

HERITAGE AT RISK FROM TOURISM

Introduction

At the 1999 General Assembly in Mexico, ICOMOS adopted the revised *ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter*, which had been prepared by the Cultural Tourism Committee in the period since the 1996 General Assembly in Sofia.

The specific aim of the *Charter* was to improve the relationship between conservation practitioners and the tourism industry. Previously the relationship had been one primarily focused on minimising the negative effects of tourism on sites and places of cultural significance. The *Charter* recommends that one of the primary reasons for undertaking any conservation works is to make the significance of the place more accessible to visitors and members of the host community, in a well-managed way.

The work currently being undertaken by ICOMOS in examining the wide-ranging risks faced by cultural heritage is an important international initiative and is commended by the International Cultural Tourism Committee. Given that tourism is one of the largest economic activities in the world, and accounts for the largest international and domestic movement of people, tourism can and does place considerable pressure on the world's heritage resources. In the company of armed conflict, economic development and environmental pollution, tourism can be regarded as one of the major factors that places Heritage at Risk.

This paper takes the various issues covered in the *ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter* and examines them as risks to the world's cultural heritage.

What is Cultural Heritage?

The *Charter* defines Heritage as a broad concept that includes the natural as well as the cultural environment.

- It encompasses landscapes, historic places, sites and built environments, as well as biodiversity, collections, past and continuing cultural practices, knowledge and living experiences.
- It records and expresses the long processes of historic development, forming the essence of diverse national, regional, indigenous and local identities and is an integral part of modern life.
- It is a dynamic reference point and positive instrument for growth and change.
- The particular, the heritage and collective memory of each locality or community is irreplaceable and an important foundation for development, both now and into the future.

The Dynamic Interaction between Tourism and Conservation

Domestic and international tourism continues to be among the foremost vehicles for cultural exchange, providing a personal experience, not only of that which has survived from the past, but also of the contemporary life and society of others. It is increasingly appreciated as a positive force for natural and cultural conservation. Tourism can capture the economic characteristics of heritage and harness these for conservation by generating funding, educating the community and influencing policy. It is an essential part of many national and regional economies and can be an important factor in development, when managed successfully.

Tourism itself has become an increasingly complex phenomenon, with political, economic, social, cultural, educational, bio-physical, ecological and aesthetic dimensions. The achievement of a beneficial interaction between the potentially conflicting expectations and aspirations of visitors and host or local communities presents many challenges and opportunities.

Natural and cultural heritage, diversities and living cultures are major tourism attractions. Excessive or poorly managed tourism and tourism-related development can threaten their physical nature, integrity and significant characteristics. The ecological setting, culture and lifestyles of host communities may also be degraded, along with the visitor's experience of the place.

Tourism should bring benefits to host communities and provide an important means and motivation for them to care for and maintain their heritage and cultural practices. The involvement and co-operation of local and/or Indigenous community representatives, conservationists, tourism operators, property owners, policy makers, those preparing national development plans and site managers is necessary to achieve a sustainable tourism industry and enhance the protection of heritage resources for future generations.

Threats from Tourism to Cultural Heritage

The threats from tourism to natural and cultural heritage of a particular place or community can be many and diverse. They include:

- A lack of adequate or appropriate presentation and communication of the significance of a place to both the visitor and members of the local or host community can lead to a lack of understanding and appreciation of the culture and heritage of the place within the wider community. This lack of awareness can hinder or prevent the development of public, political and governmental support and funding to protect and conserve the place.
- An improper or inequitable balance in programmes for the interpretation and presentation of the physical attributes of a place including its intangible aspects, contemporary cultural expression and the broader context of minority cultural or linguistic groups, can lead to an unbalanced or narrow understanding of the cultural heritage in the mind of the wider community.
- Inadequate integration of cultural heritage protection and management laws and practices into social, economic, political, legislative, cultural and tourism development policies at national and regional level can diminish the protection and conservation of cultural heritage over time.
- Inadequate recognition of the potential conflicts between tourism projects and activities and the conservation of cultural heritage can lead to poor planning and adverse impacts on the heritage and lifestyles of the host community.
- Conservation, interpretation and tourism development programmes that are based on an inadequate understanding of the complex and often conflicting aspects of significance of a place can lead to a loss of authenticity and reduced appreciation of the place.
- Tourism development can have adverse impacts on a place if it does not take account of the aesthetic, social and cultural dimensions, natural and cultural landscapes, bio-diversity characteristics and the broader visual context of heritage places.

- Excessive, poorly planned or unmonitored tourism activities and development projects can impose unacceptable levels of change on the physical characteristics, integrity, ecology and biodiversity of the place, local access and transportation systems and the social, economic and cultural well-being of the host community.
- Visitors who show little respect for the sanctity of spiritual places, practices and traditions by conducting themselves in an irresponsible manner can have an adverse impact on those places and the communities that regard them as important parts of their cultural identity.
- Tourism activities that consciously or inadvertently encourage trade in stolen or illicit cultural property can have an adverse effect on the cultural resources of the host community.
- Poorly planned, designed or located visitor facilities can have an adverse impact on the significant features or ecological characteristics of heritage places.
- Disrespect on the part of visitors for the rights and interests of the host community, at regional and local levels, property owners and relevant Indigenous peoples who may exercise traditional rights or responsibilities over their own land and its significant sites, including restriction of access to certain cultural practices, knowledge, beliefs, activities, artefacts or sites, can lead to conflict and have an adverse impact on the host community.
- Lack of consultation with host communities or Indigenous custodians in establishing goals, strategies, policies and protocols for the identification, conservation, management, presentation and interpretation of their heritage resources, cultural practices and contemporary cultural expressions, in the tourism context can lead to conflict and have an adverse impact on the host community.
- If the economic, education, employment, social and cultural benefits of tourism are not distributed to the host communities in an equitable manner, both in terms of gender and geographic coverage, conflicts can arise in those communities against tourism. This can, in turn, limit the distribution of income derived from tourism for the conservation of heritage places.
- The use of guides and interpreters from outside a host community can minimise opportunities for the employment of local people in the communication of the significance of the place to visitors. This can discourage local people from taking a direct interest in the care and conservation of their own heritage.
- A lack of integrated education and training opportunities for policy makers, planners, researchers, designers, architects, interpreters, conservators and tourism operators can hinder the resolution of the, at times, conflicting issues, opportunities and problems encountered by their colleagues.
- Tourism promotion programmes that create unrealistic expectations and do not responsibly inform potential visitors of the specific heritage characteristics of a place or host community can encourage them to behave inappropriately.
- Promotion and management of heritage places or collections that do not minimise fluctuations in arrivals and avoid excessive numbers of visitors at any one time can adversely impact both the significance of the place and the visitor experience.
- Tourism promotion programmes that do not encourage visitors to experience the wider cultural and natural heritage characteristics of a region or locality can limit the wider distribution of benefits and relieve the pressures on more popular places.
- The poorly managed promotion, distribution and sale of local crafts and other products can prevent a reasonable social and economic return to the host community, or potentially degrade their cultural integrity.

The Role of the ICOMOS Cultural Tourism Charter

The *ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter* can play a major role in managing the risks that tourism places on the cultural heritage. These roles are summarised in the stated Objectives of the *Charter*:

- To facilitate and encourage those involved with heritage conservation and management to make the significance of that heritage accessible to the host community and visitors.
- To facilitate and encourage the tourism industry to promote and manage tourism in ways that respect and enhance the heritage and living cultures of host communities.
- To facilitate and encourage a dialogue between conservation interests and the tourism industry about the importance and fragile nature of heritage places, collections and living cultures including the need to achieve a sustainable future for them.
- To encourage those formulating plans and policies to develop detailed, measurable goals and strategies relating to the presentation and interpretation of heritage places and cultural activities, in the context of their preservation and conservation.

In addition:

- The Charter supports wider initiatives by ICOMOS, other international bodies and the tourism industry in maintaining the integrity of heritage management and conservation.
- The Charter encourages the involvement of all those with relevant or at times conflicting interests, responsibilities and obligations to join in achieving its objectives.
- The Charter encourages the formulation of detailed guidelines by interested parties, facilitating the implementation of the Principles to their specific circumstances or the requirements of particular organisations and communities.

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