

HONDURAS

Cultural Heritage at the Crossroads of Modernity

Since 1984, Honduras has had a Law for the Protection of the Nation's Cultural Heritage; it was reformed in 1997 (Decree 220-97). However, public awareness about the role of citizens as direct actors in the conservation of cultural heritage is still poorly understood. For this reason and without exception, all historic monuments are in latent danger of improper intervention, or – in the worst case – of destruction without the mediation of experts or serious consideration of their opinions. On numerous occasions efforts have been made to create registers and regularly update and maintain them, but the concept of long-term planning is practically non-existent. The government's short-term political agendas weigh more in decision making, and this is subject to the personal interest that some officials in key places may have in matters of cultural heritage due to their previous professional training. This is to say that there is no guarantee that in a following government term the preceding planning will be continued. For this reason, in each particular case, conservators have to come to the defence of cultural heritage as crusaders of sorts, which is very often discouraging and unsuccessful.

The lack of recognition of the intrinsic value of cultural heritage as the spiritual wealth of a nation goes together with the lack of knowledge of conservation needs. This also occurs in cases in which cultural heritage generates tourism income. Furthermore, without the right management, tourism itself can become an agent of risk for the future of cultural properties. The maintenance of the authenticity of cultural heritage is a significant threat, but cultural heritage is also subject to dangers that may be associated with

- ignorance about historic value and economical potential;
- the lack of involvement of specialists to integrate, for instance, new architectonic elements in the built heritage, which is required in any expanding human settlement;
- the clandestine intervention to properties in private hands;
- the misunderstood role of tourism as a never-ending source of income, without taking into consideration the costs for the physical maintenance of the site.

To this day, research and conservation of cultural heritage has been entirely the responsibility of the State institutions that administer the relevant legislation. In this scheme, local government and citizen participation has been excluded. It is clear that the decentralisation process in Honduras is still incipient, and that local governments do not have the financial and human resources needed to take on the whole task. But it is also clear that the old model no longer functions and that cultural heritage conservation is only possible through the joint efforts of the entities dedicated to the research and conservation of culture heritage, which represent the central government, and through the development of local government capacity for co-management and the responsible and informed participation of citizens.

The Management Plan as an Instrument of Conservation

The best starting point to focus on the mentioned aspects, and to integrate the key actors in the conservation of a site, is the elaboration of a management plan. There are, of course, various definitions of this term; however, the majority of them agree that a management plan is a long-term vision established for a particular site,

which incorporates medium and short-term objectives. A management plan, which should be a public document, must be based on local values and be elaborated by a multi-disciplinary team. A management plan is a participatory process guided by the meaning of a site. Moreover, it implicates preserving a series of values that have been prioritised at a determined moment in time and that are subject to change (Cameron and Castellanos 2001: 13). Although a management plan is an indispensable instrument for every site, traditionally it only has been expected that World Heritage Sites will fulfil this requisite. The norm in these cases has been to hire foreign experts to elaborate the plan in question, the application of which, however, has not been allocated human and financial resources (compare with Cameron and Castellanos 2001: 19). The most critical fact in this recipe is that no allowance has been made to create or promote the capacities of local specialists who will later be in charge of the day to day monitoring of the management plan. Recently, however, this state of affairs has taken a crucial turn with the experience being developed in Joya de Cerén, El Salvador (a team of local experts has put in place a management plan under the advice of counterparts from the Getty Conservation Institute).

Honduras has also made an effort in this regard with the proposal prepared in 2000–2001 of a new management plan for the Copan Archaeological Park (the only World Cultural Heritage Site in Honduras since 1980) that will replace the one that has been in force since 1984. There is still no definitive version of this plan, but it should be mentioned that, together with foreign experts, national experts were consistently involved in the different stages of the management plan, as were local authorities, tourist operators and representatives of the indigenous population (Chorti-Maya) settled in the neighbouring villages.

Certainly, the Copan Archaeological Park is far from the type of participation that has been set up in Palenque, Mexico, for the indigenous population, but its involvement in the consulting process is nonetheless innovative and promising. In the case of Palenque, following the promulgation of a law at the beginning of 2001, the indigenous population is receiving training about this particular site and other archaeological sites. The indigenous community has free access to these facilities and their use for ceremonies, and it is also intended that they will participate in the economic benefits (Clark 2002: 8).

Another matter to clarify in this context is the misunderstanding about the indiscriminated benefits that have been attributed to tourism. The concept of 'social value' is critical here:

The stimulus for conservation of cultural heritage should not be the commercial benefit that it might provide through tourism, nor the search for confirmation of its importance through the admiration that it awakens in strangers. The stimulus should be the social benefit that a heritage property offers directly to its creators, to its descendants ... This is for its historical significance or for its aesthetic value, which according to the patterns of a particular culture contributes to consolidate the identity of a community, region or country. The economic benefit is not insignificant and should be considered, but it cannot become the primary reason for adjudication of value to a heritage property... (Lara Pinto 2001: 27–28).

Consequently, the management plan is a document that establishes the significance or the value of a site and proposes measures to maintain this significance in the future when decisions will be

made in behalf of new uses, intervention, restoration and development of infrastructure. Therefore, the elaboration of a management plan includes various steps, initiating with the understanding of the site, the evaluation of its meaning, the deliberation about its vulnerability and the identification of policies and strategies. The identification of the interest groups associated with the site is decisive in this process (Clark 2001: 7).

It is obvious that the interests of different groups can conflict in dealing with the elaboration of a management plan. One of the strategies to resolve these differences about the significance of the site is an impact evaluation (Clark 2001: 11). As the author has stated earlier:

Tourism can promote that a cultural property becomes self sustainable and can bring relative prosperity to certain sectors of a locality; however, the impact of a massive visitation ... can cause structural damages at the site and environmental degrading of the surroundings by not following the regulatory measures for its use and enjoyment. Specifically, the spirituality, the social message, the ethnic sentiment, the beauty itself which gives to the cultural heritage its reason for being can be obscured and eventually distorted in the process. That is to say that cultural tourism, when misunderstood, can threaten the integrity and diminish the authenticity of the heritage property itself (Lara Pinto 2001: 28).

In reference to the Copan Archaeological Park, there exist conflicting values of variable characteristics, of which only two will be mentioned here. The first has to do with the already taken decision to build an international airport in a distance of approximately 15 kilometres from the site, as well as a private commercial strip approximately 4 kilometres away. In accord with newspaper articles (*La Tribuna* 2002), and declarations made publicly by the President of the National Chamber of Tourism (in a forum celebrated in Copán Ruinas in October 2002), it was expected that the commercial airstrip for small planes will be in operation in the next months and the international airport in the space of the following year.

Tourist operators hope to benefit substantially from an increase in tourists arriving by air. This benefit, however, is relative and limited to a few, because it will also have the effect of creating the conditions for a flow of visitors to the site who can arrive and leave in one day, without an overnight stay. The second conflict is

represented by the massive visitation that occurs at certain times of the year when, for a period of 24 hours, large groups of students visit the site. In the course of 2001–2002, the author had the opportunity to document visits from up to 700 students on a given day, generally a Saturday. Together with the regular weekend visitation this creates an unpleasant situation that supports the need for a reinforcement of regulations regarding carrying capacity. It is not possible to arrive to more precise conclusions at the moment due to the lack of better and systematised data, but both cases addressed above qualify as sources of conflict in matters pertinent to the integrity and authenticity of the cultural heritage of the site. Consequently, these issues need to be documented urgently through an impact study.

As an expert (MacCannell 2000, p. 26) has already stated, the damages caused to cultural heritage cannot be reversed simply by closing the site to the tourist wave. He proposes instead:

1. the development of a strong conceptualisation of culture;
2. educational programmes that permit a more profound understanding of the function and value of culture heritage;
3. the re-invention of the museum through the restoration of sites and monuments and whatever other representation of heritage, tradition and collective memory is still in place. If specialists, authorities, and citizens would make a joint effort of good will, there is still time to find viable solutions to the risks that currently menace the only World Cultural Heritage Site in Honduras.

References

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