

5 UNESCO, cultural heritage sites and tourism

A paradoxical relationship

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Background¹

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

In recent decades, cultural tourism has been emerging as both a social phenomenon and an object of academic study. This growth in cultural tourism is characterised by a fragmentation into a number of emerging niches, such as heritage tourism, arts tourism, gastronomic tourism, film tourism and creative tourism (Richards, 2018). The same growing trends have characterised United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) cultural heritage tourism. This phenomenon is becoming 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 UNESCO to ensure the protection of human-made treasures worldwide:

- 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 Expressions (2005).

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

'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 heritage² in this clause, at the same time there is a desire to make it 'viable' and 'revitalize' 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, such consumption can lead to the destruction of the cultural site itself (Ashworth, 2009).

Pyykkönen (2012) discusses the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Expressions 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 that States (Nations) awarded this status 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 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).

UNESCO status 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 tourists, and in doing so loses its intrinsic difference or local culture. Tourism changes the nature of the destination dramatically and probably irreversibly. Kishore Rao, Director General of the UNESCO World Heritage 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."

(Rao, 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 it is aware of the dangers of increased promotion of a site and 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 future generations, on the other, UNESCO's assignment is also to promote "an appropriate equitable balance between conservation, sustainability and development" (Budapest Declaration, UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2002) in the UNESCO sites. Tourism has many facets that not only directly affect a cultural heritage site, but also impact on 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.

UNESCO World Heritage 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 noted above, UNESCO listing poses 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 the cultural heritage and draw worldwide attention to the cultural sites. On the other hand, the new visitor flows may seriously affect and damage the environmental and cultural integrity of the sites as their carrying capacity is seriously reduced. Cultural values related to the cultural site – fundamental to enhancing the social cohesion and identity of the local community – can be compromised and corrupted because of the "touristification" 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 traditional as well as cultural tourism, there is a clear challenge in 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), this cultural commoditisation contributes to the denigration of social customs, the alienation of residents and the creation of place homogeneity. Machtis and Burch (1993) point 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) describe a long tradition of tourism being interconnected with cultural heritage. The ‘Seoul Declaration’ of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS, 2005), on managing tourism in historic towns in Asia, expressed concern about the “importance of accurate and aesthetic interpretation and presentation of heritage places for tourism”.

A key factor in protecting sites and local cultures is the wealth of the country where the destination is located. Many of the host countries of cultural heritage sites in South East Asia, for example, are economically poor and have limited capacity to protect the site or compensate for the impact of the visitors. They want to encourage visitors because they need the tourist dollar to assist in their own economic development. But there may be a ‘sting in the tail’: while encouraging visitors, they may also be destroying the ‘golden egg’. Many famous cultural sites in Europe, such as Venice, also struggle with the impact of large tourist numbers, but they may also have 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 developing world, it is noted that overcommercialisation of sites and ‘Disneyfication’ are commonplace (Ashworth, 2009; Hausmann, 2007; Pleumarom, 2007; Malpas 2006; Rowan & Baram, 2004). Concepts such as commodification, heritagisation 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 paying 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 visitor and visited that is based purely on an economic transaction and not a cultural exchange.

On the basis of a literature review, we developed a model to present our hypothesis (Figure 5.1). Tourism has an impact on sustainability *per se*, which can be amplified by the UNESCO designation. Although this UNESCO designation appears very prestigious, it may impact the sustainability of the cultural heritage even further. As we have seen in UNESCO’s conventions, there is a clear call on sustainability, but specific tools and actions are missing to implement and monitor this sustainability; the situation then becomes paradoxical, specifically in the developing countries. On one hand, the objective is to protect the tangible and intangible World Heritage; yet on the other, UNESCO’s designation may be a driver that further burdens/contributes to the unsustainability of the World Heritage, 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 make the specific nature of cultural heritage clear and raise 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.

According to Buckley (2012: 534), “it is clear that mainstream tourism, like other industry sectors and the human economy as a whole, is far from sustainable”. The rapid growth in cultural tourism raises serious concerns about the environmental and cultural integrity of cultural and natural sites. This is more evident for World Heritage sites, which are strongly characterised by the paradox outlined above, and has led to the application of the concept of sustainability and sustainable growth (Drost, 1996). Unsustainable tourism and insufficient management are listed as two of the five “primary man-made threats” to cultural heritage (GHF, 2010).

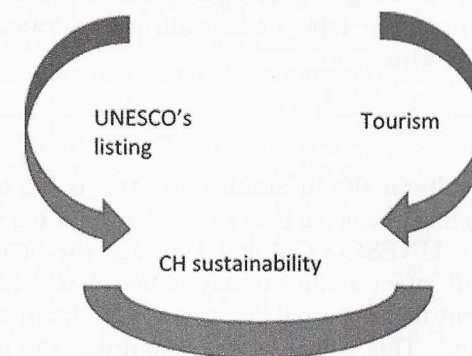


Figure 5.1 Model of cultural heritage sustainability constraints
Source: Authors' own.

UNESCO World Heritage challenges in Asia

In this section we present some challenges characterising three UNESCO World Heritage Asian sites. They have been selected according to the following criteria: they are well-known, have UNESCO World Heritage 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.

Angkor Wat

Cambodia has one of the world's most important religious and cultural sites, Angkor Wat. It received UNESCO World Heritage status in 1992 and, like other significant cultural sites, has generally experienced a dramatic increase in visitors (De Launey, 2012). This increase can be illustrated by information from the Cambodian Government website, which notes that in 2010 there were 1,155,055 foreign visitors but by 2014, 2,350,937 foreign visitors were recorded, a 100% increase over 4 years (APSARA, n.d.).

Damage due to 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 (GHF, 2010). Given the dramatic increase in visitors, it seems the authority that controls the site (the World Monuments Fund) is slow to establish conventions that might protect it further. As De 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 where tourists spend much of their time, demonstrates a lack of planning and integration with the World Heritage sites nearby. Large hotels have been built near the site, requiring considerable resources for their upkeep. Further, Fawthrop (2007) 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 due to 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 UNESCO Cultural Heritage site, 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 website 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, n.d.).

Hoi An is a place of great charm, 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 visitors. 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 now 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 visitors' needs. Further, the large number of tourists now visiting crowd the narrow streets, sometimes making passage impossible. Hoi An is an important cultural tourist destination. The buildings are preserved, but what happens inside and around them has changed.

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 placed on the World Heritage 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 the town itself (where most of them are situated) are designed in sympathy with the location so that they are not visually obtrusive and demonstrate an awareness of the site's beauty. This encourages visitors 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 tourists are invited to participate in 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 visitors is causing the main cultural sites to be overwhelmed by large numbers of people. D'Eramo (2014) argues that in fact receiving UNESCO World Heritage status has caused Luang Prabang to become a tourist trap.

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 is directly connected to the overtourism phenomenon, given the association with tourist numbers, the types and time frames of their visits, and destinations' carrying capacity. According to a recent study (McKinsey & WTTC, 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 negative effects can be more dramatic in developing countries.

In the past decade, rapid growth of both international and domestic tourism has negatively affected World Heritage sites. This is particularly true for World Heritage 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 for the potential and real damage caused by 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 (Vecco, 2007). UNESCO began a conversation about 'protection' through its acknowledgement in 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 visitor numbers. Thus, UNESCO status could be seen more as a marketing device than as 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 countries of the developing world, remains a major concern. One reason for this is the impact of uncontrolled tourism. This is becoming critical as tourist numbers increase more quickly than protective measures can be put in place and UNESCO recognition dramatically increases the volume of tourism to designated areas.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a modified version of a journal article: Caust, J. & Vecco, M. (2017) Is UNESCO World Heritage recognition a blessing or a burden? Evidence from developing Asian countries. *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 27: 1–9.
- 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 tangible but also of intangible dimensions of cultural heritage. Cultural sites are a clear expression of tangible cultural heritage; they can also embody intangible practices that cannot be dissociated from the tangible dimension. An uncontrolled tourism valorisation 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 seriously affect both dimensions.
- 3 UNESCO publishes IMPACT, a series of studies whose objective is to investigate the relationship between sustainable tourism in UNESCO sites.

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