# 1.	UNESCO, Cultural Heritage Sites and Tourism[1]: a paradoxical relationship

by

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Abstract

Keywords: UNESCO, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, tourism, Asian developing countries.

## 1.1.	Background

Cultural heritage conservation and management are characterized by several paradoxes (Vecco, 2007). These paradoxes affect the tourism activities related to these sites as well. The World Monument Fund (WMF) monitors damage to heritage buildings and sites. It identifies three major threats facing heritage sites namely political conflict, climate change, and tourism. The tourist is thus seen to be as damaging as war or rising sea levels. In the WMF 2018 list of the most endangered 25 monuments in the world approximately one-third were diagnosed as being 'in danger' mainly from the tourist.

In recent decades the emergence of cultural tourism as a social phenomenon and as an object of academic study has become quite common. Moreover, this growth in cultural tourism is characterized by a fragmentation into a number of emerging niches, such as heritage tourism, arts tourism, gastronomic tourism, film tourism and creative tourism (Richard, 2018). The same

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growing trends characterized the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) cultural heritage tourism. This phenomenon becomes particularly relevant for UNESCO cultural heritage sites in developing countries (Caust & Vecco, 2017).

From an international legal perspective, we have to mention three conventions passed by the UNESCO to ensure the protection of man-made treasures worldwide, these are:

• Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972);

• Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003);

• Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression (2005) [1].

In UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) under Article 2 it notes,

> " 'Safeguarding' means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non- formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage." (UNESCO, 2003).

Here is the dilemma. While there is the acknowledgement of the need to 'protect' the tangible and intangible cultural heritage[2] in this clause, at the same time there is a desire to make it

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[2] In this chapter we refer to the concept of heritage in its dual character: tangible and intangible as cultural sites can be the expression not just of the tangible but also of the intangible dimension of cultural heritage. Cultural sites are a clear expression of tangible cultural heritage, meanwhile they can embody intangible practices that cannot be dissociated from its tangible dimension. An uncontrolled tourism valorization of the cultural site, which may turn to a more or less severe exploitation of the tangible site in the short, medium or long term, may affect seriously both dimensions.

'viable' and 'revitalise' it. This could be seen as a way of making a site/culture come alive and not be a 'museum' or it could be interpreted as a way of economically exploiting the site/culture while trying to maintain its unique characteristics. However, this consumption can lead to the destruction of the cultural site itself (Ashworth, 2009).

Pyykkönen (2012) discusses the UNESCO Convention on Cultural expression as another example of the 'commodification' of culture while D'Eramo (2014) asserts that receiving UNESCO heritage status is the 'death knell' of a city/place. Within Article 13 of the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention there is a recommendation to States (Nations) awarded that they should:

> "[…] adopt a general policy aimed at promoting the function of the intangible cultural heritage in society, and at integrating the safeguarding of such heritage into planning programmes." (UNESCO, 2003).

This says clearly that on the awarding of Intangible Heritage Status there is an obligation by the State to introduce various measures to allow for proper planning as part of the safeguarding of the practices.

The awarding of an UNESCO status immediately bestows a national and international profile on the site or practice. While the recognition acknowledges something that is unique in the world, it also draws the world's attention to this uniqueness and singularity. Depending on the nature of the site/heritage/practice, it is then in an excellent position to be marketed by the nation concerned as a special and attractive tourist destination. It is noted that,

> "Being in the UNESCO List is highly desired by many actors as it brings prominence and monetary revenue […]" (Frey & Steiner, 2011, 560).

It is seen as an avenue for increased revenue, notably from tourism. The visitors may bring economic prosperity to a community that was formerly subsistent, yet their presence may simultaneously destroy or undermine unique features of the local culture. Over time a co-dependent economic relationship between the community and the tourists develops so that the community cannot survive without the presence of the tourists. Ironically, this then affects the attractions of the destination as it is increasingly given over to serving the needs of the tourist, and by doing, loses its intrinsic difference or local culture. Tourism changes the nature of the destination dramatically and probably irreversibly. Kishore Rau, Director General of the UNESCO World Heritage (WH) Centre has commented that,

> "In tandem with this recognition of our heritage – and the appeal of these sites often enhanced by World Heritage inscription – the tourism industry has exploded at a phenomenal rate, resulting in unprecedented numbers of visitors to sites both accessible and remote, compounding the issue of preserving sites even as we express our appreciation for them" (Rau, 2014, 2).

The potential negative impact of increased tourism is well acknowledged here. But there is an inherent contradiction in the position of UNESCO when they are aware of the dangers of increased promotion of a site, despite the damage that occurs. If on one side, UNESCO's objective is to preserve the natural and cultural (tangible and intangible) heritage of outstanding relevance for the future generations, on the other, the UNESCO assignment is also to promote "an appropriate equitable balance between conservation, sustainability and development" (Budapest Declaration, World Heritage Committee, 2002) in the UNESCO sites. Tourism has many facets that not only directly affect a cultural heritage site but the entire community and environment that surrounds it. It is important to consider then whether the granting of UNESCO status to a cultural heritage site, can cause more problems than it addresses,

particularly in relation to attracting too many visitors? If so, are there solutions to this paradoxical dilemma? These questions are addressed in the following pages.

1.2. UNESCO WH and tourism

Despite the original objective of the UNESCO listing (to identify and protect sites of outstanding value), the UNESCO label has been generally used as a marketing tool to attract more tourists (Thorsell & Sigaty, 1998; Yang, Lin & Han, 2010). As we mentioned earlier, the UNESCO listing implies a clear dilemma as the relationship between tourism and cultural heritage management is a dialectic (McKercher, Ho & DuCros, 2005). On one side, this recognition implies higher tourist flows which can produce new job creation and economic impact on the local economy. For example, the impact of cultural tourism can act as an important driving force for further growth in many countries (Wager, 1995; McIntosh & Prentice, 1999; Herbert, 2001). Moreover, it may produce finance to maintain and preserve this cultural heritage and draw worldwide attention to these cultural sites. On the other side, the new visitor flows may seriously affect and damage the environmental and cultural integrity of these sites as the carrying capacity of the site is seriously reduced. Cultural values related to the cultural site – fundamental to enhance the social cohesion and identity of the local community – can be compromised and corrupted because of the "tourismification" of a site (Daniel, 1996; Urry, 1990). As some authors have remarked (Mossetto, 1994; Garrod & Fyall, 2000), the degradation of cultural values will in turn negatively influence tourism values; a vicious cycle will then occur. Scholars have analysed this paradox and tried to provide some guidelines and best practices to achieve a more sustainable development as required by UNESCO (Wager, 1995; Urry, 1990; Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Leask & Fyall, 2006; Li, Wu &

Cai, 2008)[3]. Furthermore, it has been noted elsewhere that the conflict that exists between heritage protection and tourism development, may be more pronounced in developing countries (SITMo, 2008). In the traditional as well as cultural tourism there is a clear challenge of managing tourism sustainably for residents, tourists and day visitors, which becomes more urgent as tourism dramatically increases. Overtourism as a concept therefore has emerged rapidly and can be well applied to examples of UNESCO cultural heritage tourism.

The cultural heritage tourism phenomenon often implies the transformation of local cultures and lifestyles into "commodities" for sale to foreign audiences. According to Ato & Mensah, (2006)[20], this cultural commoditisation further contributes to the denigration of social customs, the alienation of residents and the creation of place homogeneity. Machtis and Burch (1993) pointed out that the "economisation" of tourism and the need to cater to tourists may explain the "mythic reconstruction" of places and the falsification of histories and identities. Moreover, in literature related to cultural tourism it is noted that the concept of 'authenticity' is significant (Cole, 2007; Getz, 1998; Wang, 1999). Loulanski and Loulanski (2011) note there has been a long tradition of tourism being inter-connected with cultural heritage. The 'Seoul Declaration' of ICOMOS 2005) on managing tourism in historic towns in Asia, expressed its concern about the "importance of accurate and aesthetic interpretation and presentation of heritage places for tourism".

A key factor to protecting sites and local cultures is the wealth of the country where the destination is located. Many of the host countries of these cultural heritage sites in South East Asia for example are economically poor and have limited capacity to protect or compensate for

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[3] UNESCO publishes IMPACT, a series of studies whose objective is to investigate the relationship between sustainable tourism in UNESCO sites.

the impact of the visitors. They desire to encourage visitors because they need the tourist dollar to assist their own economic development. But there may be a 'sting in the tale'; while encouraging visitation they may also be destroying the 'golden egg'. Many famous cultural sites in Europe such as Venice for instance, also struggle with the impact of a large tourist visitation, but they may also have a greater economic capacity to protect their site. This is not the case in poorer regions of the world. In relation to the impact of tourism on the third world it is noted that over commercialisation of sites and 'Disneyfication' is commonplace (Ashworth, 2009; Hausmann, 2007; Pleumarom, 2007; Malpas 2006; Rowan & Baram, 2004). Concepts such as commodification, 'heritagization' and 'industrial tourism" (McCarthy, 2004) can be used to describe these forms of tourism. There are major challenges too when those being visited are much poorer than those doing the visit. This imbalance of economic power can turn the visited into 'objects' (e.g. ethnic people with distinct cultural practices) and encourage behaviour from both the visitor and the visited that is based purely on an economic transaction and not a cultural exchange.

On the basis of this literature review, we developed a model to present our hypothesis (Figure 1). Tourism has an impact on sustainability *per se*, which can be amplified by the UNESCO's designation. Although this UNESCO designation appears very prestigious, it may impact the sustainability of the cultural heritage even further. As we have seen in the UNESCO's conventions, there is a clear "call" on sustainability, but then specific tools and actions are missing to implement and monitor this sustainability; the situation then becomes paradoxical, specifically in the developing countries. On the one hand, the objective is to protect the tangible and intangible WH, yet on the other, UNESCO's designation may be a driver that further burdens/contributes to the unsustainability of the WH, unless specific arrangements have been developed in terms of heritage management to avoid this conflictual situation. This paradox -

UNESCO's designation paradox - can be added to the four already existing paradoxes of cultural heritage (Vecco, 2007), which makes the specific nature of cultural heritage clear and raises awareness about the difficulties and constraints in managing tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Awareness is the first step in each management process and is fundamental for developing specific strategies to resolve the paradoxes.

Figure 1. Model of CH sustainability constraints
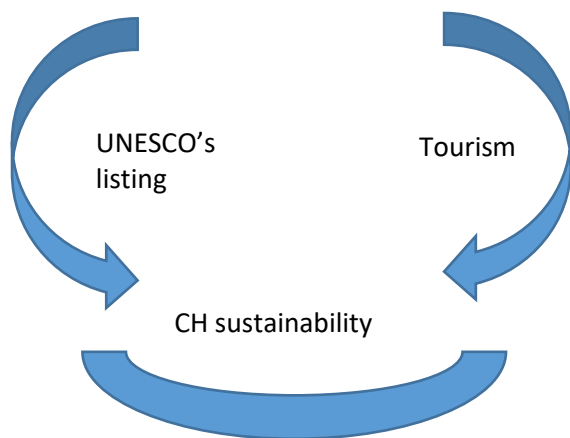
Source: own elaboration.

According to Buckley (2012), "it is clear that mainstream tourism, like other industry sectors and the human economy as a whole, is far from sustainable" (p. 534). The rapid growth in cultural tourism raises serious concerns about the environmental and cultural integrity of the cultural and natural sites. This is more evident for the WH Sites, which are strongly characterised by the paradox that we have previously outlined and has led to the application of the concept of sustainability and sustainable growth (Drost, 1996). Moreover, unsustainable tourism and insufficient management have been considered as 2 out 5 primary man-made threats of CH (Global Heritage Fund, 2010).

1.3. UNESCO WH challenges in Asia

In this section we present some challenges characterising three UNESCO WH Asian sites. They have been selected according to the following criteria: they are well-known, have UNESCO WH status and have all been visited by one of the researchers. The three sites are Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Hoi An in Vietnam and Luang Prabang in Laos, all of which are located in developing South East Asian countries.

1.3.1. Angkor Wat

Cambodia has one of the world's most important religious and cultural sites, Angkor Wat. It received UNESCO WH status in 1992 and like other significant cultural sites, has generally experienced a dramatic increase in visitation (De Launey, 2012). The increase in visitation can be illustrated by information from the Cambodian Government site that manages the site: it notes that in 2010 there were 1,155,055 foreign visitors but by 2014, 2,350,937 foreign visitors were recorded, or a 100% increase over 4 years (apsaraauthority.gov.kh).

Damage by 'wear and tear' on the site itself continues to cause concern given the numbers using the steps and paths and touching the structures. It has been noted that tourists continue to walk over areas of the site that are fragile and thereby damage the Khmer stonework (Global Heritage Found, 2010). Given the dramatic increase in visitation it seems the authorities who control the site (the World Monuments Fund), are behind in establishing conventions that might protect it further. As Launey (2012) notes, the temples have survived more than 1000 years but have rapidly deteriorated over the past 10, because of the numbers coming, their impact on the demography and their behaviour at the site.

Siem Reap the main town near the site and where tourists spend much of their time demonstrates a lack of planning and integration with the WH sites nearby. Large hotels have

been built near the site requiring considerable resources for their upkeep. Further Fawthrop (2013) notes that the Bayon Temple is now in danger of collapsing, because the amount of water being drained from the water table underneath it, has dramatically increased because of the water use by tourists.

1.3.2. *Hoi An*

Another important cultural site in South-East Asia is the town of Hoi An located in central Vietnam near the port of Da Nang. In the rationale for Hoi An's acceptance as a site of UNESCO Cultural Heritage it is noted that the reason Hoi An is still intact architecturally is that it was excluded from the economic development that occurred elsewhere in Vietnam over the past 100 years (UNESCO, n.d.). This is in itself a conundrum; the lack of economic development from trade protected it as a site of architectural and cultural significance; as an outcome it has now become a site for cultural tourism development. The government site that manages Hoi An notes that tourism to the town has increased by more than 10% over the period of one year 2014-2015 (Hoi An Heritage, 2016).

Hoi An is a place of great charm to the visitor and various measures have been instituted to enhance the visitor experience. Local traffic in the old town is confined to bicycles and pedestrians for much of the day. There is regular rubbish collection and the town is well looked after in terms of keeping the site clean, tidy and welcoming to the visitor. While the awarding of International Cultural Heritage status serves to bring into the area a rapid increase in economic wealth from the new tourists, it can also change the nature of the site. For example, instead of there being a variety of shops that serve the local needs of the community, the buildings in the old town of Hoi An have become cafes, galleries or tailors. The town is then an 'ersatz' version of the original, as the 'original' no longer exists except in 'form'. The

beautiful buildings of Hoi An remain but their function has completely changed. Everything then is in a sense 'Disneyfied'. The culture of the old town of Hoi An has changed irreversibly to become a locale that serves the needs of the visitor. Further, the large number of tourists now visiting, crowd the narrow streets and make passage sometime impossible. Hoi An is an important cultural tourist destination. The buildings are preserved but what happens inside them and around them has changed.

1.3.3. Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang in Laos like Hoi An is another town of great charm and beauty. It was the region's ancient capital city in the Lan Xang Kingdom and again it has UNESCO recognition as a major International Cultural Heritage site. Luang Prabang was put onto the WH list for 'its outstanding universal value, located in the harmonious relationship between the natural and built environment; the juxtaposition of Lao and village and French colonial urban morphology and the fusion of traditional Lao and French architecture of the 19th-early 20th centuries (UNESCO, 2003). To preserve the integrity of the town of Luang Prabang various regulations have been instituted so that new hotel development for instance does not compromise the physical attraction of the town. Hotel developments outside of the town itself (where most of them are) are designed in sympathy with the location so that they are not visually obtrusive and demonstrate an awareness of the beauty of the site. So this also encourages the visitor to really appreciate the beauty of the entire location as well as partial aspects of it. The monasteries in the community are still very active and the local community is generally doing what it does and is seemingly not taken over completely by the demands of the tourists (as yet). While the tourists are invited to participate in the local customs and rituals, they are also warned everywhere that they should be sensitive and not intrude. Nevertheless, there are concerns that the tourist invasion is commodifying local religious practices, while former residents are selling

their historic houses in the old town to those in the tourism trade (Strangio, 2016). As in Hoi An a dramatic increase in visitation is causing the main cultural sites to be overwhelmed by large numbers of people. D'Eramo (2014) argues that in fact receiving UNESCO WH status has caused Luang Prabang to become a tourist trap.

1.4. Conclusions

As the world has now recognised that climate change and environmental protection are urgent global issues and not merely national issues, the same applies to the protection of cultural heritage. Agencies such as UNESCO have played a leadership role in attempting to give acknowledgement and protection to important cultural sites and practices, but the reality of receiving UNESCO status has, in many cases, been perverted into another form of income generation. Overtourism is now becoming as harmful to cultural heritage sites as other forms of neglect or wilful damage. Urgent action is now required globally to give cultural heritage sites and practices appropriate respect and protection, before it is too late.

This chapter has shed light on the concept of sustainability of Cultural World Heritage sites and its controversial relationship with tourism, which are directly connected to the overtourism phenomenon given the association with tourist numbers, the type and time frame of their visit, and a destination's carrying capacity. According to a recent study, (McKinsey & Company & World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017), challenges associated with overtourism are connected with alienated residents, a limited, partially authentic or even degraded tourist experience, overcrowded infrastructure, damage to nature, and/or threats to culture and heritage. Such kind of negative effects can be more dramatic in developing countries.

In the last decade, rapid growth of both international and domestic tourism has negatively affected WH sites. This is particularly true for WH sites in developing countries such in Asia, which are struggling with unsustainable tourism and insufficient management skills and resources to manage their sites properly. Despite this, these sites are attracting "hordes" of visitors, but little financial support and no specific actions have been implemented to compensate the potential and real damages of this touristic cash-cowing phenomenon. It is well understood that uncontrolled visitation to heritage sites and cultural practices can negatively impact upon those sites and practices. The impact of uncontrolled and mass tourism can be dramatic, and in some cases irreversible, as it happens within a conservation process where there is a necessity to deal with absolute and not relative decisions (Vecco, 2007). UNESCO began a conversation of 'protection' through its acknowledgement conventions of international tangible and intangible cultural heritage and cultural expression. However, the outcome of this has meant that UNESCO status has given sites/practices a much greater profile, which then attracts increased visitation. Thus, UNESCO status could be seen as a marketing device more than a protection approach.

Much more needs to be done to protect the culture and integrity of all peoples, as well as their important cultural sites and practices. Any actions should take a long-term view and not merely focus on maximising short-term economic returns or the interests of the strongest groups. This chapter argues that despite the different models and codes in place, protection of cultural heritage and cultural practices, particularly in third world countries, remains a major concern. One reason for this is the impact of uncontrolled tourism. This is becoming critical as tourist numbers increase faster than protective measures can be put in place and, as noted here, UNESCO recognition dramatically increases the volume of tourism to designated areas.

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