

The Program for Visitor Management at Monte Alban, Mexico: A Strategy for Managing Mass Tourism through Junior Volunteers

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A common problem among those grand World Heritage Sites such as Angkor, Taj-Mahal, Great Wall of China, or the Roman Coliseum is the unrelenting pressure of mass visitation, a continuing presence regardless of season or circumstance. Site managers and service providers know few respites and must plan their relationship with visitors as of constant demand. Most cultural and natural sites open to the public, however, experience periodic fluctuations in the flow of visitor traffic, i.e., across a year will have peak, moderate, and low seasons, often quite predictable because they coincide with calendars governing visitor mobility such as school calendars or public celebrations. In Latin America peak periods for domestic tourism frequently coincide with major flows of international tourist traffic, confronting sites with dramatic though predictable swings in the volume of visitors within a relatively short time.

Managing Monte Alban's Visitor Traffic

Monte Alban, a World Heritage Site in Oaxaca, Mexico, confronts the challenge of addressing substantial fluctuation in visitor traffic across the year. With approximately 700,000 visitors each year it struggles to maintain an acceptable international standard for the quality of visitor experience while protecting the vital qualities of the site. Visitor pressures soar during three periods during the year: Holy Week, the Guelaguetza dance festival in the nearby city of Oaxaca in mid-July, and the Christmas – New Year vacations at the end of the year. The state of Oaxaca, one of the poorest in Mexico, nevertheless attracts tourism due to its rich archaeological heritage, vibrant local culture, reputation for grand cuisine, and creative crafts. Thus three times yearly a surge of visitors may increase Monte Alban's weekly count by five-fold or more, continually threatening to overwhelm its limited staff.

One complication is the federal budget process sends the income generated by Monte Alban to central agencies in Mexico City that then return it across the budget year. This means that resource availability does not always coincide with resource demands. And beyond the matter of problems with a budgeting calendar lie the realities that visitor services at Monte Alban must compete with not only other archaeological sites but all of the other demands for federal funds such as education, health care, public safety, and infrastructure. Thus site management cannot count on budget support alone to meet the needs and expectations of eager visitors.

Structural accommodation

One approach Monte Alban's site managers have pursued has been continuing attention to planning and organizational arrangements intended to produce as much value as possible for each peso spent. In 1997 Monte Alban introduced the first site management plan in Mexico, an attempt to rationalize efforts by creating departments of Research, Conservation, Maintenance and Security, Dissemination (which includes Visitor Services) and Administration. Dissemination has focused heavily on outreach and visitor contact, taking responsibility for the site museum, educational services, and coordinating an increasingly-complex Visitor Attention Program which moves into action during the periods of peak visitor traffic in Holy Week, the Guelaguetza, and the Christmas holiday. Structural accommodation seeks to smooth interaction among departments to assure effective services while holding down costs, such as assuring Maintenance alters the schedule for trash removal to align with heavier visitor demand. It also seeks to reinforce visitor protection and wellbeing by creating a temporary medical post staffed by the Red Cross, arranging the temporary presence of local traffic police, and a temporary tourist services desk. During the Christmas-New Year's week visitors sometimes exceed 8000 daily, and total staff on site may temporarily reach 200.

Volunteer Rangers

Structural accommodation reflects an institutional response to the burdens of periodic surges in visitor traffic as Monte Alban address the demands via internal adjustment and collaboration with external actors. But the need for additional support also created an exceptional opportunity to draw on the human resources of neighboring communities and thereby reinforce a sense that Monte Alban belongs to them, not just the tourist trade. To do this Monte Alban created a program referred to as *Custodios Voluntarios*, often referred to as Junior Rangers. It draws on the happy coincidence that the three periods of heavy visitor traffic occurs during school vacations in local communities. Monte Alban seeks out volunteers from nearby schools and different grade levels to spend two weeks directing groups of visitors and looking after monuments. Site archaeologists provide them with basic information and training as well as some equipment and food. The Junior Rangers become a supplementary team assisting with visitor control while nurturing a sense of site ownership and interest. Roving archaeologists provide encouragement, support, and information. Domestic and international tourism alike responds positively to encounters with children protecting local heritage. At the end of the program the Junior Rangers enjoy a party and receive diplomas thanking them for their service.

Conclusion

Structural accommodation offers a way to mobilize internal and external organizational capacity to better respond to variations in visitor demand. The Junior Rangers build links to neighboring communities, create a sense of identification with Monte Alban, and remind us of the importance of the human element in protecting natural and cultural heritage. Both approaches contribute to visitor management in the face of stress.