

INTRODUCTION:

FINDING A BALANCE

World Heritage Sites are the planet's outstanding attractions, the greatest monuments from the past. They are contemporary tourism magnets and national icons that continue to influence present values. They are treasures in the fullest and deepest sense. They must be managed in such a way that they are preserved for future generations and at the same time presently made accessible to the public for its education and enjoyment. Finding the proper balance between these two demands is the difficult and important task of World Heritage Site managers.

The World Heritage List results from a global treaty that seeks to identify, recognize and protect places that are of "outstanding universal value." There are two main categories: man-made sites and natural sites. The man-made sites are often referred to as cultural sites, or historic sites, and they are the subject of this book. They include archaeological sites, ruins, or intact structures still in use today or adapted for a new use. In contrast to natural heritage sites which were formed by natural forces, cultural heritage sites contain the physical evidence of outstanding examples of human creativity or of important historic events. They provide a unique record of momentous achievements that puts the witness in direct contact with an otherwise invisible time.

Only in a few cases around the world is there sufficient national money allocated for educating and hiring staff for the professional care, maintenance, and presentation of these great places. Yet glamorous pictures of World Heritage Sites are used in national tourism marketing efforts, and visitors flock to them. Tourism earns hard currency and is the darling of national finance ministers. Conservation, however, is usually the last line-item to be included in national budgets and the first line-item to be cut.

In the context of modern developments in world tourism, this imbalance of concerns requires immediate redress. In the year 1991, there were 450 million international tourist arrivals worldwide. In the year 2000, the figure is expected to rise to 650 million. The pressure on World Heritage Sites can only be expected to increase. When they were built, most of these sites were not meant for large numbers of people, and certainly they were not meant to accommodate large numbers of tourists.

The management of World Heritage Sites is a crucial issue. This book is devoted to helping the managers of World Heritage Sites accomplish a dual purpose: to conserve the site given to their care, and to provide meaningful and considerate access to as many visitors as the site can allow. In order to do this, site managers must work in partnership with professionals in the fields of planning, community development and tourism.

These professionals comprise a large network that penetrates into virtually every sector of society. It is important to be aware of the extent of this network,

because it provides the connection between the World Heritage Sites and the visitors who go to them. In general, this network of professionals work in planning, research, development, marketing and education. We need their skills and their friendship.

There are investors, developers, architects, insurance companies and economic analysts who do much of their work behind the scenes. There are writers, consultants and academics whose careers revolve around the world of travel. There are suppliers who provide for every need -- from uniforms and air conditioners to toothpicks and telephones. Trainers prepare chefs, airline pilots, managers and computer operators to do their jobs. Public officials serve agencies that issue licenses, collect taxes and regulate standards. Others drive buses, do laundry, mix drinks and park cars. This whole universe of working people that guides the engine of the tourism industry is what makes it possible for people to visit World Heritage at all.

Conservation Precedes Tourism

This book makes a critical and fundamental assumption: that conservation precedes tourism. Conservation is a separate and prior activity that prepares the way for tourism development. If conservation planning is successful, then acceptable, dignified and profitable tourism will follow. By setting the right tone, conservation can contribute to the financial and social progress of a country in partnership with tourism. Once conservators have defined the limitations of visitor access to a site, tourism professionals can help to attract visitors, manage their stay and generate income for the continued conservation, protection, interpretation and maintenance of the site.

It is not easy to create such a balance, especially because conservation and tourism are in many respects opposite kinds of endeavors. Generally speaking, conservators preserve and tourists consume. There is a way to create a bridge between the two. This is by developing the concept and practice of comprehensive planning in relation to World Heritage Sites.

Cultural Tourism

The meaning of cultural tourism has changed over the last two centuries. From 1750-1850, cultural tourism referred to the practice of traveling around Europe to study the fine arts. The sons of aristocrats would do a grand tour in the company of tutors, and they would return home a "cultured" person. In the subsequent century, cultural tourism was adopted by merchants who traveled in order to develop "class." And finally, in the present era of jet plane mass-travel, "cultural tourism" has become a popular phrase that has been abused.

At its worst, cultural tourism has taken on a sanctimonious meaning, standing for all that is good and constructive in tourism, involving music, the arts and ethnic exchange. It distinguishes itself from bad and destructive tourism which sells the allure of beaches and the satisfaction of the cravings of the body. Yet this definition is too moralistic to be useful. The same person may one day visit a World Heritage Site and the next day be found relaxing on a beach.

Rather, cultural tourism, also known as "niche" tourism, can today be defined more functionally -- that is, by what it does and how. Firstly, cultural tourism is small, well-managed, educational and frequently up-market tourism. It offers a special kind of visit for a person with a special kind of interest. It is not wide-ranging, mass-tourism but tourism dedicated to presenting or explaining some cultural idea. In the case of World Heritage Sites, the cultural ideas are expressed in the monuments and surrounding locations.

"Cultural tourists" or niche travelers themselves are a particular kind of people. They tend to be environmentally conscious, politically open-minded and appreciative of differences. They probably travel frequently, are highly educated and bring a sharp intellectual and friendly energy to their encounters with foreign cultures. They do not buy souvenirs but prefer handicrafts and learning about or seeing how they are made. They don't mind modest means of transportation if it is taking them to some remarkable place, and they don't mind a small, local hotel as long as it is clean. They also don't mind spending money as long as they get value in return. They are refined customers with a love of excellence, a taste for the authentic, and they do not tolerate mediocrity.

Some destinations have a direct link with the history that lends them international fame -- for example, the great churches in the Philippines are still in daily use. Other places have a more tenuous link -- the Acropolis has little relationship to the contemporary religious or social structure of modern Greece. Still, Athens, along with Rome, Venice and Istanbul, has been a classic destination for niche travelers. Egypt has been attracting niche travelers to its archaeological wonders. The terra cotta soldiers of Xian have been attracting this same breed of voyager to China. Everywhere the opportunities for developing cultural tourism are expanding, and World Heritage Sites offer particularly fertile ground.

Niche travelers come in small numbers, they spend a healthy sum of money, and they leave. They are, as a group, therefore highly desirable as visitors to the often fragile contexts of World Heritage Sites. To satisfy niche travelers, however, will require not only the patient work of the conservationist but also the experience of the tourism expert to provide the quality service that niche travelers require.

Limiting the Number of Visitors

World Heritage Site managers must anticipate the world's continued rapid population growth and the continued growth of the travel industry. They must recognize that the sites entrusted to their care will remain the same size. This means that the number of visitors has to be controlled. But how?

Hearst Castle, situated in a relatively remote part of California provides one instructive example. From the very day of its opening, the site was managed with a reservation admission system. Tickets were issued for a particular time and a particular day, and they were expensive. Hearst Castle is a public state park, but its managers had no hesitancy in limiting the number of visitors and raising prices to cover expenses.

In too many countries the priorities are reversed: tourism is being promoted before conservation. Many World Heritage Sites are in countries that simply do not have either the money or the expertise to meet international conservation standards. Even when there is a national awareness, financial support for even

minimal conservation is 15 or 20 years away. There are too many other needs on the national agenda. These countries need an interim plan that will initiate basic conservation steps. They need to match this plan with a tourism plan that promotes their World Heritage Sites as magnets for only limited tourism.

Such a plan of action would help conserve the sites for future generations, allow access and appreciation among the present generations. Such a plan of action would help generate income for the national economy without endangering the national patrimony. In the future, World Heritage Sites may become the high-priced, hard-to-get-into attractions in the tourism world. *

By definition, World Heritage Sites are the world's greatest cultural attractions and undisputedly of unique significance. These sites represent the precious remains of the highest achievements of humankind through the ages. **

The World Heritage Convention requires that nations not only protect, conserve and rehabilitate World Heritage Sites; it also requires that these sites be given a function in the life of the community. The point is not to place these treasures under lock and key but to make them safely part of the fabric of life. There is a dilemma here that re-emphasizes the need for balance: old sites, residents, new numbers of visitors. This handbook is meant to help World Heritage Site managers take a step in that direction.

(For a discussion of the economics of conservation, see the companion volume prepared for this General Assembly.)

** See Appendix A for the criteria for election onto the World Heritage List as established in the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.