical and social environment, can contribute to profitable tiger tourism in Cambodia. With a long-term perspective of conservation through tourism of an iconic species, its habitats and improving the well-being of local communities, there exists the opportunity to generate sufficient revenue to offset initial investments in tiger conservation and wildlife tourism. We use the wildlife safari experience of KTR as a model for the Cardamoms.



Tented house, cardamoms © Jimmy Borah

a. Tourist routes and capacities: It is well-known that tourists can be detrimental to biodiversity, including iconic wildlife, if not managed (regulated and controlled). We support application of the 80:20 rule (National Tiger Conservation Authority [NTCA], 2012) in Cardamoms, where only 20 per cent of the area should be allowed for tourism purposes, while 80 per cent of the area is an inviolate zone to be accessed only for protection and research purposes. A similar policy (STRIPES, 2012) in Indian tiger reserves has yielded fruitful results both in terms of controlling overcrowding as well as maintaining intact undisturbed habitats to sustainably support tigers and other wildlife. For generating relative profits from wildlife tourists, the safari zones and numbers of safari vehicles must be capped to minimise tiger disturbance. Entry fees would be collected from each visitor or group, either directly at the entry gates or through corporate group tour arrangements. Entrance per person should start at a modest level then increase over time to reflect the quality of the experience. Pricing structures should be tiered and adaptive, taking into account local affordability, international market positioning, and willingness-to-pay dynamics. A similar sized park in India (e.g. KTR), allows around 80 vehicles for safaris per day based on a first come booking basis (NTCA, 2012). Each vehicle has a maximum of six tourists, one official guide and one driver, with a maximum of two safaris – morning and afternoon (NTCA, 2012). Considering the current trend in tourist numbers in Koh Kong, around USD 5

million can be expected from entry fees, and a maximum of 960 persons on any given day, with a maximum peak tourism season of 180 days. The marketing of a quality experience would increase revenues and numbers of international tourists visiting the Cardamoms for tiger sightings. This could generate direct employment for approximately 160 people (e.g. drivers and guides) from local communities, while also creating substantial indirect employment across sectors such as vehicle maintenance, fuel supply, hospitality and food services, thereby supporting diversified livelihoods and strengthening incentives for wildlife conservation.

b. Wildlife levy: We use levy to mean an amount of money paid to a government (a tax) or organisation for a specified purpose. A wildlife levy, or the willingness to pay (WTP) of wildlife tourists, can be used to help sustain reintroductions and improve economic growth and environmental quality of an area (Israel & Levinson, 2004). It is important to distinguish between park entry fees, which may contribute to general government revenues, and wildlife levies, which are typically earmarked for conservation and community benefit-sharing mechanisms. The pricing strategy to visit a protected area is as important for protecting the tigers and wildlife as it is for the local economy (Samdin et al., 2010). All tourists visiting Koh Kong and the Cardamom Landscape should be asked to contribute USD 1 and USD 2 respectively per person per night as a wildlife levy for local and international tourists, respectively. Since more than 75 per cent of

tourists visit Koh Kong Province to experience nature, this would represent a small contribution for the protection of nature, and by generating an additional USD 100,000 per year will support the government to manage the natural assets in the long term. However, it is imperative that revenues generated from a wildlife levy are managed and governed transparently and used only for the management of protected areas and the development and protection of communities residing near these protected areas.

Tiger tourism projections and contribution to Cambodia’s economy

Building on trends from India and Nepal, the introduction of tiger tourism in the Cardamoms Landscape could generate more than USD 5 million annually within five years of tiger reintroduction. Realising the potential of wildlife-based tourism in the Cardamoms will require investment in basic infrastructure, including access roads, visitor facilities, trained guides and accommodation, alongside strengthening institutional arrangements for protected area management. With proper infrastructure, international marketing and strong enforcement, this could grow to over USD 7 million per year in the following decade, which can be used to cover the cost of law enforcement and protection for all protected areas in the province. These figures are based on comparable visitation and revenue streams reported for India’s Kanha and Nepal’s Chitwan tiger reserves. In Cambodia’s context, even a modest 10 per cent increase in international tourist stays and a rise in average stay duration (from three to five nights) due to tiger tourism could significantly boost regional economies. Local communities could benefit from over 300 new direct jobs (as guides, rangers and service staff), while indirect employment opportunities across transport, food and lodging sectors could reach several hundred more. A USD 1 wildlife levy per visitor is projected to generate an additional USD 300,000 annually in ten years or more, funding community conservation efforts and

improving protected area management. In the same timeframe, tiger tourism could contribute an estimated 1.5–2 per cent to Cambodia’s overall tourism GDP, making it a transformative economic and conservation strategy. With an increase in tourism products and sites across Koh Kong, it would be fruitful to apply and adhere to standards such as Community Based Ecotourism (CBET). Any developments of new hotels and guesthouses must be managed harmoniously with the natural assets that help to draw more tourists to the province, and therefore more revenues.

DISCUSSION

Cambodia has seen a positive surge in international tourist arrivals in 2024, significantly aiding the country’s economic growth. The tourism sector contributed 9.4 per cent to Cambodia’s GDP in 2024, making the sector one of the key drivers of the country’s economy (Ministry of Tourism, 2024). During 2024, Cambodia welcomed 6.7 million international tourists, a year-on-year increase of 22.9 per cent, and attracted 22.52 million domestic tourism movements, up 22 per cent from the year 2023. The influx of international tourists generated USD 3.637 billion, reflecting a year-on-year rise of 18 per cent. With effective and responsible marketing and enhanced tourism packages, the potential to increase revenues from tourism is immense. In a bid to attract more international tourists, particularly from China and other Southeast Asian countries, it might be worthwhile to create tour packages along the lines of ‘Beyond temples to forests and wildlife’ or ‘Angkor and tigers of Cambodia’. Currently regional tourists can only view tigers at the infamous (and illegal) tiger temples in Thailand. While there are few wild Indochinese and Malayan tigers left in Southeast Asia including in Thailand (~200 tigers, increasing), Myanmar (~22, decreasing) and Malaysia (<150, declining), sighting them in natural conditions is rare. With tiger reintroduction in Cambodia, and proper safari experiences, tourists will have an extra incentive to visit the country. The Royal Government of Cambodia will need to commit at the

Table 3. Summary of tiger tourism economic projections

Parameter	Projection (first 5 years)	Projection (10+ years)
Annual tiger tourism revenue	USD 5 million	USD 7+ million
Wildlife levy income	USD100,000 – USD 300,000	USD 300,000+
Direct jobs created	300+	500+
Indirect employment	500+	800+
Contribution to tourism GDP	1.5%	2% or more

Note: Projections are based on (i) observed tourism growth trends in Cambodia (2019–2024), (ii) Ministry of Tourism projections to 2030, and (iii) comparative benchmarks from established wildlife tourism destinations (e.g. India and Nepal), adjusted for Southeast Asian conditions. Estimates should be interpreted as indicative scenarios rather than precise forecasts.



Tiger release site © Jimmy Borah

highest levels and pay additional attention to policies of sustainable development. Millions of urban tourists in hubs across the region are within a two-hour flight of the Cardamoms, and could be directed towards Koh Kong, significantly boosting the province and the country’s revenues. This would require aggressive and appropriate marketing from the government as well as other stakeholders. The government should encourage product development to expand options for tourists beyond visiting temples, strengthen law enforcement, improve the quality of tourism products and services, and promote the market via digital platforms internationally.

Across Southeast Asia, protected areas such as Cat Tien and Bach Ma National Parks in Vietnam, Khao Yai, Kaeng Krachan, Kuiburi and Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary in Thailand, and Taman Negara in Malaysia provide useful examples of existing tourism infrastructure and visitor experiences. These sites typically offer a combination of basic to moderately developed infrastructure, including road access, visitor centres, guided tours, forest trails, and accommodation ranging from park lodges to nearby private facilities (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005; Lynam et al., 2013). Tourism in these landscapes is largely experience-based, focusing on trekking, birdwatching, river-based activities, and occasional wildlife encounters rather than guaranteed sightings of large carnivores (Buckley, 2010; Lynam et al., 2013). For instance, Khao Yai National Park represents a relatively well-developed tourism model with high visitation, while stricter protected areas such as Huai Kha Khaeng emphasise conservation-oriented

management with controlled access (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005). These examples highlight that, in tropical forest systems, tourism models are typically designed around broader nature experiences and regulated access, rather than high-certainty wildlife viewing, offering important lessons for developing tourism in the Cardamom Mountains Landscape.

Tiger tourism will create opportunities and income for local communities directly and indirectly. The income generated will therefore be useful to provide local socio-economic incentives and benefits, such as providing education for the host communities (Higginbottom et al., 2001; Orams, 1995). Besides education, other positive social impacts for local people could be employment, cultural exchanges, better sanitation facilities, improved health services, increased social interactions, entrepreneurship and more motivation towards wildlife conservation. Similarly, the local communities can benefit by promoting their local products and developing their skills in preservation of their culture.

A notable example of conservation-linked tourism in Cambodia is the community-based ecotourism model developed in the Cardamom Mountains with support from Wildlife Alliance. Since 2007, initiatives such as the Chi Phat ecotourism programme have successfully transitioned local communities from activities such as logging and poaching to sustainable livelihoods based on guiding, homestays and nature-based tourism. This model demonstrates how tourism can generate income while incentivising forest protection and wildlife conservation (ASEAN, 2026; Wildlife Alliance, 2024).

Wildlife tourism may also deter poachers through increased human activity (both rangers and tourists); however, its effectiveness as a deterrent to poaching depends on governance, enforcement capacity, and local socio-economic conditions (Banerjee, 2010; Buckley, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2016). Wildlife tourism should increase the value of a flourishing living ecosystem and maintain motivation for Cambodian park rangers. We believe that initiating tiger tourism will attract tourists to lengthen their stay in Cambodia and elevate Cambodia's image as a desirable tourist destination with exclusive wildlife experiences. It will also lift Cambodia's leaders to exceptional conservation heights for their role in restoring the tiger population and contributing to the global goal of doubling tiger numbers.

The findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. The projections are based on trend extrapolation and comparative benchmarks, and actual outcomes will depend on site-specific factors such as infrastructure development, governance effectiveness, and market dynamics. In particular, wildlife visibility in dense tropical forests may limit the immediate tourism appeal of tiger reintroduction compared to open landscapes in South Asia.

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RÉSUMÉ

Le secteur touristique cambodgien a connu une forte reprise après la pandémie, portée en grande partie par ses sites du patrimoine culturel de renommée mondiale. Le réseau d'aires protégées du pays et sa grande biodiversité offrent des possibilités de diversification au-delà du tourisme culturel. Cet article évalue le potentiel de la réintroduction du tigre – en particulier dans le paysage des montagnes des Cardamomes – pour catalyser une nouvelle économie touristique durable axée sur la faune sauvage. Le Cambodge a accueilli 6.7 millions de visiteurs internationaux en 2024, générant 3.6 milliards de dollars américains – des chiffres qui soulignent l'importance d'explorer de nouveaux produits touristiques. Cette étude estime que le tourisme axé sur les tigres dans les Cardamomes pourrait générer entre 5 et 7 millions de dollars américains par an d'ici une décennie, créer de nombreux emplois locaux et contribuer jusqu'à 2 pour cent du PIB national lié au tourisme. Des mécanismes complémentaires – tels que des taxes sur la faune sauvage, un zonage réglementé des safaris, des modèles d'écotourisme communautaire et une gouvernance solide – pourraient garantir un partage équitable des bénéfices et une viabilité financière à long terme. En intégrant la conservation de la biodiversité à une expansion touristique stratégique, la réintroduction des tigres offre au Cambodge une occasion unique de faire revivre une espèce disparue, de stimuler les économies rurales et de se positionner comme une destination d'écotourisme en Asie du Sud-Est.

RESUMEN

El sector turístico de Camboya ha experimentado una sólida recuperación tras la pandemia, impulsada en gran medida por sus lugares de interés cultural de renombre mundial. La red de áreas protegidas del país y su elevada biodiversidad ofrecen oportunidades para la diversificación más allá del turismo cultural. Este artículo evalúa el potencial de la reintroducción del tigre —concretamente en el paisaje de las Montañas del Cardamomo— para impulsar una nueva economía turística sostenible basada en la fauna silvestre. Camboya recibió 6.7 millones de visitantes internacionales en 2024, lo que generó 3.6 millones de dólares estadounidenses, cifras que subrayan la importancia de explorar productos turísticos adicionales. Este estudio estima que el turismo basado en los tigres en las Cardamomos podría generar entre 5 y 7 millones de dólares estadounidenses al año en el plazo de una década, crear un número significativo de puestos de trabajo locales y contribuir con hasta un 2 por ciento del PIB turístico nacional. Mecanismos complementarios —como tasas sobre la fauna silvestre, la zonificación regulada de los safaris, modelos de ecoturismo comunitarios y una gobernanza sólida— podrían garantizar una distribución equitativa de los beneficios y la sostenibilidad financiera a largo plazo. Al integrar la conservación de la biodiversidad con la expansión estratégica del turismo, la reintroducción del tigre ofrece a Camboya una oportunidad única para recuperar una especie perdida, estimular las economías rurales y posicionarse como destino de ecoturismo en el Sudeste Asiático.

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