A Temple Reborn: Conserving Preah Khan, Angkor, Cambodia
In 1989, at the invitation of the Cambodian government, the World Monuments Fund embarked on an ambitious, multidisciplinary conservation effort at Angkor—one of the first of its kind undertaken by Western experts after nearly two decades of civil unrest.

WMF discovered that, while the monuments themselves had been spared, few conservation specialists had survived—the country was faced with the challenge of caring for its magnificent cultural patrimony.

For the Cambodian people, Angkor is a touchstone of the past and a basis on which to build a future. Conserving the monuments of Angkor is crucial for peace and prosperity in this country that has suffered so much. WMF strives to create economic sustainability by providing jobs, expertise, and positive international relations. We hope all who are interested in Angkor will join us in the effort to safeguard this fragile and majestic place.

—John H. Stubbs, *Vice President of Programs*
World Monuments Fund, 2003
Angkor, a vast Hindu-Buddhist temple complex in north-central Cambodia, is among the most magnificent architectural wonders of Southeast Asia. Founded more than a millennium ago, this ancient city was the one-time seat of the mighty Khmer Empire, which ruled most of the region between the ninth and fifteenth centuries A.D. For all its splendor, the site, spread over more than 310 square kilometers, was all but lost to the Western world until French archaeologists began excavating in the early years of the twentieth century. With the outbreak of war in the 1970s and subsequent takeover of the country by the Khmer Rouge, all work ceased and the city gradually succumbed to the will of the jungle.

One of the most important monuments at Angkor is the twelfth-century monastic complex of Preah Khan (Sacred Sword). Since 1991, WMF has concentrated its efforts on the temple complex, using it as a proving ground for innovations in conservation and as a classroom to teach a new generation of experts in preservation.
Commissioned by Jayavarman VII in 1191, Preah Khan occupies .5 square kilometers, with four concentric enclosure walls that embrace a labyrinth of shrines, courts, halls, and pavilions. A monument to religious tolerance, Preah Khan has sections dedicated to Buddhism, Hinduism, and veneration of ancestors. Its most important elements are the Vishnu Complex, the Two-Story Pavilion, the Hall of Dancers, the Dharmasala, and the 72 monumental sandstone Garudas (guardian birdmen).

When WMF began work, Preah Khan was little more than a jumble of fallen stones and structures on the brink of collapse—the result of years of neglect, jungle vegetation encroachment, and water damage. Eschewing major reconstruction due to the lack of historical data, the magnitude of the task, and the questionable philosophical nature of such an invasive approach, conservators chose instead to stabilize the site and preserve it as a partial ruin.
Prior to any stabilization, stones were measured, drawn, and number-coded. As conservation began, the team adopted a low-tech approach using steel scaffolding, block-and-tackle hoists, and hydraulic jacks to move stones.

For more than a decade, work has proceeded at Preah Khan, uninterrupted by political conflict. Since then, the principal East Entrance was reopened to visitors, the Hall of Dancers saved from collapse, and the Dharmasala and East Gopura stabilized.

Today, WMF’s work at Angkor extends to the gallery at Angkor Wat and the diminutive temple of Ta Som. All projects are staffed and managed by Cambodia architects, archaeologists, conservators, and workers trained in site conservation. In addition, WMF built a site-interpretation center at Preah Khan and established a comprehensive maintenance program.
World Monuments Fund

World Monuments Fund is the foremost private international non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of architecture and works of art whose loss or destruction would impoverish humankind. Founded in 1965, World Monuments Fund is headquartered in New York City with international affiliates. Through a program of fieldwork, grant-making, educational programs, and advocacy, it brings public and private support together to preserve or rescue monuments worldwide.

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