The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), a United Nations specialized agency, is the leading international organization with the decisive and central role in promoting the development of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. It serves as a global forum for tourism policy issues and a practical source of tourism know-how. Its membership includes 156 countries, 6 territories, 2 permanent observers and over 400 Affiliate Members.
Tourism at World Heritage Sites
Challenges and Opportunities

International tourism seminar
Çeşmese (İzmir), Turkey, 26 March 2013
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Over the last decades, tourism has become one of the leading socio-economic sectors in the world today. In 2012, for the first time in history, over one billion international tourists travelled the world in a single year. Yet one billion is not just an impressive number, it means immense opportunities for development through job creation, businesses for small and medium enterprises, improvement of livelihoods, renewal of places and communities, and the promotion of natural and cultural heritage if tourism is properly managed.

Among the different motivations for travelling, visiting cultural sites and discovering local customs and traditions rank high on traveller’s list. Cultural tourism thus forms an important component of international tourism and can contribute to ensure the conservation of heritage, foster mutual understanding and a sense of pride in host communities.

To ensure that tourism is used effectively as a tool for cultural preservation, UNWTO is working closely with the UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme to create an international framework for sustainable tourism management at world heritage sites. Considering that more than 40% of the world heritage sites listed by UNESCO are in Europe and that seven out of the ten most visited countries in the world are European, the safeguarding of cultural heritage must be a priority.

This seminar was just the beginning of a journey that aims to maximize tourism’s potential to contribute to the conservation of world heritage sites, the empowerment of local communities, and the engagement of all stakeholders in the tourism and cultural sector. I trust that this report, through the compilation of knowledge and firsthand experiences, will be a useful tool in addressing the challenges and maximizing the opportunities of tourism development at world heritage sites.

Taleb Rifai
Secretary-General,
World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)
Introduction

The Conference on “Tourism at World Heritage Sites – Challenges and Opportunities” was held at Çeşme (Izmir), Turkey, on 26 March 2013, in conjunction with the 55th Meeting of the World Tourism Organisation Commission for Europe. Representatives from the majority of the European member countries of the UNWTO Regional Commission for Europe gathered to discuss and raise awareness within the tourism sector of the dynamic relationship with world heritage sites and the need to share in the protection, management and presentation of these special places. This conference report captures the main themes, presentations and discussions that took place throughout the day. It aims to disseminate the information and insights from the conference, thus contributing to the important work of UNWTO, while affirming UNWTO’s support and encouragement for culture and tourism experts and stakeholders to work together to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Tourism and world heritage

2012 was yet another remarkable year for tourism, and one in which an astounding milestone was achieved: one billion international tourists travelled the world in a single year. Around five billion more travelled domestically within their own countries. Never before have so many people travelled to so many places. Few places on the planet have escaped the curiosity of the traveller, and few are now unreachable.

Beyond these impressive figures lies an immense opportunity for growth and development in all nations. Tourism means jobs, business opportunities for small and medium enterprises, the renewal of urban and rural areas and, when properly managed, the preservation and promotion of a country’s natural and cultural heritage. Tourism is one of the world’s largest and fastest-growing industries, and culture is one of the fastest developing components of international tourism. Since cultural exchange creates mutual understanding between different peoples and societies, cultural tourism is significant for contributing to mutual respect, peace, dialogue and diversity throughout the world.

UNWTO has been at the forefront of recognizing the important dimension and role of tourism as a positive instrument for the promotion of cultural identity in host societies, the alleviation of poverty and the improvement of the quality of life for all people, its potential to make a contribution to
economic and social development, especially in developing countries and its emergence as a vital force for the promotion of international understanding, peace and its prosperity. These principles of sustainable and responsible tourism are enshrined in the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism\(^1\).

The aim of the conference was to showcase the cultural, natural historical richness and heritage characters of the countries that comprise the UNWTO Commission for Europe by presenting case studies and country experiences on successful policies, guidelines for sustainable site management, and strategies for cultural tourism development at world heritage sites.

World heritage is certainly a success story. There are now 190 countries as signatories to the World Heritage Convention, which makes it one of the most ratified Conventions in the world. In early 2013 there are 962 properties inscribed on the World Heritage List from as many as 157 countries. More sites are usually added to the list at the annual meetings of the World Heritage Committee.

The interaction between world heritage sites and tourism has been both dynamic and closely related since the commencement of the World Heritage Convention in the early 1970s. The reason is simply that these places are recognized by the international community as among the world’s most valued and iconic destinations. People have visited places of natural and cultural heritage since the dawn of history. They encapsulate the people and their stories; they are a window into their souls, helping visitors to understand other places and other times.

Tourism to sites of natural and cultural heritage should be encouraged and supported as it contributes much to the competitive ability and growth of European nations. In 2012 seven out of the ten most-visited countries in the world are situated in Europe, and the heritage of Europe, in particular its cultural heritage, is one of the oldest and most important generators of tourism in the region. Between them, the Member States of the UNWTO Commission for Europe host some 400 world heritage sites. There can be no doubt that places of natural and cultural heritage, scenic landscapes, archaeological sites, monuments, revitalised historic towns and cities and traditional places of worship, including those inscribed on the World Heritage List, make up a significant proportion of Europe’s tourism assets, representing a large and increasing source of business for the tourism sector.

And now, with emerging destinations set to surpass advanced ones in terms of the number of tourists they receive by 2015, it becomes even more important for Europe to focus on its key competitive strengths, the foremost of which is surely its rich history and cultural heritage, as exemplified by its collection of world heritage sites.

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\(^1\) The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism was adopted by the UNWTO General Assembly in 1999, and endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution of 21 December 2001. The Code covers various areas of application including consumer protection, corporate social responsibility, the protection of children and of the most vulnerable segments of the population, cultural and environmental sustainability, dialogue between cultures, as well as its vision of tourism as a factor for development and the promotion of fundamental human rights, in line with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.
Tourism and world heritage: the challenges

Effective tourism management of world heritage sites must sustain the conservation and presentation objectives of the Convention, while contributing to and supporting socio-economic development. Tourism development and visitor activity should enhance the visitor’s understanding and appreciation of the heritage values through proper interpretation, presentation and visitor services. Sustainable tourism relies on the development and long term delivery of quality visitor experiences that do not degrade or damage any of the property’s natural or cultural values and visitor attraction.

There is a two-way relationship between world heritage and tourism:

1. World heritage properties are often major attractions for the tourism sector; and
2. Tourism offers world heritage stakeholders the ability to meet the requirements of the Convention to “present” (or communicate) world heritage properties to the public and to generate funds for conservation, while also realising community and economic benefits through sustainable use.

The dramatic current and projected growth of international and domestic travel represents both challenges and opportunities for world heritage sites and their surrounding populations. World heritage sites can be among the most popular and heavily promoted visitor and tourist attractions in many countries, generating a risk of unacceptable impacts from ill-planned and mismanaged tourism. Other sites, which are less well visited, may not be able to generate or sustain either an economic contribution to the local community or sufficient management resources to manage issues such as tourism. Poorly planned and managed tourism, or excessive visitor numbers at a site, can pose major threats to the heritage significance of the place and degrade the quality of the visitor experience. Therefore, the tourism and heritage sectors must combine to build a positive, dynamic and responsive relationship between each other. Top priority must be attached to best practice tourism management during the formulation of strategies and plans concerning world heritage sites.

Heritage is not a luxury – it is a most precious asset that we have inherited from our forebears and which we must pass-on unimpaired to future generations. This basic principle is the foundation for all UNWTO and UNESCO’s work on world heritage and sustainable tourism.

Perhaps the most important challenge for tourism management at world heritage sites is how to respond to the demand for access in a rapidly changing and globalised world, while protecting the Outstanding Universal Values for which they were inscribed on the World Heritage List. If the Tourism and Heritage sectors work closely together, then both will benefit from shared outcomes. If they do not, then neither Tourism nor Heritage has a sustainable future.

Tourism and world heritage: the opportunities

Well-managed tourism associated with world heritage sites can contribute to the socio-economic development of host communities and improve their well being, by promoting respect for, and commitment to the core cultural and ethical values of host communities. It can also contribute to the enrichment and safeguarding of the cultural identity of the destination promoting cross-cultural exchanges between visitors and the host community. Therefore the management and presentation
of these sites should creatively encompass various opportunities including architectural design, music, visual and performing arts, popular culture, museum studies, communication technologies and brand management.

The management of tourism at world heritage sites has an importance which extends far beyond remaining competitive in the international tourism market. Such sites have an immeasurable inherent value in the expression and sense of identity of a host community. They play an important role in public education, and when managed properly, help to protect natural and cultural values and improve the quality of life for residents and visitors alike. As such, their integrity and authenticity must be conserved, so that the values they represent are available to current and future generations.

Tourism of course can play, and does play, an important role in this process. Firstly, the appreciation of heritage sites can help positively reaffirm the cultural identities of local populations as they take pride in themselves and their homes. Secondly, tourism often provides the vital financial resources which allow these sites to be managed and conserved.

A great deal of tourism promotion, visitor activity, cultural exchange and economic development associated with world heritage properties takes place in the surrounding community, in the nearby tourism destination, or elsewhere in the country, even internationally. As a result, sustainable and responsible tourism development and visitor management requires effective, cooperative commitment and coordination between site management and all relevant public agencies and private enterprises.

In light of the need to approach tourism at world heritage sites in such a comprehensive and integrated manner, UNWTO is proud to have been involved in the consultation process leading up to the adoption of the UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme, which represents a new paradigm where natural and cultural assets are valued and protected, and where tourism and heritage management is integrated at a destination level.

For its part, UNESCO is firmly committed to strengthening the links between world heritage and tourism. While its starting point and main priority are without doubt the protection of this exceptional heritage, UNESCO is determined to show that the implementation of the World Heritage Convention is an accelerator for sustainable development, both at the local and national levels.

In order to accomplish a sustainable future for tourism at world heritage sites, it is essential that tourism and heritage stakeholders work together. In a world where people are increasingly connected, culture and heritage have a growing importance for the ‘soft power’ of a country, for its influence and outreach. For all these reasons UNESCO is committed to leveraging the power of world heritage and changing the paradigm of how to approach tourism development in conjunction with world heritage sites.

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre has developed a new World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme (WHSTP), approved by the World Heritage Committee in 2012, which creates an international cooperative framework based on the objective of shared and sustainable outcomes. The Programme brings together tourism, one of the world’s biggest economic and cultural exchange activities, with some of the world’s most important and attractive natural and
cultural tourism places. UNWTO has been invited to be a member of the Steering Committee of the Programme.

The WHSTP and its proposed framework take into account the differences in scale, experiences and capacity of various stakeholders in both the heritage and tourism sectors. It addresses the motivations and concerns of individual stakeholders, enabling each to engage with the Programme, to interact with other stakeholders, contribute to and draw benefits from the framework, identify shared issues and opportunities and develop cooperative outcomes. Overall, successful stakeholders can set an example for, or become mentors to, less experienced stakeholders or those with fewer resources available. The Programme will facilitate this exchange and capacity building over time.  

**Conference themes**

By bringing together representatives from the majority of the almost 50 European member countries of the UNWTO Regional Commission for Europe, the Conference showcased the wide range of cultural, natural and historical richness and heritage of the European region. Various presentations and discussion sessions presented case studies and county experiences on successful policies, guidelines for sustainable site management, and conservation, strategies for cultural tourism development. These presentations and discussion sessions reflected the increasing need for UNWTO Member States to provide and continuously refine relevant responses and strategies in response to increasing tourism demand.

In particular, the conference programme developed two major themes:

1. Sustainable management of heritage sites; and
2. Communicating our world heritage.

The two sessions of the Conference have been derived from two important publications by the World Tourism Organisation in recent years:

1. *Handbook on Tourism Congestion Management at Natural and Cultural Sites* (2005); and

What links these two sessions are the opportunities for their continuous application throughout the visitor experience, which can be divided into six main stages:

1. Choosing a destination and time to travel;
2. The journey to the destination;
3. The experience of the destination;
4. The journey to the natural or cultural site;
5. The experience of the site; and

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2 The Programme takes a strategic approach in its implementation, working in partnership with the key stakeholders (States Parties to the Convention, site practitioners and management, tourism sector and local communities) to achieve its objectives. The Programme is being coordinated through the World Heritage Centre and will work extensively through UNESCO’s regional and country offices in close collaboration with UNWTO, other UN Agencies, and with the support of the World Heritage Advisory Bodies and UNESCO Category 2 centres. An Action Plan has been developed, which will guide the implementation of the Programme.
Tourism resources belong to the common heritage of mankind. One of the consequences of the growth in world tourism has been that most of the great heritage sites have attracted huge numbers of visitors and will continue to do so, often at the expense of less well-known sites in the region. Visitors often arrive at random times, causing at times delays and crowding at destinations and sites during peak periods that spoil their overall experiences. This may discourage people from making a return journey or recommending the trip to their friends, families and colleagues. The UNWTO Handbook on Tourism Congestion Management at Natural and Cultural Sites (2005), encouraged the spread of tourism activities outwards from famous destinations and sites to other related sites, as well as developing off-season programmes to extend the benefits of tourism more evenly across the year.

Congestion management arising from excessively high levels of tourism activity has major implications for the tourism sector, host destinations and site managers. It is an important issue in the successful and sustainable management of tourism at heritage places:

- **For the tourism sector:** congestion results in operational inefficiencies, unhelpful competition for scarce resources, increased business costs and loss of profits;
- **For the responsible authorities in the host destination:** congestion results in disruption to the local community, excessive pressure on infrastructure, reducing the welcome extended to visitors and adversely affecting local political support for tourism; and
- **For the managers of natural and cultural sites:** congestion can adversely impact the long-term conservation of a site, negatively altering the biodiversity of a natural site or physical fabric and significance of a cultural site.

Tourism congestion is a complex issue, and is not always related simply to the numbers present on a site at any given time. Each stakeholder in the tourism process has different perceptions about it. Each has a different motivation about the need to manage high levels of tourism activity, and each has a different role to play in the management of that congestion. The dynamic nature of visitor movement is a key factor in the management of congestion at natural and cultural sites. Many sites have been upgraded to improve their capacity to respond to their popularity and to provide visitors improved access to their most interesting or attractive aspects.

By gaining an understanding of the objectives and motivations of the various stakeholders in the process, all participants can more readily appreciate the need for more rigorous management and coordination to minimise the adverse effects arising from congestion and capture the benefits of sustainable management. Achieving more consistent visitor flows will help host communities and tourism-related businesses to better utilize and manage local resources and infrastructure across the seasons and throughout their region. It will also provide more stable business and employment opportunities for the local people and help to minimise negative impacts on heritage values.

The majority of visitors move through a destination and its associated natural and cultural sites along relatively well-defined or pre-determined routes. Congestion occurs when physical obstructions block the natural flow of visitor movement or narrow passages cause the flow to slow down. Congestion can also occur when the flow, or the number of visitors, is excessive in relation to the capacity of the destination or site to accommodate that flow. Blockages need to be cleared quickly, diversions prepared in advance or extra capacity found to relieve the pressure of excessive volumes of people. A sustainable tourism industry depends on an effective
management of tourism flows at and through destinations and sites, giving the visitor time and opportunity to appreciate and enjoy the local culture and the values of the places being visited, and to acquire local goods and services.

Session 2  Communicating our World Heritage

Well-informed tourists are at the very centre of all sustainable tourism activity. The UNWTO publication *Handbook on Communicating Heritage for the Tourism Sector* (2011), adds value to the tourism product with helpful suggestions for building an understanding and emotional attachment in the mind of the visitor.

One of the pillars of the tourism industry has been people’s inherent desire to see and learn about the cultural identity of different parts of the world. Travel experiences that were once limited to a relatively small number of people are now within the reach of millions. Many tourism promotion agencies, tour operators and destination managers are increasingly aware of the growing interest among prospective travellers in the distinctive natural and cultural heritage of destinations and sites.

Visiting heritage attractions can be an intrinsic part of a trip and a major motivator for selecting a destination. The tourist’s personal compulsion to visit a heritage site is highly influenced by their specific knowledge or previous experience of similar places, as much by the messages they have absorbed from friends and relatives, from the media, or through travel promotions. Therefore, effective communication of heritage sites is absolutely crucial for winning the hearts and minds of visitors.

Tourism development and visitor activity should enhance the visitor’s understanding and appreciation of the heritage values through proper interpretation, presentation and visitor services. Sustainable tourism relies on the development and delivery of quality visitor experiences that do not degrade or damage any of the property’s natural or cultural values and visitor attraction.

Article 4 of the World Heritage Convention states that one of the main obligations in conserving world heritage places is to present their significance to the public. Informing the visitor and managing their expectations is a vital role for all tourism promotion agencies and the travel sector.

Importantly, the handbook stresses that the communication about the culture and cultural heritage of destinations must be commenced long before the visitor arrives. Unlike traditional forms of site interpretation and presentation, messages received even before the visitor leaves home have the power to build expectations and a sense of enquiry that can ultimately improve the visitor’s enjoyment and appreciation of the experience in site.
Contributing to the success of shared outcomes

World heritage sites cannot be managed in isolation. It is essential for all those involved in site management, including tourism authorities and tourism operators, to consider and respond to issues and opportunities that are generated beyond the boundaries of the site. Cooperation is required by local and regional agencies to develop policies and programmes that can be integrated into a broader policy context. There needs to be full vertical integration with local, regional and international policy frameworks and industry activity.

Mr. Taleb Rifai, UNWTO Secretary-General, reinforced the concept of tourism as a force for conservation and for the absolute necessity of continuing to work closely with and further strengthen its links with UNESCO and the World Heritage Centre. With the leadership of the UNWTO, the tourism sector can contribute its special expertise and experience to enhance the sustainability of the world’s special places.

Mr. Kishore Rao, Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre reinforced the growing linkages between UNESCO and UNWTO, stressing that the work of the World Heritage Convention is not only about heritage conservation, but also simultaneously about sustainable social and economic development. He emphasised the potential for tourism to be a great generator of such sustainability.
Opening ceremony

Participants

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