

"World Heritage and Tourism Challenges and Opportunities"

Presentation by:
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I'd first like to thank the Ministry of Education and Culture for inviting me to speak today at this 40th World Heritage Anniversary celebration; it's much appreciated and very flattering. What I'll be speaking to you today about is World Heritage and Tourism and some of the Challenges and Opportunities presented by this issue. (Slide 1)

I'm sure some of you have reflected on the key challenges how the push and pull of conservation and tourism development seems so many times to be in conflict.

Maybe you have also contemplated as I have, what inscription of a property does for visitor numbers; I used to think that it drove the site instantly to become a major tourist attraction. Get on the list and there is enough promotional punch in the World Heritage status so that tourists will come flocking. In fact, I used to get calls from the press all the time asking about the danger of escalating visitor numbers that inscription will cause. I still think that many governments see World Heritage status as a passport to economic stimulus through tourism.

But just to go a little deeper, acknowledging that tourism pressures at many World Heritage sites are certainly real, what we have found out is that the situation is far more complex.

Research shows that site inscription doesn't necessarily bring hoards of people to a property; some sites do experience increases but it is hard to pin it on World Heritage, there are so many other externalities. Also we know that at some sites visitor numbers remain stagnant others can even decrease.

What we know now is that for tourism development, World Heritage status in and of itself isn't enough; a site must be motivated and organized, have a clear direction and strategy to exploit the status; as well as more importantly the right stuff, infrastructure, transport, accommodation and a programme of investments.

Also we know that there are different motivations for using the status. Some governments are concerned with economic development, but others may be concerned with using the status for building civic pride, or to use it to promote the conservation of a certain monument that is important to cultural identity for a region or the nation. Some might not think through at all in great detail why they are inscribing a property.

So what we have found is that World Heritage designation is what you make of it, consciously deciding how to leverage the status to meet management challenges and unlock opportunities.

But to come back to the challenges of tourism which is something I'm to mention; we know of course there are many. Lots of World Heritage sites face growing visitation, resulting in an increase of congestion from people and vehicles. This goes along with inappropriate infrastructure possibly affecting the site's Outstanding Universal Value, as well as uncontrolled buffer zone development, damaging the sense of place at the property and in the neighboring local communities.

Adding to this are the challenges for management staff. Particularly in the developing world, protected area systems can be severely underfunded, management teams may not be trained in visitor management methods, management plans and tourism strategies many times don't get implemented.

And if we are to believe the UN World Tourism Organization, the pressures will mount. International tourism is expected to double in the next 15 to 20 years.

So we clearly have our work cut out for us to better address these challenges and it would be useful to figure out how World Heritage status can be leveraged to better help us do this.

It's not an easy task, research shows us that tourism impacts are complicated, difficult to sort out. For example, with sustainable communities which is a major theme of these 40th anniversary activities, we know that, communities are not uniform, some communities are more resilient and resistant to tourism pressures than others, some members may support tourism, others might find it offensive.

I've always thought the Sherpas of Nepal a country where Finland has many projects provide a good example of a group of people that have used tourism for great benefit but have kept their culture intact.

Socially we know that different user groups have different tolerances for crowding. Many people are not bothered with a more developed approach to heritage, other of course want less.

Environmental impacts from tourism are also not straightforward. It turns out the relationship between visitor numbers and many environmental impacts are curvilinear. A little bit of use results in disproportionately high impacts. Conversely, for areas already experiencing high visitor use, use increases may have little additional impact.

For example, at a desert environment such as Wadi Rum, in Jordan, where I just came back from, additional vehicles may not add much damage to an already

impacted driving track. In fact, because of this curvilinear relationship with some impacts we may be able to increase visitor numbers without much further damage at all. Of course we change the visitor experience if we do that.

At cultural sites, like cathedrals and museums, to protect the resource and to accommodate more visitors we can do things like construct barriers and more walkways to harden the site, but again when we do this we also change the visitor experience.

All this leads to a key point in this talk, that most of the big challenges confronting protected area management and tourism development are driven by conflicts in values rather than disputes over science or technical questions. Values which are sometimes shared but lots of times as we know they are in competition.

What this means is that technical – supposedly science driven approaches, like carrying capacity, even though many times these questions are framed within the notion that there is some definite tourism carrying capacity number, can't effectively address these value-based issues.

Questions like what is appropriate visitor experience for a particular World Heritage site or what are the appropriate limits of acceptable change for tourism infrastructure development, or what do we really mean by sustainable tourism? These are all political and policy questions.

So getting back to the notion that World Heritage is what you make of it, how might we better leverage it to help us with these sorts of issues?

Well I've always believed World Heritage can be a great help, otherwise I'd be reluctant to be up here speaking to you today. For example, I've always thought processes such as the World Heritage inscription process offer us tremendous potential. Why couldn't the inscription process, a two year long exercise, be used more as one of the great management tools in helping us engage different interest groups to gain more clarity and make tourism related value judgments explicit; and also to search for joint areas of mutual interest to unlock opportunities?

I saw it happening at Wadi Rum, just recently, where World Heritage inscription influenced reflection on what are appropriate experiences for visitors at this site. After inscription the Jordanians are calling it the "New" Wadi Rum meaning that they are using World Heritage status as a way to try and reorient tourism to the more culturally focused markets.

I'll mention a number of things that might encourage this sort of reflection during the inscription process and even post inscription.

UNESCO and the Advisory Bodies could be explicit about pointing out that tourism demands are many times value based decisions and not technically driven by a carrying capacity number.

With this in mind, there could be more specific guidance on the more robust planning frameworks that we have, substitutes for carrying capacity. These could be better packaged and presented for consumption during inscription. Metsähallitus here in Finland uses these more advanced planning frameworks, could Finland do more to help developing countries in planning for tourism during inscription?

Also World Heritage could provide information and guidance on working approaches that promote the positive linkages between, protected area management, communities and the tourism industry. For example, if there's interest in heritage tourism-led economic development then one process to bring interests together might be cooperation though identifying, and prioritizing in addition to the site up for inscription, other regional cultural and natural heritage tourism-related assets. We did this post inscription in the region of Hoi An and My Son World Heritage sites in Vietnam. I also refer you to the experiences in the Douro Valley of Portugal and the trans-national Crown of the Continent site in Canada and the US, using techniques National Geographic Maps have developed to link and promote heritage assets.

The inscription process may also open discussions that focus on the value laden questions of establishing criteria and indicators for a sustainable destination or region. For example, discussions might suggest as an objective to have a small percentage of the profits from individual businesses going back into a World Heritage regional development fund or foundation. In exchange for this donation, by these contributing businesses, they could be promoted by a regional web mechanism.

Another process might include a robust analysis of the potential of different communities, and the development support needed, to create the heritage-related products capable of unlocking greater value. We know that this market may yield substantial economic benefits.

The process of working to develop local brands and marketing that is specifically targeted at cultural visitors is important. The World Heritage site at Cinque Terre in Italy, is working with agricultural producers to find ways to add value to products, and to get visitors to spend more on local high quality food. This has kept the young people in the area and the terraces intact at the site. These types of actions helping to motivate and bring together both economic and social interests could be jumpstarted during inscription.

On generating community investment, heritage funders suggest that they are more willing to invest in projects if there is a strategy that spells out how different

sites or heritage assets can compliment each other to create storylines that lure visitors across the landscape, this creates an even greater market potential.

Creating these shared story lines or interpretation messages could be a complementary process during inscription or post inscription that helps development but also helps management with the distribution of visitors from the iconic World Heritage site to other neighboring sites. This is particularly important when establishing visitor limits; alternative attractions can be useful for those visitors who may have to wait to enter the main site. For example, at Petra in Jordan they are thinking of both establishing visitor limits and trying to link the iconic site to other sites in the region, interpreting other periods of history, one of the nearby sites they are working on is as old as Jericho making one of the really ancient points in human civilization.

Just brain storming here but let's imagine if Suomenlinna's management board wanted to even more emphasize the cultural aspects of the site, but also think about local economies. Could Finland and the City of Helsinki give thought to its tremendous economic comparative advantage, of sea and islands within minutes of a major capital and the potential of the international yachting and water sports industry? This could be linked to an interpretive programme describing Helsinki's and Suomenlinna's maritime history but also there could be a range of other local products and festivals related to the maritime theme. But perhaps this is already being done.

Well I will end here, hopefully having done my job of presenting at least some of the tourism challenges but more importantly some of the opportunities that World Heritage may facilitate. I realize of course none of this is easy but World Heritage is what you make of it and much more can be done to use this unique convention to bring interests together for very practical management and development approaches.