

184 VMAST - the UNESCO World Heritage Visitor Management Assessment & Strategy Tool

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UNESCO designated areas, natural and cultural heritage including World Heritage sites, Biosphere Reserves and Global Geoparks are among the most visited places and attractions in the world. After a period of growth and challenges relating to visitor management and overtourism, the pandemic has demonstrated the vulnerability of tourism dependent communities. To 'build back better', we need tools and methodologies that help enhance adaptive and transformative capacity through a systems approach.

The UNESCO Visitor Management Assessment & Strategy Tool (VMAST), developed within the context of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972) and set out through the UNESCO World Heritage Sustainable Tourism programme, is a new addition to the World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Toolkit. As a voluntary self-assessment tool, it helps site management authorities manage visitation and tourism for the protection of heritage values while localizing sustainable development goals.

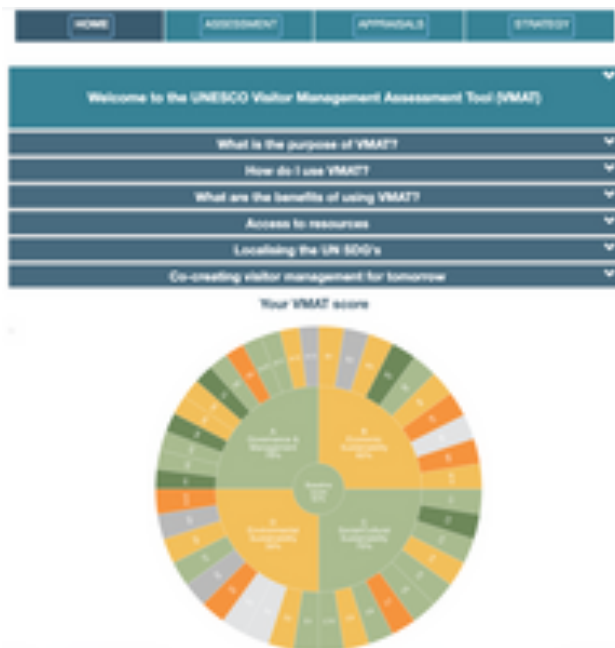
The tool was developed with input from a broad spectre of stakeholders, including the Advisory Bodies (IUCN, ICOMOS, ICCROM), site managers and professionals working in the field of sustainable development and tourism. It aligns with the Operational Guidelines for Implementation of the Convention, the Periodic Reporting Tool, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations (GSTC-D) among other relevant resources.

While many monitoring and management tools including certification systems focus on principles and what should be done at a minimum, VMAST recognise the many different efforts that can be considered good visitor management. VMAST allows the creation of a visitor management baseline encouraging improvements over time, considering best practice an ongoing process rather than status. As site management compare against their own baseline, sites managed under relatively low budgets may just as well demonstrate significant progress as compared to relatively resourced sites. As such, VMAST is designed to recognise and celebrate what is done and inspire continued efforts to improve and adjust visitor management according to resources and needs.

VMAST is used to assess achievements towards governance and visitor management with indicators structured under four main goals:

1. *Effective governance and visitor management protecting heritage values*
2. *Contribution to environmental sustainability, climate change mitigation and adaptation*
3. *Contribution to inclusive social development and cultural sustainability*
4. *Contribution to inclusive economic development*

Each of these goals include ten management objectives with approximately five target outcomes. With such a rich content, easing the user experience was an important consideration in its development. Besides an assessment and monitoring functionality, VMAST also include an integrated strategy function



allowing users to formulate building blocks for a SMART strategy and action plan.

VMAST aims to improve practice across five management activities:

Monitoring -> Improved understanding

Use VMAST to inform what could be done to improve protection of the sites heritage values while contributing to sustainable development objectives.

Budgeted activities -> Feasible ambitions

Use VMAST to budget for activities and support feasibility of strategic ambitions.

Communication -> Improved outreach

Use VMAST to effectively and in a culturally appropriate manner communicate with relevant stakeholders.

Capacity development -> Strengthened capacities

Use VMAST to engage with relevant stakeholders and strengthen capacities towards the achievements of identified sustainability and development objectives.

Collaboration -> Increased impact

Use VMAST as a framework to enhance engagement and dialogue with local and national authorities, rights-holders and other relevant stakeholders.

The presentation will focus on experiences from implementation the tool and user feedback. It will also focus on the potential for making use of VMAST beyond World Heritage.