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Is UNESCO World Heritage recognition a blessing or burden? Evidence from developing Asian countries

Abstract

To both acknowledge and protect many cultural heritage expressions, sites and practices, UNESCO has instituted three conventions; Tangible Heritage, Intangible Heritage and Diversity of Cultural Expression. If a site/practice receives this UNESCO badge it is an acknowledgment of its universal cultural and/or natural value as well as recognition of the need to protect it from harm. However, the UNESCO badge is an important marketing tool in world tourism and its presence ensures many more visitors to a site/practice that is UNESCO recognised. With increasing wealth and mobility many more people are travelling than was possible even a decade ago. Increasing numbers of visitors can negatively impact on a site/practice as well as affect the local culture and integrity of a region, particularly in developing countries. So is the UNESCO recognition a blessing or burden? This paper addresses the challenges that ensue from the UNESCO conventions by considering three UNESCO World Heritage case study sites in Asian developing countries. In particular, it seeks to understand the extent to which UNESCO's World Heritage approach protects or further undermines the cultural heritage sustainability of these sites.

Keywords: cultural heritage, UNESCO's World Heritage list, Tourism, Cultural Heritage Protection, South East Asia.

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone ...* Joni Mitchell (Big Yellow Taxi)

1. Introduction

Part of the mandate of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is to protect man-made treasures that exist in our world. Three conventions passed by the UNESCO to ensure this are titled:

- 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.” [1].

So here is the dilemma. While there is the acknowledgement of the need to ‘protect’ the tangible and intangible cultural heritage¹ in this clause, at the same time there is a desire to make it ‘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. Another dimension however is the philosophy behind the awarding of the UNESCO status and the interests it serves. For instance, Frey and Steiner [2] observe that the UNESCO Conventions have so far mostly benefited the more affluent nations. This is also noted by Bertacchini, Saccone and Santagata [3]. Pyykkönen [4] discusses the UNESCO Convention on Cultural expression as another example of the ‘commodification’ of culture while D’Eramo [5] 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.” [1].

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. However the awarding of an UNESCO status immediately bestows a national and international profile on the site or practice. While the recognition acknowledges something that it is unique in the world, it also draws the world’s attention to this uniqueness. 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 [...]” ([2]: 560).

It is seen as an avenue for increased revenue, notably from tourism, but also from various agencies that provide much needed funds to poorer nations for restoration or conservation processes. 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

¹ In this article 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.

as it is increasingly given over to serving the needs of the tourist, and by doing, loses its intrinsic difference or local culture.

Moreover, greater wealth and cheaper travel have enabled the numbers of people travelling around the world to grow exponentially. Gonzalez-Tirados [6] observes that from 1950 to 2008 the number of world-wide tourists increased from 25 million to 924 million ([6]:1589). Many of these visitors are in large groups and herded from one destination to another with little local engagement or understanding. In addition, hotels, casinos and resorts are then built near these significant sites for the tourists' accommodation and entertainment. Other forms of infrastructure development follow quickly; major roads, shops, bars, restaurants etc. Often the local residents become entirely dependent on tourism for making their living and their former local trades, occupations and industries fall by the wayside [7]. 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” ([8]: 2)

The potential negative impact of increased tourism is acknowledged here by Rau [8]. 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 [9]) in the UNESCO sites. The success of this initiative relies though on the degree of engagement and awareness of the local community [10]. In reviewing the management processes of six world cultural heritage sites Landorf [11] notes that they rarely factor in consultation or broader sustainability issues. Perhaps an inherent danger in the awarding of UNESCO Status is that it takes the planning and control away from the local community so that the locale becomes a ‘plaything’ for national and international interests. The community can then be excluded permanently from the conversation. This is further noted by Salazar [12] where it is observed that the challenge is to match the demands of tourism to local needs, while making it sustainable and viable. Tourism has many facets that not only directly affect a cultural heritage site but the entire community and environment that surrounds it. It is for these reasons that we focus on the impact of tourism on UNESCO cultural heritage sites, seeing its uncontrolled expansion as a threat to their short and long term sustainability.

2. Research Aims

This article aims first to develop state of the art concepts addressing sustainability, cultural tourism and UNESCO WH status, and to understand to what extent the UNESCO's WH approach – as presented in its main conventions previously mentioned - protect or further undermine the tangible and intangible cultural heritage sustainability of some sites in Asian developing countries. As researchers we combine the perspectives of a cultural policy specialist and a cultural heritage specialist to investigate this hypothesis. Indeed, most of the literature in this area comes from the tourism field, which generally has a vested interest in the maintenance of that tourism. But for those of us in the cultural field the preservation of unique cultures and protection of cultural sites is quite critical. So how do we address the conundrum of wanting to protect destinations that are unique and of universal value, and yet allow the local community to economically survive? How do we maintain ‘difference’ under the force of the explosion of visitation and pressure to serve the needs of the tourist? How are unique cultures protected when every day they are being pressured to become the same as others? These are all challenging questions for which there may not be a simple answer, but as cultural policy and heritage scholars it is important that we explore them and consider options that go further than the UNESCO badge.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a critical literature review of the main relevant concepts to our study (tourism impact on local community and UNESCO World Heritage – from here on WH - tourism). Section 3 focuses on the challenges characterizing some UNESCO WH in Asia. Section 4 concludes and provides some suggestions for further research.

3. Literature review

3.1. *Tourism impact on local community*

The first wave of studies analysing the relationship between tourism and local community date back to the 1970s. To analyse the relationship between local perception of tourism development, several theoretical models have been developed over time. These include Doxey's Irridex model [13], Butler's tourism area life cycle [14], reasoned action [15], stakeholder theory [16] and social exchange theory [17]. Several scholars have remarked that a correct understanding and assessment of tourism development in level of local communities, is fundamental to foster sustainable tourism [18,19,20,21,22,23, 24,25,26]). More specifically, literature about the impact of tourism has noted for a long time the negative impact of uncontrolled tourism on a community.

Doxey [13] postulated that the attitude of local people to tourism crosses four stages (euphoria, apathy, annoyance and antagonism), and he defined it as 'an index of tourist irritation'. This model was challenged subsequently as being too simplistic and that local factors also needed to be taken into account in any analysis. These local conditions included the nature of the visitors, the nature of the local community and how the area visited is managed [14]. Butler modified Doxey's concept to note how over-development causes eventual stagnation of the location. He postulated that this can then lead to the demise of the location as a tourist hot spot, or as he suggests, can also lead to its renewal through a reframing of its attractions (e.g. the introduction of another attraction such as a casino). However, Butler notes that the attractions of most locations are finite and in scientific terms, non-renewable resources, so they are likely to be negatively impacted by large scale visitation.

Certainly the physical location of a destination can be compromised by the impact of large scale tourism. For instance, if the environment is originally pristine, large numbers of people visiting may negatively affect its natural advantages through littering, overuse of natural resources and inadequate infrastructure such as sewerage, so that quite quickly the physical environment is degraded. In addition, the former peace or tranquillity of the location may be destroyed by the increased presence of visitors [27]. This is well illustrated by the impact of visitors to Bali or Thailand. The original assets of the location may be compromised and their attraction to visitors is then lessened. Hence the cycle that Doxey [13] and Butler [14] refer to occurs and the visitors stop coming because the location is no longer an attractive proposition. This could be further enhanced in an environment that had limited financial resources in the beginning, and without the visitors, has no way of renewing or revitalising its environment.

In tourism research resident attitudes toward tourism development are classified according to three dimensions: economic, social and environmental [19,28,29,30,31,32,33,10,34,35]. As observed by Sharareh and Badaruddin [36], although residents may be in favour of tourism development, they are also concerned about its negative effects. While the impact of large scale tourism on a physical environment may be obvious, the impact on the local people may be harder to evaluate. There might be a significant impact on the local culture for instance from the pressure to serve the needs of the tourists. As an outcome there is intense pressure for everything to be the same as everything else in terms of offering the same degree of service, facilities, activities etc. in tourist destinations [6]. A downside of global tourism is that everything becomes homogenised and individual differences in culture become absorbed or disappear to conform to the needs of the travelling mass. The contradiction within this is that the tourist also wants something different or unique to happen during their travelling experience. That is part of why they are travelling in the first place; to leave the 'known' behind and experience the 'new' or the 'different'. They can then go home afterwards and 'tell' the stories of their adventures or new experiences.

There are several planning approaches to protect physical and cultural environments already noted in the tourism literature [37,38,39]. For instance, in 1999 in Santiago, the World Tourism Organization developed a Worldwide Code of Ethics in Tourism [40] which was a template for appropriate planning responses. Under Article 3 of the Code the notion of sustainable development is emphasised to allow for the aspirations and needs of future generations within the local community. In particular controlled visitation is recommended as a means of protecting the use of local resources. And under Article 4 there is recognition that long term planning should occur that supports the nature of the site and that income gained from the site should be used to support the site. In addition, there is a statement that tourism should support the uniqueness of local cultural practices rather than homogenise them.

Ways of implementing sustainable tourism have become recognised as essential to avoid the cycles noted by Doxey [13] and Butler [14] earlier. Approaches to making this happen have been well documented [41,42,43,39,44]. The Global Sustainable Tourism criteria (GSTC)² is the result of a worldwide effort to develop a common language about sustainability in tourism. Focusing on social and environmental responsibility, as well as the positive and negative economic and cultural impacts of tourism, the criteria are organized into four subjects:

- sustainable management;
- socio-economic impacts;
- cultural impacts;
- environmental impacts (including consumption of resources, reducing pollution, and conserving biodiversity and landscapes).

It is noted though that the criteria are the *minimum* expectations, not the *maximum*, which businesses and destinations should aim to achieve to approach social, environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability. This then represents another aspect of the conundrum given the recognition that this is a minimum standard. When discussing examples of sustainable tourism Aruljothi and Ramaswamy [37] see it as maintaining tourism in a region without negatively impacting on its environment by “[...] balancing the needs of the present and future tourists with those of the tourism destinations” ([37]: 56). When they talk about ‘environment’ they include both the physical as well as the social and cultural. In this context they refer to the Worldwide Code of Ethics in Tourism [40] as providing a framework for appropriate behaviour.

3.2. 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 [45,46]. As we mentioned in the introduction, the UNESCO listing implies a clear dilemma as the relationship between tourism and cultural heritage management is a dialectic [47]. On one side, this recognition implies higher tourist flows which can produce new job creation and economic impact on the local economy. The impact of cultural tourism may act as an important driving force for further growth in many countries [48,49,50]. 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 [51,52]. As some authors have remarked [7,53], 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 [48,53,54,55,56]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 [19].

The cultural heritage tourism phenomenon often implies the transformation of local cultures and lifestyles into “commodities” for sale to foreign audiences. According to Ato et al. [58], this cultural commoditisation further contributes to the denigration of social customs, the alienation of residents and the creation of place homogeneity. Machtis and Burch [58] 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 [59,60,61]. Loulanski and Loulanski [62] note there has been a long tradition of tourism being inter-connected with cultural heritage.

As it has been pointed out by several authors [2,3, among others] the effectiveness of tourism generated by UNESCO WH is still an open and controversial question. There are differing views about its impact. By analysing the effects of UNESCO label on tourist sites, Tisdell and Wilson [63] identified

² <https://www.gstcouncil.org/en/>

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

complementary as well substitution effects. UNESCO WH has been considered by Arezki et al. [64] as a good example of tourism specialization. Moreover, these scholars find positive and significant effects on economic growth through specialization in tourism. However, no consensus on the effects has been agreed in academia as the empirical evidence is ambiguous [63,46,65,66]. Further Cuccia and Rizzo [67,68] show that the UNESCO inscription does not foster cultural tourism on a regional scale while Cellini [66] asserts that the effect of WH List in attracting more tourists is limited. This divergence in views can be explained by the different methods used (cross-sectional and time-series dimensions), the dataset considered for the analysis which can lead to different results and the original research question posed by the researchers.

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 are economically poor and have limited capacity to protect or compensate for 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 [69]. Concepts such as commodification, 'heritagization' and 'industrial tourism' [70] 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 the hypothesis of the present article (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 [71], 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.

Insert Figure 1. Model of CH sustainability constraints

Source: own elaboration.

3.3 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. Asia and the South Pacific have 231 sites on the UNESCO WH list, with 5 listed sites in danger (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2: Distribution of UNESCO WH sites in Asia with the three case studies

[See the external file]

Source: UNESCO WH site: <http://whc.unesco.org>, accessed on Sept. 1, 2016.

Red: site in danger; yellow: natural site; green: cultural site.

Luang Prabang
Hoi An
Angkor Wat

Table 1 presents the main information and features of the three case studies selected in this study. All of the three cultural sites were designated as WH in the 1990s, a period characterised by a need to diversify WH, thus providing an opportunity for non-European countries to be included in the list. With the exception of Angkor Wat in 2015, all three sites experienced a significantly increased foreign visitation over the years 2013, 2014 and 2015. Angkor Wat, the oldest in terms of designation, has faced serious issues (this was in fact one of the reasons for its original designation) generated by increasing tourism trends (apart from 2015) and by being close to a tourism hub. In this context there is the possibility of compromising its integrity. Moreover, it was put on the UNESCO's danger list in the period from 1992-2004. Luang Prabang also has a high UNESCO threat intensity coefficient, which has slowly decreased. There is less information available about Hoi An in relation to UNESCO reports. This information unavailability does not allow us to compare and contrast this site in all areas with the other two. On the other hand, it reveals that at present there are limited sources about Hoi An. This means that Hoi An needs to develop better monitoring systems and practices to collect relevant information that could be used to improve both the protection process and the management of the site.

Insert Table 1: Profile of the three UNESCO WH sites selected

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 [72]. 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 [73]. While there has been some reduction in numbers of about 9.6% in 2015, nevertheless the visitation has increased dramatically over a 5 year period. Everyone who goes to the site has to pay for a visitor pass and is photographed and then given a pass on entry. One measure that is generally effective, is the insistence that groups can only visit the site with an official local guide who is a Cambodian [74]. This ensures a continuity of local knowledge, a level of acceptable visitor behaviour, as well as much local employment. So there are controls in place about how you can visit, when you can visit and what you can visit. It is also noted that controls exist around the number of vendors on the site [75]. All of these are critical in terms of the importance of the site.

Nevertheless '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 [76]. 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 [72] 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. Ironically, on the UNESCO site it says in relation to Angkor Wat that it has been removed from its list of WH sites in danger in 2004 because "[...] the numerous conservation and restoration activities coordinated by UNESCO were successful" (whc.unesco.org/en/107/).

At present, it seems no controls have been exercised around planning outside of the site. Siam Reap, the main town near the site and where tourists spend much of their time, has been allowed to develop in whatever way the market determines with no limitations around size, location or design of hotels and other facilities. Instead of using the proximity of Angkor Wat to create a special destination for visitors, Siam Reap 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 [77] 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.

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 [78]. 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 [80]. The specific numbers of visitors to Hoi An for the years 2014 to 2015 are however not publicly available and are estimates based on media data (see Table 1). In 2014 a visitor's ticket was introduced allowing access to several specific sites in the town. There are inspectors who walk around monitoring the use of the tickets. However, it would seem the ticket is a fund-raising exercise more than a visitor control management tool. It is likely though that the money raised is used for the benefit of the site.

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. In an effort to improve communication with tourists in Hoi An, an information centre has been recently opened within the old quarter which, it is said, will support sustainable tourism by providing better information to the tourists [78]. However, this might be seen as better tourism servicing rather than an example of 'sustainable' tourism. But there are renewed efforts

being put into harnessing the skills of the local craftspeople to produce saleable goods that keep their craft traditions alive as well as providing a new income flow [78].

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’. People are ‘fishing’ in the river but they are not really fishing; they are a photo opportunity for the tourist and expect payment as you pass them. The culture of the old town of Hoi An has changed irreversibly to become a locale that serves the needs of the visitor. Hoi An is an important cultural tourist destination. The buildings are preserved but what happens inside them and around them has changed. The impact of tourism on Hoi An has been seen has an important issue to address by international commentators who are concerned about endangered cultural heritage sites in the developing world [76].

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 [1]. 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.

Like the example of Hoi An it was already noted in 2004 that having UNESCO WH status has enabled a major increase in tourism [80]. Staiff and Bushell [81] while acknowledging the rapid growth in development and change of use of traditional houses within Luang Prabang for tourist businesses, argue that these changes are part of an eastern approach to change, which is different to a western approach of conservation. They argue that modernity is welcomed by the local people and they wish to take advantage of the tourists and interest in their town in whichever way they can [81]. They assert that in fact there are sufficient controls in place to protect the fabric of the town because of the intervention of UNESCO, and the arrival of tourists is helping the local community economically. 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 [82]. D’Eramo [5] argues further that in fact receiving UNESCO WH status has caused Luang Prabang to become a tourist trap.

In table 2 below there is a comparison of costs and benefits accrued when considering the challenges of cultural heritage sites and practices. It is structured into three parts: financial, economic and cultural and environmental dimension. Although this paper is not focused on a costs-benefits analysis, we decided to use this table as it clearly presents the pros and cons generated by tourism in developing countries. While this table was developed in 2010 [76], the same issues apply to cultural heritage sites now, and in many cases, more so in the developing countries. In bold are the issues most urgent and challenging in the case studies analysed above. 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 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. Urgent action is now required globally to give cultural heritage sites and practices appropriate respect and protection, before it is too late.

Insert Table 2. Benefits and costs of tourism in developing countries

According to Buckley [83], “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 [41]. Moreover, unsustainable tourism and insufficient management have been considered as 2 out of 5 primary man-made threats of CH [76].

4. Conclusions

This paper has shed light on the concept of sustainability of Cultural World Heritage sites and its controversial relationship with tourism. In the last decade, rapid growth international and domestic tourism has negatively affected WH sites. This is particularly true for WH sites in developing countries, 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-cow 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 [71]. 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.

So there is another conversation that we are all must be part of and where we need to do more than merely acknowledge cultural heritage value. 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 paper 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, UNESCO recognition dramatically increases the volume of tourism to designated areas. A holistic approach is essential where the interaction between protection of heritage and the impact on the local community are taken into account. This is especially critical in communities that are economically and socially vulnerable. The challenge is to manage tourist visits and related activities so that they can bring economic benefit without degrading the asset base and/or negatively impacting the environment and communities of these sites.

When talking about sustainability the focus cannot just be on the physical heritage but on the cultural heritage - in its tangible and intangible dimension - and how that can be maintained and supported. Prioritising economic goals over social and cultural goals creates sustainability challenges for the longer term. There needs to be a vested interest in protecting the sites/practices by those managing them, so that they do take a holistic approach. Several questions need to be addressed such as: should there be a limit on the visiting capacity of an area so that the invasion of tourists does not ultimately destroy both the location as well as the culture? How should extraneous development near the location be managed? How should cultural differences be acknowledged and respected? How should the local community be involved and engaged with the development of a location?

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