

Managing Tourism at World Heritage Sites:

a Practical Manual for
World Heritage Site Managers

By Arthur Pedersen

Foreword

It is an inevitable destiny: the very reasons why a property is chosen for inscription on the World Heritage List are also the reasons why millions of tourists flock to those sites year after year. In fact, the belief that World Heritage sites belong to everyone and should be preserved for future generations is the very principle on which the World Heritage Convention is based. So how do we merge our convictions with our concerns over the impact of tourism on World Heritage sites? The answer is through sustainable tourism. Directing governments, site managers and visitors towards sustainable tourism practices is the only way to ensure the safekeeping of our world's natural and cultural heritage.

In 2002, the international community's virtually "undivided attention" was focused on tourism and its impact on our cultural and natural heritage. It started with the United Nations declaration of 2002 as the "Year for Cultural Heritage". Then in May, Québec City hosted the first ever World Ecotourism Summit, whose Declaration on the development of Ecotourism in the context of sustainable development was later delivered at the Johannesburg World Summit. In November, "heritage, tourism and development" is one of the focuses of the International Congress in Venice on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention. Through the publication of this manual, we aim to harness this momentum by putting all of the ideas, theories and plans for sustainable tourism into action.

By learning to "tread lightly" on the earth, not only are we ensuring the future of World Heritage sites but also the future of tourism. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved: the site is better protected and maintained, the tourist experiences a more pleasant visit, and the local economy is boosted as a result.

Tourism is an important management issue at both natural and cultural World Heritage sites. It is an industry with well-known costs but also with the potential for aiding protection efforts. We recognize this potential and are convinced that by engaging, and by taking appropriate actions at the different levels of the sustainable tourism process, tourism can be managed to generate net site benefits. This manual outlines a process to guide site managers toward this end.

The first in a series of "how to" World Heritage manuals, it is dedicated to the men and women who give their heart and soul everyday to protecting our world's priceless treasures.

Finally, I thank TEMA and UNEP for supporting the Centre's initiative to elaborate a user-friendly Manual for World Heritage Site Managers.

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Foreword

I am proud to present this manual, another valuable contribution to the International Year of Ecotourism in 2002. Tourism is one of the world's largest industries, with almost 700 million international tourists in 2002, and can become an essential tool in the challenge to overcome biodiversity losses and eradicate poverty, particularly in sensitive ecosystems and protected areas. The basic fact is that a healthy social and natural environment is the first and most important asset for this global industry. It makes business sense for tourism stakeholders to be natural allies of sustainability.

Protected areas, particularly World Heritage sites, are some of tourism's main attractions, and are subject to growing visitation. World Heritage sites are outstanding cultural and natural landscapes covering all kinds of ecosystems, which are carefully selected through a process resulting from a 1972 multilateral agreement involving 175 countries. Maintaining such sites requires adequate practices to guarantee environmentally sound management of the park and at the same time to ensure that local communities benefit from the park's existence.

The potential economic benefits that tourism can bring do not materialize without careful planning. Indeed, uncontrolled tourism development can have major negative impacts on these jewels of humanity's heritage. World Heritage site managers are often inadequately prepared to deal with the challenges of visitation and to negotiate with the complex tourism industry. Their background most often lies in forestry, public environmental management and biological sciences. Thus, concepts such as business management, marketing, and entrepreneurial risk management are still relatively new to many site managers. A practical, case-specific approach is used in the manual to explain these and other subjects, so that park managers can design and develop visitation according to the needs and limits of a site's master plans.

In 2002, UNEP, IUCN and the World Tourism Organization published a book entitled "Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas" written by Dr. Paul Eagles of the World Commission on Protected Areas, with the contribution of many other international experts. This book aims at building a better understanding of issues related to tourism in protected areas and providing guidelines on how to address them. The present manual effectively complements the previous publication: it addresses the specific needs of World Heritage site managers and guides them through the visitor planning and management process. It is one more milestone in UNEP's long collaboration with UNESCO on improving benefits to protected areas through sustainable tourism. I am sure it will result in increased cooperation and partnerships among World Heritage site managers, the tourism industry, local communities, governments and travelers.

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Preface

It can be easy with all the other tourism manuals around to ask why write another. This of course is a legitimate question that should be addressed by the author.

The answer is quite simple: this manual comes out of a desire to see just what is being done in the field, trying to make sense of it all, comparing it to my own experience, and putting what I learned in a style of language hopefully everyone can understand. Having worked in visitor management and planning for many years, I wanted to know what we have discovered in using tourism as a tool to benefit conservation.

In fact this manual is just the start of a projected series of manuals for World Heritage site managers on tourism issues. Why the focus on World Heritage sites? Perhaps this is best explained by a question from the Chief of the Natural Heritage Section of the World Heritage Centre, Natarajan Ishwaran, who once asked, "If we can't save World Heritage sites, what can we save?" I have taken this to heart. As I continue to work with World Heritage sites I have come to realize the important role of the World Heritage Convention.

What this manual does, and why it may be different than others, is that it synthesizes the logical and holistic process of tourism and visitor management reflected in management literature. It has been my experience that if one understands the process of a subject and has a global vision of how things fit together, it is much easier to wade through the array of technical details that compose most modern fields. Without this knowledge, those who aren't specialists can get lost in the complexity.

Successful, sustainable tourism calls for a process of close engagement. It involves having clear ideas on goals and objectives, knowing where you want to go, setting these goals and objectives within the constraints of legal and social rules and then negotiating with relevant interest groups to try to incorporate their needs into the mix. It also means continually monitoring to see if these elusive targets are being reached and, if they are not, deciding what actions to take to get the programme back on track. This whole process is simple in theory but difficult to implement and sustain in practice.

Someone once said to me that, "Ideas should feel like affinities and not impositions", and I have tried, with the help of my fine editor Gina Dogget to gear the text to this end.

Arthur Pedersen

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Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC) estimates that tourism generates some 12% of the world total GNP. With studies predicting continued growth, tourism is an increasingly important factor in the planning and management at UNESCO World Heritage sites.

While no formal data have been collected, a site's inscription on the World Heritage List often coincides with a boost in visitation rates. Even at current rates, tourism is an important issue at World Heritage sites. A 1993 UNESCO-United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) study showed that most managers of natural sites regard it as a key issue. Interviews and surveys carried out by the World Heritage Centre at cultural sites have revealed similar concerns.

Tourism offers well-known advantages. Visitor fees, concessions and donations provide funds for restoration and protection efforts. Visitors may be recruited as friends of a site and can help generate international support. Tour operators and hotel chains can play a role in the management of a site by making financial contributions, aiding monitoring efforts, or instructing their clients in responsible tourism. Tourism can also promote cultural values by supporting local handicrafts or by offering alternative economic activities.

On the downside, tourism spawns well-known problems. Managing rapid tourism growth is a time-consuming process demanding clear policies, ongoing dialogue with stakeholders, and constant monitoring. Tourism activities require environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and procedures for minimising impacts. At sites with limited budgets and staff, growing tourism can stretch scarce resources and take managers away from protection efforts.

While tourism can contribute to protection and restoration efforts, the right balance between economic gain and undesirable impacts can be elusive. Managers know that a tourist attraction must be periodically renewed to remain competitive. In the case of World Heritage sites, they are also aware that they are under an international obligation to maintain or restore the site's original values. This responsibility poses difficult questions regarding the degree of change that should be permitted to accommodate tourism growth. Another problem is ensuring that a portion of tourism revenue remains in the community as a means of fostering local protection, conservation and restoration efforts.

To meet these and other challenges, managers have requested training and information on World Heritage as well as concrete examples of procedures for addressing tourism planning issues. The World Heritage Centre has responded by increasing its support for training in tourism management skills, including the publication of this manual.

The manual addresses the needs identified by site managers and training centres. It provides a set of management methodologies and practices intended to help managers to solve tourism problems. It also establishes a common terminology with the aim of facilitating communication and information exchange among managers. Subjects include UNESCO, the World Heritage Convention and the World Heritage Centre, the tourism industry, working with the public, carrying capacity issues, tourism impacts, visitor management strategies, and interpretation and promotion; several of these subjects are illustrated by short case studies.

The manual also offers a set of tools applicable to designing surveys, monitoring policy and management implementation, promoting sites and communicating with stakeholders. Managers can select the procedures that are appropriate for different sites, and adapt them accordingly.



Readers will note that the manual addresses tourism at both cultural and natural sites. While visitor management poses different issues depending on whether a site is cultural or natural, the two types of sites have many concerns in common, including setting goals and objectives, working with stakeholders, dealing with issues of carrying capacity, and interpretation and promotional activities. Moreover, many World Heritage sites, though listed as either natural or cultural, protect both types of resources.

Experience has shown that visitor management is a balancing act requiring the establishment of a tourism policy based on conservation and preservation goals that will be supported by all stakeholders, while respecting legal mandates, encouraging ongoing debate and monitoring tourism activities. This manual attempts to bring these many factors together, to provide managers with a practical framework on which to base their efforts.