

Developing Guiding Principles and Policies for World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism – A Major UNESCO World Heritage Centre Initiative

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Abstract: This paper presents a mid term progress report on a ground breaking project that is at the very heart of how ICOMOS protects and transmits the tangible and intangible values of heritage places and the communities who sustain them. The 18 month UNESCO World Heritage Centre project brings together the conservation and tourism sectors to generate shared and sustainable policies, guidelines and methods to ensure that tourism activities contribute to the protection and conservation of World Heritage sites. For the first time, a number of major international agencies including UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), ICOMOS, IUCN, ICCROM, The Nature Conservancy and the World Bank have joined UNESCO and representatives of the Tourism Private Sector to craft common tourism and visitor management principles. These will be used by all participants to improve the management of tourism at World Heritage sites. Such sites will become best practice exemplars for other heritage places throughout the world. This is a project of great importance for ICOMOS as it considers ways to protect and enhance the *Spirit of Place* from increasing tourism pressures at heritage places.

Introduction

One of the most significant developments in relation to the work of ICOMOS in conserving Cultural Heritage and enhancing the *Spirit of Place* is emerging through a project initiated by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre; *Developing Guiding Principles and Policies for World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism*. Although only at its midpoint, this project has a direct and powerful relationship to the main themes of the International Symposium held in Quebec as part of the ICOMOS General Assembly, particularly Sub Theme 3, which explores mechanisms for *Safeguarding and Transmitting the Spirit of Place*.

The theme of the ICOMOS Symposium, “Finding the Spirit of Place” opens a new chapter in the international work of ICOMOS with regard to the conservation of the world’s cultural heritage. While there is a significant material component to the *Spirit of Place*, one that is inherent in the physical remains of monuments, historic places and cultural landscapes, another, equally powerful component must be considered – the human transaction that goes to the very heart of finding, understanding, appreciating, enjoying and ultimately sustaining that *Spirit of Place*. This human transaction is the core of the future challenge for ICOMOS as it strives to protect, sustain and conserve in a comprehensive manner the tangible and intangible characteristics that combine to create the *Spirit of Place*.

The human dimension of cultural heritage management was recognised by ICOMOS as part of the 1999 *ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism*

Charter, “Cultural heritage is seen as a dynamic reference point for daily life, social growth and change. It is a major source of social capital and is an expression of diversity and community identity.”

The *Charter* also recognised the important role of tourism and public engagement with cultural heritage as a key activity in communicating the *Spirit of Place* to people from the host community and elsewhere. “Domestic and international tourism is one of the foremost vehicles of cultural exchange, providing personal experience of that which has survived from the past as well as the contemporary life and society of others. Reasonable and well managed access to cultural development and cultural heritage is both a human right and a privilege. It brings with it a duty of respect on the part of the visitor. Interpretation or presentation, play an important role in making the cultural heritage accessible to people.”

Finally, the *Charter* stressed the critical role played by the human transaction in working towards the ultimate goals of ICOMOS and the wider conservation community. “A major reason for undertaking the protection, conservation and management of heritage places, the intangible heritage and collections is to make their significance physically and/or intellectually accessible to the host community and to visitors. Unless there is public awareness and public support for cultural heritage places, the whole conservation process will be marginalised and not gain the critical levels of funding or public and political support so necessary for its survival.”

Domestic and international visitors to a heritage place have the potential to be its greatest champions for safeguarding its *Spirit of Place*. Visitors and local people who experience a place and absorb its *Spirit* often develop a strong interest that extends well beyond their actual visit. In his keynote address, *Enhancing Travel Experiences, Making a difference in the World, Your Travellers and Institutions*, to the Educational Travel Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, USA (February 22, 2007), Dr Sam H Ham quoted the eloquence of Mr Sven Lindblad, a successful operator of cruise ship travel in the Galapagos Islands, when he said; ‘Ultimately, it will be the insistence and passion of the traveller that will save the special places on earth.’

Dr Ham continued, ‘These people represent an army of potential spokespersons, defenders and constituents of a sane and healthy planet. And sufficiently moved by their travel experiences to any given place, each of them is capable of acting in behalf of, or even in defence of, that place, whether its while they’re there or long after they return home.’

To fulfil its ultimate mission, ICOMOS has an inherent responsibility to contribute to the relationship between people and places that takes place through the mechanism of travel. The *UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism* project provides ICOMOS with an enormous opportunity to make a powerful contribution to this important mechanism.

Shared International Objectives

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre attaches overriding importance to the development of sound and sustainable tourism policies and practices to ensure that tourism activity contributes to the protection and conservation of heritage sites and the communities that sustain them. In developing the *World Heritage*

and Sustainable Tourism Project the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and the UN World Tourism Organisation recognise that World Heritage sites cannot be successfully conserved without proactively responding to the challenges of increasing tourist visitation and the broader humanitarian context.

They have jointly identified a suite of initiatives to make tourism more sustainable within the context of the human transaction between visitors and the *Spirit of Place*.

These include:

- Raising World Heritage awareness to build community support for conservation
- Economic, education and employment opportunities derived from tourism
- Empowering of local communities in decision making and conservation activities
- Poverty Alleviation, particularly in the communities that sustain heritage places
- Capturing diverse and innovative funding sources for site conservation
- Building the capacity of World Heritage Site management in tourism related issues
- Developing tools and techniques for tourism management at World Heritage sites.
- Integrating comprehensive tourism management with the Operational Guidelines of the World Heritage Convention.

This suite of initiatives clearly demonstrates the broader socio-economic and development context in which the relationship between heritage conservation and tourism is regarded at the international level. International development agencies such as the World Bank are deeply interested in the potential for heritage and tourism to contribute to their wider social and economic objectives.

For the first time, this UNESCO project brings together all of the major international leadership stakeholders in the relationship between tourism and World Heritage Sites. Together they are moving to a new level of cooperation and a shared commitment to protect the *Spirit of Place*. The UNESCO World Heritage Centre is combining with its Advisory Bodies ICOMOS and the World Conservation Union (IUCN), with the UN World Tourism Organisation, The World Bank, ICCROM, The Nature Conservancy and with key representatives of the Tourism Private Sector to develop a common vision and set of guiding principles and working tools to implement that vision. The relationship between tourism and conservation extends well beyond places inscribed on the World Heritage List. However for the purpose of the project, World Heritage sites are regarded as the exemplars of the issue, having the capacity to become beacons of best practice management.

Concurrently, and again for perhaps the first time in such a structured manner, the human transaction with the *Spirit of Place* of World Heritage listed natural heritage places, cultural heritage places, places of mixed values and cultural landscapes are being jointly considered by ICOMOS and IUCN. For too long these two major UNESCO advisory bodies have tended to confine themselves to their own fields of interest. A realisation of shared values and

objectives is bringing ICOMOS and IUCN to the *UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Project* in a spirit of unity and mutual cooperation.

The *UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Project* is responding to one of the key lessons learned from past initiatives - the need for a deep engagement with the tourism sector, especially the tourism private sector. This engagement is required to find mutually applicable solutions to site management problems and to utilise the tourism sector to sensitise visitors and their own personnel on World Heritage issues and on low impact ways to visit fragile sites. Engagement is also important to help aid local tourism enterprises. Providing communities in and around World Heritage sites with enhanced livelihoods from tourism can reduce threats to heritage values and build local conservation constituencies.

The author, in his role as President of the ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee, is the official ICOMOS representative on the Project.

Tourism: A Threat or Opportunity for Conserving the *Spirit of Place*?

Protecting and managing the *Spirit of Place* is no longer the exclusive domain of technically trained professional conservation practitioners and heritage focussed academics. The “democratisation” of heritage means that the tangible and intangible characteristics of heritage places are of considerable interest and value to the wider global community. The inscription of a place on the World Heritage List signifies that it “belongs” to both the host community within the particular State Party and to humanity at large. While protection and conservation are a fundamental responsibility within the World Heritage Convention, so too is the equivalent responsibility for the significance of the place to be transmitted to the visiting public and through other media to the wider community.

Tourism has become one of the world’s biggest economic and social activities. In 2007 there were an estimated 900 million international arrivals and at least five times that number of domestic tourists, world wide, although a visit to many of the major heritage places in Europe or Asia indicates that at some sites domestic visitors can outnumber international travellers by ten, twenty or fifty times. The UN World Tourism Organisation expects that tourism will continue to grow exponentially, reinforcing the critical need to manage it in a responsible manner. Places of natural and cultural heritage, whether formally protected or not, and the lifestyles of traditional communities throughout the world are increasingly becoming the focus of visits by more than just those people who are classified as “cultural tourists”. The great challenge for both the conservation and the tourism sectors is to harness this enormous energy for the conservation of the heritage resources that form the core experiences of so much travel activity.

The ultimate challenge for the conservation community is that the 858 World Heritage sites spread over 145 countries are some of the world’s most seductive and most heavily marketed tourism attractions. The dynamic growth in tourism at World Heritage sites is generating important challenges on how to respond to the public’s demand for access while protecting the Outstanding Universal Values for which they were inscribed. Some 25% of recent State of Conservation reports to the World Heritage Committee indicate that poor tourism management is a problem.

Tourism development brings a concentration of public use to places where this was never contemplated historically. The need to both protect and present sites generates major challenges for all parties in the complex and challenging balance of competing or overlapping goals and responsibilities. Carefully coordinated planning and cooperative decision making are required. Clear objectives for both conservation and tourism must be formulated between the parties and supported by all stakeholders in the process.

A Challenge for ICOMOS

An informal email survey within the ICOMOS community, undertaken in February 2008 by the author as preparation for the first Project Workshop, reinforced an overwhelming priority that the protection of heritage values far outweighed any obligation or opportunity to present and communicate heritage places to the visiting public, if by so doing the heritage values were degraded.

Many of those actively involved in the conservation of the physical cultural heritage have a background as architects, archaeologists, historians or as technical or scientific researchers. They have tended to regard cultural heritage within a framework of immovable material space, which is rooted in the characteristics of a particular place and imbued with the spirit of past, often lost societies or social practices. The implementation of the World Heritage Convention reinforced and consolidated a focus on material culture, the physical expression of heritage values and on memorializing the achievements of past societies. There remains a widely held priority on the “traditional” with its inherent concern about the intrusion of the “modern” into those values.

Accordingly there has been a strong concentration in the conservation community to emphasise and prioritise physical protection over human interaction. In this context, the presence of visitors is widely regarded as a threat to the heritage values of the place. It is reasonable to assume that to a large extent those involved in the conservation of nature and natural heritage places also emphasise the protection of the physical characteristics and natural systems.

There needs to be a broader approach within the conservation community away from just managing heritage places primarily as self contained physical space to one which includes the whole range of contemporary social, political, intellectual and economic forces that shape modern life – to a sort of social-cultural landscape, rather than just a physical-cultural landscape. These influences are inevitably not confined to a local level. There is a need to look beyond the site to the national and even global level to examine contemporary tourism as one of the key social, economic and political forces that converge on heritage landscapes.

The informal survey generated a strong call for a major paradigm shift in the relationship between the heritage conservation and tourism sectors. A great deal needs to be done before the tourism policymaking and planning bring lasting opportunities to safeguard heritage places and their *Spirit of Place*. The conservation community needs to do more to transmit the heritage as an essential repository of cultural diversity and knowledge for future generations. We have not yet sufficiently brought the lessons learned from heritage into the development discourse. Equally we have yet to learn how to harness the energies of the tourism sector as a contributing force for heritage.

The conservation world must engage actively with the tourism sector to develop shared understanding and shared outcomes that can motivate the tourism private sector to regard heritage places as assets to be conserved as well as utilized.

A Challenge for the Tourism Private Sector

In the context of this project, it is important to distinguish between the Tourism Private Sector and the Visitor who actually comes to the heritage site. The tourism sector facilitates the choice of the destination and the journey to the heritage site. With the exception of on-site tour guides and transportation providers, it is typically the visitor, traveller or tourist who actually experiences the site.

The Tourism Private Sector is characterised by an interactive combination of small or local service providers and regional, national or international, transportation, accommodation and reservation organisations. The sector is service oriented, highly dynamic, competitive and typically profit driven. It is subject to the extremes and fluctuations of fashion, prejudice and curiosity, climactic conditions and natural forces, perceptions of security and public safety, and above all by competitive pricing. It is widely diversified across many sectors including transportation, hospitality and accommodation, food and beverage, merchandise retailing, entertainment and information, and property development. The broad Tourism Sector embraces all forms of public and private organisational structures, motivations and anticipated outcomes.

While the Tourism Private Sector is economically focussed and will naturally exploit available resources for its own outcomes, there is a growing awareness in the sector of the need to sustain natural and cultural heritage resources for its own long term survival. However are the majority so focussed on the competitive pressures of the tourism supply chain that the final impact by the visitor on the heritage site is of little interest or concern? Does the property developer, hotel manager or bus driver in the nearby township really care about the same issues as the heritage site manager? There is of course no single answer. A far greater dialogue between the conservation and tourism sectors will determine among other things how tourism operators regard cultural or natural heritage values and the qualities that contribute to heritage sites.

Key Outcome: A Paradigm Shift in the Relationship between Tourism and Heritage

Something very special happened during the first Workshop, in March 2008, at the World Heritage listed Arc et Senans historic site in south eastern France. Representatives from a range of professional, public sector and commercial organisations across the whole spectrum of heritage and tourism came together to create a shared commitment to advance common goals.

The four major outcomes of the first workshop can be summarised as follows:

1. There is now a shared agreement that both the tourism and conservation sectors regard heritage places and their multiple values as long term

assets that must be protected and conserved to ensure the sustainability of their respective objectives.

2. The concept that tourism simply exploits heritage sites was reversed to one where tourism should be an active contributor to the conservation of heritage places. This represents a change from the concept of “carrying capacity” to “caring capacity”.
3. There was change from the mindset within the Tourism Private Sector away from creating public assets for private gain towards joint engagement of private enterprise and public policy to contribute to the provision of infrastructure that can enhance local community livelihoods, while serving tourism demand.
4. There was a realisation that heritage sites cannot be managed only within the confines of their legal boundaries. Site management needs to engage with such issues as protecting buffer zones and safeguarding the character of nearby Destinations. It should be aware of social, political and economic frameworks, of infrastructure, environmental management and cultural traditions, tourism activity and visitor expectations in the broader local or regional context. Site management must consider its relationship to the whole Tourism Supply Chain.

The first Workshop focussed on “Creating an Enabling Environment”, hence the importance of the outcomes detailed above. In addition to developing a strong sense of mutual cooperation, the Workshop examined issues such as Site Planning, Site Financing and Licensing for Concessions.

A Key Role for ICOMOS in Tourism Management at World Heritage Sites

The *UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism* Project provides a unique opportunity for ICOMOS to engage with a process that brings together all of the major stakeholders in the conservation and tourism sectors to develop a shared vision for the protection and transmission of the world’s natural and cultural heritage. The ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee has actively committed itself to the project and to contributing to the development of a new compact between stakeholders.

The emerging comprehensive approach is thus a key initiative for ICOMOS as it seeks to protect and enhance the *Spirit of Place*. There are many areas where ICOMOS can contribute to good tourism management at World Heritage sites.

Tourism at World Heritage sites cannot be managed in isolation. Tourism is characterised by a long supply chain, commencing when someone decides to visit a place and finishing when they eventually arrive. Tourism management for World Heritage sites needs to shift from self contained site conservation to the sustainable use of heritage resources. It needs to regard the site as a component or end point of the Tourism Supply Chain. Site management needs to take an interest in the development of visitor expectations and in the quality of the experience as visitors move through the local destination and onto the site. It is essential for site management to consider and respond to issues and opportunities outside the boundaries of the site, to cooperate with local and regional agencies in the development of policies and programmes that are integrated with a broader context. Good destination planning and management is

critical to ensure that the special features of the World Heritage site do not to stand in direct contrast with the degradation of urban, natural and scenic qualities in the surrounding cultural landscape.

The UNESCO Project continues for another year. The next workshop, to be held in Switzerland in late October 2008, will concentrate on enhancing the visitor experience. The last, to be held in India in early 2009, will examine the issue of community benefit. The project will conclude with a major public event in the later half of 2009.

This is a project for which ICOMOS should give its full hearted support.