

World Heritage and sustainable tourism challenges and current approaches

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World Heritage sites are unique treasures of humanity. These natural and cultural wonders have outstanding universal value, represent our past and present, and belong to all. These sites are also important travel destinations with huge potential impact for local economic development and long-term sustainability.

Travel and tourism is one of the largest industries and heritage tourism is its most rapidly growing international sector. With millions of tourists visiting World Heritage sites each year, tourism has become an important cross cutting issue and management concern at most World Heritage sites.

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre has developed the World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme (UNESCO WH + ST) to catalyse positive change to protect and conserve the sites while enriching the lives of local communities at the same time enhancing the experience of travellers.

If undertaken responsibly, tourism can be a positive force for local community development and a vehicle for conservation and environmental protection. But if unplanned, tourism can be socially, culturally and economically disruptive, and have a devastating effect on fragile environments.

For the stakeholders implementing the global strategy of the World Heritage Convention, the overarching goal is the protection of cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value. It is also the fact that this natural and cultural heritage provides the assets needed for tourism development and the accrued benefits for the local communities. Therefore in order to achieve economic, environmental and social sustainability, the natural and cultural assets must be valued and protected and appropriate tourism developed.

At an operational level, there are a number of critical factors, which need to be addressed to foster sustainable tourism at a World Heritage property. This includes understanding the context, planning and development, management and monitoring, compliance and resources.

World Heritage is defined by its Outstanding Universal Values (OUV). Tourism to World Heritage properties represents an opportunity for sustainable development. However, if not well managed tourism may negatively impact the OUV and hence threaten our global heritage belonging to this and future generations.

Addressing unsustainable tourism and promoting sustainability requires a sophisticated, multi-layered and coordinated approach. The mechanisms of the World Heritage Convention, as outlined in the Operational Guidelines, represent a strategic advantage. The mechanisms relate to the nomination and inscription of World Heritage properties, their management, monitoring and evaluation, reporting as well as support and financial assistance. There are opportunities to strengthen the mechanisms of the Convention in terms of attention to tourism and for the new programme to assess potential impact on OUV from tourism and whether adequate management arrangements are in place. Although the mechanisms primarily focus at site level they can also

inform the enabling environment providing the overall policy and regulatory framework as well as the institutional and funding arrangements.

While activities at site level may achieve specific results, they can also be very resource intensive and risk being undermined by a weak enabling environment. On the other hand, opportunities to influence the enabling environment may be complex but can have significant impact and present a more strategic approach for the new programme on World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism.

However, there are significant challenges for UNESCO to respond effectively. The number and diversity of World Heritage properties, the complexity of the tourism industry, capacity needs and conflicting incentives across a range of stakeholders may lead to the prioritization of short-term gains at the cost of sustainability. Furthermore, resources available to the Programme and its partners may at best be modest in relation to the scale of the challenge.

UNESCO is advocating a strategic approaches that:

- Integrate a sustainable tourism perspective into the mechanisms of the World Heritage Convention.
- Strengthen the enabling environment by advocating policies and frameworks that support sustainable tourism as an important vehicle for managing cultural and natural heritage of Outstanding Universal Value.
- Promote broad stakeholder engagement in the planning, development and management of sustainable tourism that follows a destination approach and focuses on empowering local communities.
- Provide World Heritage stakeholders with the capacity and the tools to manage tourism efficiently, responsibly and sustainably based on the local context and needs.
- Promote quality authentic tourism products and services that encourage responsible behaviour among all stakeholders and foster understanding and appreciation of the concept of Outstanding Universal Value and protection of World Heritage.