

## THE IMPACT OF WORLD HERITAGE LISTING

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**Abstract.** The paper reviews the history and development of the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention and analyses the extent to which the aims of those responsible for its drafting and application have been achieved. In the opinion of the author the present situation has become over-politicized and the implementation of the Convention is overdue for an objective re-evaluation. The growth of tourism since the 1970s has created new challenges to those responsible for the management of the world's cultural and natural heritage, who should address the impact of tourism on that heritage in close conjunction with international tourism institutions.

### The genesis and development of the Convention

The need for an international legal instrument to ensure the protection and conservation of the cultural and natural heritage was recognized as the world rebuilt itself after the destruction and depredations of World War II. It had been discussed over several decades by the League of Nations, without any concrete result, and it was taken over by UNESCO on its foundation in 1945. Little positive happened in the following decades (apart from the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the result of the initiative and resolution of the Government of The Netherlands), and it was not until the 1960s that progress was made (Parent 1984; Pressouyre 1993; Batisse & Bolla 2003), leading eventually to the promulgation of the 1972 *Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage*, better known as the World Heritage Convention. Its *raison d'être* and objectives are made clear in the Preamble to the Convention:

- 1 *Noting* that the cultural heritage and the natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation with even more formidable phenomena of damage or destruction,
- 2 *Considering* that deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world,
- 3 *Considering* that protection of this heritage at the national level often remains incomplete because of the scale of the resources which it requires and of the insufficient economic, scientific, and technological resources of the country where the property to be protected is situated,

➤ 4 *Recalling* that the Constitution of the Organization provides that it will maintain, increase, and diffuse knowledge by assuring the conservation and protection of the world's heritage, and recommending to the nations concerned the necessary international conventions,

➤ 5 *Considering* that the existing international conventions, recommendations and resolutions concerning cultural and natural property demonstrate the importance, for all the peoples of the world, of safeguarding this unique and irreplaceable property, to whatever people it may belong,

➤ 6 *Considering* that parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole,

➤ 7 *Considering* that, in view of the magnitude and gravity of the new dangers threatening them, it is incumbent on the international community as a whole to participate in the protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value, by the granting of collective assistance which, although not taking the place of action by the State concerned, will serve as an efficient complement thereto.

### The Convention in 2011

By July 2011 the Convention had been ratified by no fewer than 187 countries, and there were 936 sites and monuments ("properties" in UN jargon) on the World Heritage List in 153 countries ("Member States" or "States Parties"); 725 of them cultural, 183 natural, and 28 mixed (that is to say, on the List for both cultural and natural qualities).

This sounds impressive, but it has to be acknowledged that the List can in no sense be considered to be representative of the great diversity of the world's cultural and natural heritage. One of the most serious problems is probably the different perceptions of "outstanding universal value," the primary criterion for inscription on the List, between the cultural and natural communities. It had originally been intended that the List should not exceed one hundred properties, with equal numbers of them cultural and natural, but the ambitions of different countries for international recognition of their own heritages and the weaknesses in the evaluation process meant that this quickly became no more than a pipe dream. The whole concept was vitiated from the start by the fact that nominations could only be made by national governments. As a result certain categories of cultural monument figure disproportionately on the List: Gothic cathedrals, for example, are to be found in every country where this style developed and no former province of the Roman Empire is unrepresented.

Another problem that the Committee has not yet succeeded in resolving is that of the apparent competition between a number of countries to have as many as possible of the most important heritage properties on their territories inscribed on the List. Italy, for example, now has 47 World Heritage sites and monuments, with as many more awaiting nomination, and it is followed by countries such as Spain (43), France (37), and Germany (36). Outside Europe China is well represented (41) with India next in Asia (29) (though a case can probably be made for these large countries with their long and eventful histories). Mexico (31) is also well represented, and is way in front in the New World. At the other end of the scale there is a number of countries represented by a single property.

There is also a tendency for properties to be inscribed on the List as a result of backstairs discussions by sympathetic delegations during Committee meetings. A recent article in *The Economist* magazine (2010) reports that at the 2010 meeting of the World Heritage Committee in Brasilia 21 properties were put on the List, ten of them against the advice of the Advisory Bodies\*. The article perceptively draws attention to the fact that the numbers of heritage professionals on national delegations had decreased alarmingly in recent years in favour of politicians and bureaucrats.

Analysis of the existing World Heritage List and all the tentative lists of States Parties some years ago by ICOMOS (Jokilehto et al. 2005) showed that this imbalance was likely to persist unless drastic measures were implemented. A number of possible actions that might be taken in order to rectify this situation have been proposed and debated, but in my

opinion none of these could be expected to succeed unless drastic measures, such as a moratorium, were to be imposed on further nominations from over-represented States Parties or of over-represented categories of property.

Another, more cosmetic, solution that has been suggested and appears to have been greeted with some measure of relief is what are known as "serial nominations." These are groups of similar or closely linked properties, within a single country or covering more than one, the cultural value of which is that of the group and not of any single property. A good example is the Castles and Town Walls of King Edward in Gwynedd, Wales (United Kingdom). A case can be made for this device in certain cases, but it has been deliberately misused by several States Parties in order to satisfy local ambitions for political reasons: the most exceptional example is probably a Spanish serial property that embraces several hundred remote megalithic sites. More disturbing are grandiloquent proposals such as that for the Silk Road, from Xi'an in China to the Mediterranean (or, in the most ambitious proposal, from Japan to Italy).

Another that is even more fanciful is that of the Great Rift Valley, stretching more than 6000 kilometres from Central Africa to Asia Minor.

Clearly the wholly admirable objectives in the Convention have been amply realized over the past forty years.

The World Heritage List continues to grow, and there is a good case for asserting that the lofty objectives set out in the Preamble to the Convention have to a considerable extent been achieved. It is now formally acknowledged by no fewer than 187 countries that "...that parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole." However, it is less arguable that "in view of the magnitude and gravity of the new dangers threatening them, the international community as a whole [should] participate in the protection of the cultural and natural heritage .... by the granting of collective assistance which, although not taking the place of action by the State concerned, will serve as an efficient complement thereto." There is indeed the World Heritage Fund (interestingly, an unrealized project of the League of Nations in the interwar years that UNESCO inherited on its formation in 1945), but the resources available from this source are severely

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\* The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

limited and do little to meet the requirements of those countries with rich heritages that are subject to adverse economic and social pressures that cannot be dealt with from their own resources. World Heritage Listing can be of significance indirectly, in that it highlights individual needs that can be responded to by means of bilateral aid from countries such as Italy, Germany, France, Japan, and the USA or from private foundations such as the World Heritage Fund. There is, however, no overall programme that brings together and coordinates these diverse sources.

### The future of the Convention

What has been described above demonstrates that there can surely be no dispute that, in spite of the defects that have been identified, the World Heritage Convention has been remarkably successful in achieving the objects set out in its Preamble, designed to ensure the survival of the past for the benefit of future generations. However, the time is now surely overdue for a more objective survey of what it has accomplished and what remains to be done.

Serious consideration must be given to a number of serious shortcomings in the present set-up. These include, *inter alia*, the need for a systematic impartial monitoring of those sites and monuments that are already on the List. Linked with this is the development of a firm policy of re-evaluation, leading to the potential removal of certain sites and monuments from the List if they fail to meet the requirements relating to the “outstanding universal value” and the management of properties. There is also an urgent need to rationalize the different approaches to evaluation of nominations adopted by the two Advisory Bodies.

If the World Heritage Convention is to survive and retain its validity and meaning it will require a complete overhaul and reorientation in the coming years. As a recent leading article in *The Guardian* on

2 August 2010 put it, “An effective solution would be to slash the number of World Heritage sites down to 1990s levels .... and focus scarce resources and expertise where they are not already available in abundance. Otherwise, what more do we have than a tourist information leaflet for the world?”

### The impact of tourism

The somewhat sardonic comment made in *the Observer* article leads to an aspect of the Convention and its application that has so far received scant attention at UNESCO or Member State level, and one which is intensely relevant to the present Symposium, on *Heritage, driver of development*. This theme is devoted to a consideration of “Development as tourism,” with the following three sub-themes:

- 1 Heritage facing the challenge of tourism: what strategies, what tools?
- 2 Can the development of tourism be sustainable?
- 3 How determining is appropriation of the heritage by local populations regarding sustainability of tourist development? And how can tourism help populations regain their heritage?”

Scrutiny of the achievements of the World Heritage Convention in this respect suggests this is an area in which its performance has been less effective than in other fields.

*The Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO 2008) set out detailed prescriptions regarding the management and conservation of properties nominated for inscription which must be complied with. In addition to cultural significance, these cover *inter alia* the state of conservation, protection (including development plans and proposals of all kinds), management structures and objectives, and provision for regular and impartial monitoring.

Extensive documentation is required and this, together with the reports of expert missions, are used to compile the detailed reports by ICOMOS and IUCN that are presented to the Committee to assist it in making a decision regarding inscription on the List. The encouragement and development of tourism on the basis of World Heritage Listing, which has become increasingly intensive in recent decades, can be seen to have resulted in an unanticipated and undesirable *–ex post facto–* impact which has in some cases become seriously counter-productive. This is manifested in an excessive and insensitive policy for the provision of tourist facilities (hotels, restaurants, shops, etc), within or around Listed sites and monuments. The approaches to such sites as Pompeii (Italy) or Fatehpur Sikri (India) are disfigured by large areas of commercial activities designed to ensnare the visitors. This was the situation until comparatively recently at Troy (Turkey), but the heritage agency has taken steps to remove these from the immediate vicinity of the entrances.

In order to fulfil these rigorous requirements, Member States of the Convention frequently prescribe and implement extensive land-use plans which may have adverse impacts on traditional social structures and customs. These may result in the loss of some of the qualities for which properties have been inscribed on the List and may also destroy certain aspects of the genesis and survival of a community or urban landscape upon which tourism is developed by creating a false picture.

The most obvious illustrations of the arguably adverse impact of this approach are those where a well established land-use has been disrupted by the removal of elements that bear witness to this quality, which testifies to the eligibility of sites and monuments for inscription on the World Heritage List. When I first saw Petra (Lebanon) some sixty years ago it was much as it was when it was visited by the

some kind of “heritage Disneyland” in which their organic growth is smoothed over and neutralized. I have powerful memories of my first visit (in 1963) to Alberobello (Italy) and its extraordinary domestic buildings, known locally as *trulli*. At that time this was an active and viable community where most of the buildings served to house traditional crafts and also to meet the needs of the contemporary



Figure 1 Mycenae: Treasury of Atreus in summer

Scottish artist David Roberts in 1839, with a Bedouin community living in the ruins.

Much has been done by Lebanese officials and archaeologists to remove all traces of these more recent occupants, rehousing them in drab modern structures out of sight of the tourists. A similar situation can be found at Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka), though here the alternative accommodation is markedly superior to that provided at Petra. There are other examples of the expulsion of contemporary communities from heritage sites; one of the most contentious is probably that of Chan Chan (Peru), where the indigenous inhabitants of part of this vast archaeological site are in all probability direct descendants of those who built the ancient mud-brick city.

Another questionable aspect of the development of heritage properties is that of the excessive cleaning and sanitizing of outstanding historical settlements, and thereby creating

society of the town. Alberobello has deservedly been on the World Heritage List since 1996, but its character has been destroyed: the central area appears no longer to have any social function apart from selling snacks and souvenirs to tourists. The same melancholy fate has befallen the historic town of Lijiang (China), which dates back to the 13th century CE. The efforts to attract tourists have resulted in the redecoration and restoration of all the buildings in the Old City, which is highly desirable, but at the same time in the loss of the quality of a living community centre. This is best illustrated in the spacious market-place, where all the stalls at first site give the impression of selling products for the consumption of local inhabitants; closer inspection reveals that they are selling a wide range of souvenirs for tourists. This is a phenomenon that is much in evidence in a substantial proportion of the urban centres on the World Heritage List, one which paradoxically suppresses what should be a major element of such properties, that of visible



living continuity.

With regard to the first subtheme, *Heritage facing the challenge of tourism: what strategies, what tools?*, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee has, in my opinion rightly, not directed too great a proportion of its scanty resources to this aspect of the international heritage. Tourism planning and

theirs.” This is a worthy concept, but one that needs to be studied by a wide-ranging expert group, comprising not simply heritage and tourism experts, but also those working in broader fields, such as economics, politics, and philosophy. It may well be unrealistic in the current international climate of severe



Figure 2 The Great Wall of China at Badaling, near Beijing

pressures are no more than alluded to in the Operational Guidelines (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2008), without the development of more specific provisions, whilst only the first in its admirable World Heritage Series (Pedersen 2002) specifically addresses tourism, and concentrates on tools rather than on strategies and policies. It is arguable whether priority should be given, in the light of the limited resources of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and Centre, to the development of overall tourism strategies for World Heritage sites and monuments. This is a subject that might well be worth considering as a joint project with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

The second subtheme asks whether the development of tourism can be sustainable. It puts forward for consideration a concept of sustainability in the following terms: “A development (of tourism) that would answer the needs of the present generation without compromising (i.e. preserving heritage values) the capacity of future generations to answer

economic and political disruption, but it would be immensely valuable if UNESCO were to make use of its international professional networks and contacts to encourage preliminary studies in this important field, before it is too late.

The third subtheme addresses the problem of evaluating how determining the appropriation of the heritage by local populations regarding sustainability of tourist development should be, and how tourism can assist populations in regaining their heritages. This is, in most cases, influenced strongly by both the political profile of the current government in the country concerned and the extent to which the present-day inhabitants see themselves as being directly descended from those who in the past have strongly influenced the growth and cultural history of the site/monument. Political elements may be so strongly centralized under an authoritarian government that the role of local populations is very restricted. It would

be invidious to identify specific heritage sites and monuments where officials operating at supra-urban level have imposed their concept of the relevant heritage qualities on local populations and administrations. A number of examples located in recently constituted sovereign states formed as the result of securing independence from larger political units in, for example, Central Asia or sub-Saharan Africa will doubtless spring to mind. There are comparable situations in countries such as Turkey, where a number of ethnic and religious groups may exist side by side, within both national frontiers and town boundaries. Perhaps the most striking examples of tourism assisting populations in regaining their heritages are to be found in Australia. The indigenous Aboriginal peoples have been successful in raising the profile of their cultural remains by being given a key role in the management and presentation of some of their most important and sacred sites.

For example, management of the unique archaeological and ethnological reserve of Kakadu, located in the Northern Territory, which has been inhabited continuously for more than 40,000 years, is to a significant extent in the hands of the local Aboriginal people, who have played the dominant role in planning and designing the site interpretation centre and museum. In a similar way, the local communities played a major role in the nomination to the World Heritage List and the subsequent management of the Fujian *Tulou* in China, which consists of over forty remarkable earthen buildings, circular in plan, some of which were constructed between the 15th and 20th centuries and still house as many as 800 people.

### Conclusion

The title of this paper poses a question – or to be more precise, two questions. The first asks whether the World Heritage Convention has been a success or a failure, and the second goes on to apply a similar test to the role of tourism within the Convention.

The answer to the first question must surely be equivocal: intellectually it has been successful in confronting the problems set out in the Preamble to the Convention, but the current situation is that such that the time has come for a new evaluation of the objectives of the Convention and the extent to which they have been achieved. The system is showing signs of political and bureaucratic ossification and it is therefore imperative that there should be a critical and impartial analysis of the implementation and achievements of the Convention without delay, to ensure that the intentions of those responsible for its creation four decades ago are redefined and reinforced, in order to prevent it being looked upon, in the words of the *Guardian* leader, no more than “a tourist information leaflet for the world.”

The answer to the second question, seeking to establish whether the World Heritage Convention is a success or a failure so far as tourism is concerned, must surely recognize that tourism and the tourist industry have hitherto paid scant heed to the ideals and objectives of the Convention. A cynic might agree with the comment quoted in a tribute to the distinguished travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor who died recently. When contemplating his beloved Greece he commented that “tourism destroys the object it loves” (Thubron 2011). This must strike a sombre chord in many lovers of the heritage when visiting honeypot sites such as the Taj Mahal or the Athens Acropolis. Once again, there must be a new evaluation of the relationship between tourism and heritage such as to ensure that their objectives can be coordinated so as to ensure that a relationship is established that will have the maximum positive effect on this precious but continuously threatened cultural resource.

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