Governance and sustainable tourism in World Heritage sites – Can sustainable tourism serve as a tool for improved protection of UNESCO World Heritage sites?

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Introduction

The UNESCO World Heritage List contains over 900 of the world's most important natural and cultural areas and therewith contributes to their conservation. The inscription of a site in the list means not only the recognition of its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) and its integrity, but also implies the need to protect and manage it (Edroma 2004). A site being removed from the World Heritage List due to endangered site values means not only an irreversible loss of biological and cultural diversity, but also of our common heritage of humanity.

Despite the crucial contribution of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention to secure the World Heritage site values, the sites face various significant challenges and many portray severely threatened protected areas. Impacts result from direct degradation (human pressure, armed conflict, war, natural disasters and pollution), but also poaching, invasive alien species and global effects (e.g. impacts of climate change) can cause loss of biodiversity. Additionally, uncontrolled urbanization and tourism development can result in direct and indirect impacts on the site, whereas a lack of political support and sustainable finance can largely influence the effectiveness of managing the site and preserving its OUV.

An often discussed – yet to be critically considered – concept that could link conservation and development in World Heritage sites is sustainable tourism. Tourism in general has the potential to generate economic benefits that support site conservation and the regional as well as national economy. However, poorly managed tourism development can also have severe consequences for the site's integrity and its OUV, possibly also degrading the quality of the visitor experience (Tourtellot 2007 in Borges et al. 2011; Pedersen 2011; UNESCO 2012). Thus, management of tourism in a sustainable way is often discussed as benefitting conservation purposes.

Governance was identified as a key factor for the conservation of protected areas, having a major influence on the achievement of protected area objectives (Dearden & Bennett 2005; Mehnen et al. 2009; Tilcepa 2003 in UNESCO 2005). A cornerstone of the debate on protected area governance was the 5th IUCN World Parks Congress in Durban 2003. Since then, the topic has become more and more influential, and research has been carried out on 'good governance' (Borrini-Feyerabend 2003, Graham et al. 2003), on the application of governance to different categories of protected areas (Fürst et al. 2006; Mehnen et al. 2009; Stoll-Kleemann et al. 2006) as well as on trends in protected area governance (Dearden et al. 2005). Some research has been carried out on World Heritage and governance (Thomas 2003; Thorsell 2003) in preparation for the workshop on governance and World Heritage at the 5th IUCN World Parks Congress, regarding the World Heritage Convention as a tool of governance.

Methodological approach and expected results

Recognizing governance as a key factor for the conservation of protected areas (see figure 1), the purpose of our research is the development of a governance model for World Heritage sites, which contains of components such as actors, their interests, strategies and instruments (globally, nationally, regionally, and locally). The development of the governance model is based on literature research of previous work being done on governance in protected areas (Borrini-Feyerabend 2003, Graham et al. 2003, Thomas 2003) and the application of qualitative social research methods. Through experts' consultation, the model will be further developed and tested. The governance model for World Heritage will focus on the context of World Heritage sites as specific types of protected areas, being subject to the World Heritage Convention as a governance tool on international level.

Governance helps to enable effective site management and to reach the desired outcomes. Management effectiveness assessments serve to measure the effectiveness of management to preserve the sites' OUV. Therefore, the relationship between governance and management effectiveness needs to be increasingly understood (Dearden et al. 2005). Thus, management effectiveness has to be analyzed within the governance model as an important component of preserving the site values, but largely influenced by the governance framework (see figure 1). It is assumed that the evaluation of the interdependencies between governance and management effectiveness can further disclose success factors and challenges for site management to preserve the sites' OUV taking into account the governance structure.

As participatory governance evaluation processes are of great importance (Borrini-Feyerabend 2003), the application and analysis of the governance model will in a next step be carried out in different case study sites – European (Northern) and Non-European (Southern) UNESCO World Heritage sites. Thereby, the largely different economic, social and cultural contexts, having an impact on the governance structure, are recognized, and the diversity of World Heritage sites is represented. Expert interviews as well as stakeholder workshops are used to gain actors knowledge. The application of the governance model helps to identify the impacts differing between the analyzed World Heritage case study sites.
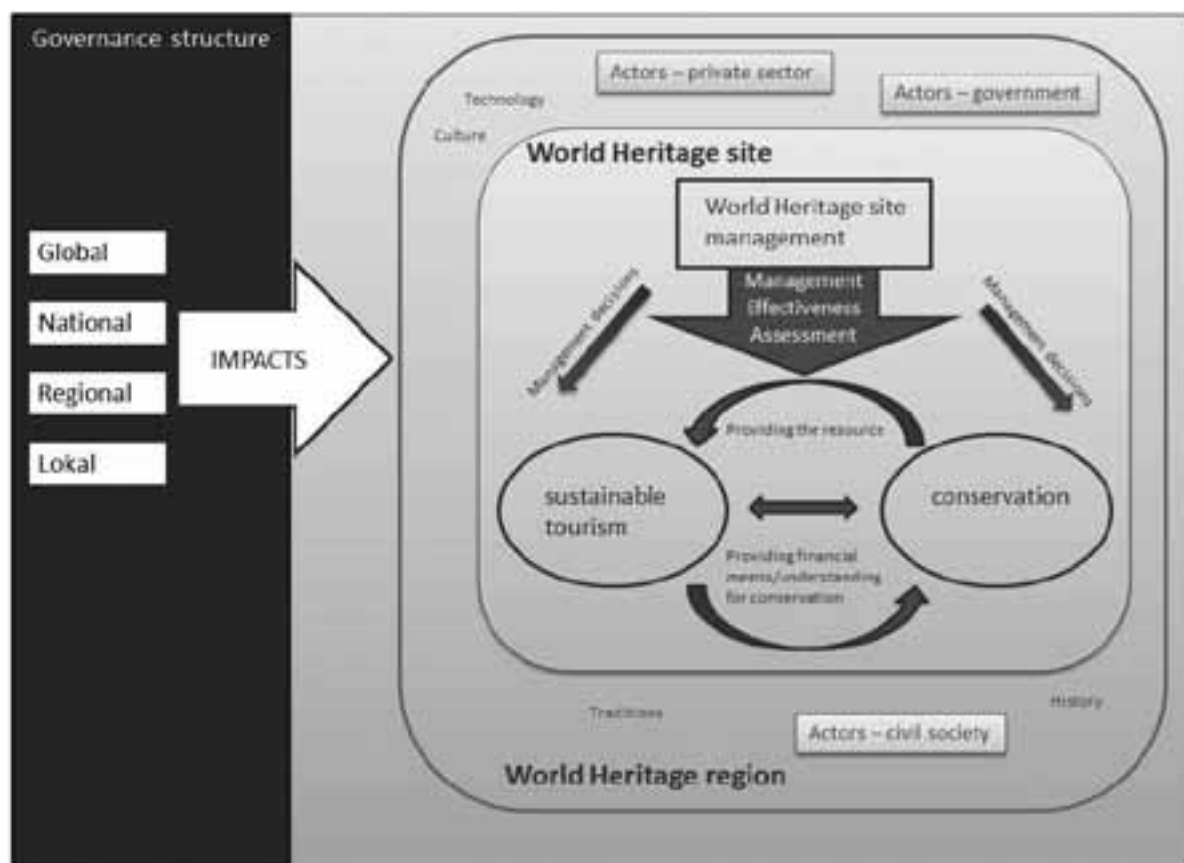
Figure 1. Impacts of governance on UNESCO World Heritage sites; Source: own illustration

Considering the critical application of sustainable tourism as concept to link sustainable development and conservation, the question of whether and under which circumstances sustainable tourism as a strategy can improve the protection of World Heritage sites needs to be further analyzed on the basis of the case study sites. Effective management of sustainable tourism as a part of the overall World Heritage site management is dependent on the particular governance structure the site is situated in. Thus, the study results should indicate the relation between governance structures – stretching from local to global levels, involving different stakeholders including the management, tourism sector, local community, regional and national government etc. – and sustainable tourism management assisting in preserving the site values. Best practice examples are to be identified as an important output of the study.

Conclusion

The main output of the study is the identification of ways for a better long-term protection of World Heritage sites' OUV, taking into account the governance structures and their impact on effective management. The application of the governance model in the case study sites helps to identify success factors and challenges of governance structures in regard to World Heritage as well as to develop strategies to improve protection in the specific sites. Whether sustainable tourism can be a tool to enhance protection of World Heritage sites, and the impact of governance structures on it, will be another important output of the study.

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