The governance strategy of the Dolomites World Heritage Site – From carrying capacity to carrying capability.

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The Dolomites World Heritage Site – inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List on June 2009 – are widely regarded as being among the most attractive mountain landscapes in the world, as millions of people testify coming from all over the world to visit it every year, both in summer and winter. The Dolomites WHS are inscribed on the List as a serial site since they appear as an organic whole even though they have a complex structure both from the geographical/landscape and the geological/geomorphological point of view. Like an extraordinary "fossil archipelago", the Dolomites WHS constitutes a select set of exceptional geological features and landscapes, characterized by extraordinary representativeness and high levels of protection, and it is connected by a network of genetic and aesthetic relationships [Micheletti, Gianolla and Panizza, 2008].

The governance strategy of the Dolomites WHS

The mechanisms put in place to guarantee the conservation and enhancement of the site originate mainly from the choices on the basis of the conceptual 'construction' of the site. In other words, this means ensuring that the management strategies and development policies descend logically from the strategies implemented for constructing the serial site. The guiding principles are: networked management, harmonisation, participation and cooperation.

From a serial site to networked management

The concept 'networked management' is a consequence of the interpretation of the seriality of the site, in which the nine component sites are seen as interrelated parts in terms of the universal value of the entire WHS. This concept was recognised as good practice by UNESCO. The management is based on enhancing the specific territorial features by means of functional networks – which interpret the serial structure of the WHS – and by harmonising management actions to select those elements that are common to all the component parts [FD4U, 2011].

The overall management strategy acts as a multiplying factor to strengthen the effectiveness of each aspect of management and facilitate interaction and the creation of synergy between the territories in a dynamic system, taking into consideration the fact that every form of local government has developed in response to the needs of its territory.

The vast number of stakeholders operating within the WHS is the result of the particular geo-morphological configuration of the Dolomite mountains, which are divided into many isolated groups making them unusually accessible, and also due to the fact that historically, these areas feature the highest number of stable human settlements in the Alps, many of which are pre-historic in origin and loca ted at a very high altitude. This means that the Dolomites are one of the most densely populated mountain areas in the Alps, characterised by deeply rooted and highly developed traditions, cultures and management systems.

Furthermore the Dolomites are one of the most famous mountain landscapes in the world and in some areas the visitor levels are already at or over capacity.

For this reason the strategy deals with a comprehensive approach for recreational use covering the WHS, its buffer zones and considering appropriate links to a wider region, in order to maintain the Outstanding Universal Value and conditions of integrity of the WHS. The method chosen for assessing critical points and the potential for the status of recreational use in the WHS is the carrying capacity assessment (CCA).

From carrying capacity to carrying capability

To assess the CC is particularly complex in a serial natural site as varied as the Dolomites. In fact, the Dolomite region includes full-grown tourism destinations, for which it is extremely important to invest more in environmental conservation, and others rising, for which it is essential to set carefully projects of environmentally sustainable tourism from the start.

This complexity requires a specific approach to CC, although recognizing that the experiences and methods developed in the planning of the CC in protected natural areas have more and more evolved in recent years [Manning, 2007].

In particular, it has gone from the use of physical and ecological parameters – relatively easily to measure – to the use of socio-demographic and socio-cultural parameters, more complex to evaluate [Russel and Rey-Vallette, 2007]. Nevertheless, the cultural resources have been included amongst the non-renewable resources in few cases [Seidl and Tisdell, 1998; Nurse, 2006]. This finds an explanation in the fact that the concept of carrying capacity has been applied particularly in natural areas visited, but not lived in, by man. In the case of the Dolomite range however, where man is present and lives in the mountains since prehistoric times, a clear distinction between natural and cultural resources is difficult and pointless. In fact, over centuries of habitual visiting, man has become an integral part of the life cycle of these areas.

Planning the carrying capacity of the Dolomites has therefore imposed a new process, putting the methods applied to date into context. The main idea consists in evaluating the cultural diversity not only as an entity to preserve but as an activity (as active elements) capable of intervening on

Figure 1. The Dolomites World Heritage

the positioning of the bottom-line for defining effects. A dynamic rather than deterministic interpretation of the variable indicators derives from this, that is the measurable elements and the standards, the limits within which to keep the values of the indicators. Consequently the process of repetitive indicator-standard relations becomes interactive, since the variation of "importance" of the indicators entails a parallel "adaptation" of the limits, as happens in a dynamic system.

In this perspective the focus shifts from the "capacity" to the "ability" of the territories, interpreting them as active and not passive subjects of transformation. The term "carrying capability" would express this active perspective, considering the complex of aptitudes that allows a complex system as a serial site to interact with the evolutionary phenomena that involves itself.

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