World Heritage Site Status: boon or bane?

Questions are emerging about the ever-increasing Unesco World Heritage Site List. **Ean Lee** takes a look at some of the doubts and concerns.

The World Heritage Committee ("the Committee") has recently decided to remove Germany's Dresden Elbe Valley from Unesco World Heritage List "due to the building of a four-lane bridge in the heart of the cultural landscape which meant that the property failed to keep its outstanding universal value as inscribed".

Dresden Elbe Valley

Extending some 18 km along the river from the Ubigau Palace and Ostragehege fields in the north-west, to the Pillnitz Palace and the Elbe River Island in the south-east, the Dresden Elbe Valley features low meadows, monuments and parks, and was recognized as a World Heritage Site in 2004.

The construction of the Waldschoesschen bridge across the valley, according to the Committee, would tarnish the natural beauty of the area.

An Administrative Court in Bautzen ruled in March 2007 that the 160-million Euro construction project should proceed in spite of the threat that the site would be struck off the World Heritage List.

In negotiations, the Committee urged the German authorities to build a tunnel as an alternative, and advised that the damage should be addressed, and that the property would be deleted from the List if work on the bridge was not stopped.

The Dresden Elbe Valley, an 18th and 19th century cultural landscape, was eventually removed from the List in 2009, and joins the Oryx Sanctuary as sites that had their world heritage status rescinded.

Oman takes the dubious honour of being the first country to have an inscribed site removed from the list.

The Committee took the unprecedented measure of delisting Oman's Oryx Sanctuary in 2007, after Oman decided to reduce the size of the site's protected area by 90%, in contravention of the Operational Guidelines of the World Heritage Convention.

Oman's decision to reduce the area for protection, as well as the decline in the population of the rare Arabian Oryx from 450 in 1996 to 65 in 2007, were perceived by the Committee as damaging the outstanding universal value of the site.

The Committee believed that Oman failed to fulfill its obligations in conserving the sanctuary, and also by planning to proceed with oil drilling at the site.

As the natural sanctuary was a massive 27,500 sq km before the reduction, the viability and capability in preventing habitat degradation and the poaching of the Arabian Oryx have always been questioned.

While two sites have been taken off the list, many countries are vying to get their sites on it year after year, with the knowledge that inscription will galvanize tourism at their sites, and benefits can be reaped.

The long-term value of World Heritage Site status, however, has come under greater scrutiny.

In a recent *Newsweek* article, 'To list or not to list', William Underhill suggests that the list should be restricted, and resources should be concentrated on the sites that demand assistance most.

He writes that there's deepening concern "the scheme, intended to preserve the world's greatest treasures, may actually be contributing to their demise."

World Heritage site tourism fuelled by commercial interests, illustration by Pattanapong Varanyanon

Conservation is not always the goal, and a World Heritage Listing "represents a marketing tool that can turn obscure sites into must-see destinations", Underhill says.

Referring to the ancient city of Lijiang, China, he notes that the number of visitors rose annually to 4.6 million from 1.7 million in the decade of it being listed.

Similarly in Siem Reap, Cambodia, the annual number of visitors at the Angkor Wat temple complex is at more than a million from less than 10,000 since 1992.

He says that it is difficult to avoid these consequences of gaining the World Heritage status, quoting a 2008 Unesco mission finding: "Commercial interests have driven measures to facilitate large numbers of tourists, compromising the authentic heritage values which attracted visitors to the property in the first place."

Underhill argues that Unesco, with limited funds and despite its moral authority, is unable "to do much to help the swelling number of sites."

Reservations

A few years ago, similar cautions had been expressed by *New York Times* journalist Seth Kugel in a provocative piece, 'Flip side of the world heritage status', which was published in the International Herald Tribune and other publications.

In his article, he asks whether the List's meaning has been watered down by its rapid expansion, and if both tourism and development

that are often left unchecked at listed sites can do more harm than good to places so anointed by the honour.

One of the major benefits of a site making it on the List is the recognition which translates into tourism income, and a proliferation of travel websites, and publications, and heightened interest, which business agencies are certainly well aware of.

Consequently, how should the effects of increased tourism and development be dealt with?

As a focal point and co-ordinator within Unesco, the World Heritage Centre provides advice to States Parties, organises international assistance, and co-ordinates the reporting on conditions of sites and emergency action undertaken when a site is threatened, including day-to-day management of the Convention.

Kugel points out that the main objective of the World Heritage Centre is to conserve sites through international co-operation for the next generation, but its official mission statement makes no reference to tourism and economic development.

He questions whether the World Heritage Centre can effectively monitor the rapidly-expanding number of listed sites, and provide technical assistance on conservation.

In his Newsweek article, Underhill reports that the Centre employs less than a hundred personnel, and that its annual revenue of about US$20 million, including donations, can barely help developing countries in conserving their sites.

The World Heritage List has increased steadily since it was introduced in 1978, recognising 12 sites.

The number of properties on the List has now been expanded to 890, of which 690 are cultural, 175 natural and 25 mixed sites.

Today, Unesco world heritage status is well established and promoted by travel agents and websites.

Like Underhill, Kugel wonders whether the award of world heritage status might be – to many applicants – "more an end goal than the beginning of conservation efforts".

He claims that, following the conclusion of the nomination process which takes 4-5 years, Unesco "generally doesn't provide funds or technical assistance ... [or] regular monitoring to ensure that the ambitious plans come to fruition."

According to him, monitoring is the main difficulty encountered by the World Heritage Centre, which depends primarily on local governments to report on site conditions every six years.

Historical background

It was after World War I that the idea of initiating an international movement to protect heritage arose.

The historical background to the World Heritage Convention was an event in 1959 which was a major contributing factor: international concern aroused at that time by the decision to construct the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, which would have inundated the valley and destroyed a treasure of ancient Egyptian Civilisation, the Abu Simbel temples.

Abu Simbel Temple, Egypt

Unesco initiated an international safeguarding campaign, following an appeal from the Egyptian and Sudanese governments.

The temples were moved and reassembled in another area, with archaeological research expedited in the region that was later flooded.

It was a successful campaign which cost an estimated US$80 million, with about 50 countries donating some US$40 million.

The significance of shared responsibility and solidarity among nations in protecting prominent cultural sites inspired further efforts in the conservation of Italy's

Borobodur, Indonesia

Moenjodaro Archaeological Ruins, Pakistan

Venice and its Lagoon; Indonesia's Borobodur Temple; and Pakistan's Moenjodaro Archaeological Ruins, leading eventually to the implementation of the Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, as well as the establishment of the World Heritage Committee and Centre.

Promoting tourism, preserving heritage

In 'Social Quality in the Conservation Process of Living Heritage Sites', author Ping Kong referred to the ratification of the 'Unesco World Heritage Convention' in 1972, and observes that "since then, both public and private sectors around the world have attached growing importance to the safeguarding and conservation of selected cultural and natural 'objects', focusing on physical, 'tangible' characteristics."

He also finds that "World Heritage sites receive major publicity and as a result become notable attractions for large numbers of tourists from all over the world. However, in spite of the clear economic benefits and political prestige, this massive influx of tourists disrupts and in most cases, in the long run, destroys the social quality of the indigenous community. The deterioration of social quality could ultimately undermine the application of conservation policies."

"The world's 'most outstanding' sites face threats from tourism, while the world heritage listing does not offer much in the way of support to alleviate the threats," Bart J.M. van der Aa writes in his 2005 book, 'Preserving the Heritage of Humanity? Obtaining World Heritage Status and the Impacts of Listing'.

His research is an attempt to determine if the Convention has been effective in better preserving heritage sites; to examine whether inscription raises the level of preservation; and to determine whether the 'best' sites are selected.

It also analyses the effects of tourism to see if they endanger a listed site, and asks whether the international community is willing to assist, and is capable of acting when sites are threatened, and if countries contribute financially through the convention.

Among the major conclusions drawn from this study is one concerning outstanding universal value: there is doubt as to whether all inscribed sites meet the criterion.

The research notes that, with four cultural world heritage sites for every natural site, and about half of the cultural sites located in Europe, questions are also made regarding an imbalance in the List, and the willingness and capability of European countries to nominate (cultural) sites.

Aa says that there are no indications that the listed sites lose their outstanding universal qualities as a consequence of rapidly increasing visitor numbers after the world heritage listing.

He suggests that there could be a positive impact from the "high visitor-induced pressure" at a majority of the listed sites in terms of site management, based on the presumption that visitors "only continue to visit high-quality environments."

However, with an unlimited number of visitors having unrestricted access to almost any site or part of it, he says that "world heritage status has not had much influence on the site's visitor management."

Writing for *AP*, Denis Gray wrote in 2008 that by official count there were over 160 hotels and guesthouses providing accommodations in Luang Prabang (Laos), a world heritage site.

From interviews with Luang Prabang experts and residents in 2007, *AFP* reported on the changes, noting that "world heritage status has turned the former Lao Capital from a ghost town into a tourism hub, but too much of a good thing could soon prove the kiss of death."

Francis Engelmann, former Unesco adviser and resident, complains of the increase in cars and noise, and cautioned that the 700-year-old town might turn into "a mono-industry where everything depends on tourism."

The report said that the trendy mantras in Luang Prabang were concerned with sustainable and ethical eco-tourism as in other parts of Asia, but the operational plans of tourist officials in Laos pushed for "more, more, more."

Luang Prabang, Laos

Issues and debates

Heritage professionals have been debating on the World Heritage scheme and its future.

Tijana Rakic explores the subject in her 2007 paper, 'World Heritage: Issues and debates', focusing on the indefinite expansion of the List as a contentious issue among heritage professionals.

According to her, Peter Skoberne, the then Assistant to the Director (Central Europe) of the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Natural and Natural Resources), was concerned that the List will include many high quality sites but will become too numerous to manage, with some sites not even meeting the criteria.

There are arguments for the List to be limited, with the warning that its significance might be lessened.

Georgina Peard, who at that time was a programme officer at IUCN, was reported as saying that the credibility of the List is closely linked to the concept that it is not indefinite.

To maintain credibility, Peard suggests that priority should be on managing the existing sites rather than on inscribing new ones, and she is supported by James Arnold, manager of New Lanark Heritage site, UK, who claims that inscription does not imply that sufficient funds will be offered for site preservation.

With unlimited growth of the List, Rakic cautions in her paper that there may be dilution in the value of the world heritage site status, and doubts the abilities of Unesco and its advisory bodies in preserving listed properties, due to limited expertise and financial support for necessary conservation work.

In the afterword to 'Politics of World Heritage: Negotiating Tourism and Conservation' (2005), Michael Hitchcock writes that the Convention "lacked an important provision from the outset, the need to conduct research on how well the convention was fulfilling its brief in scientific terms."

With reference to Hitchcock's point, Rakic says that despite its influence, Unesco "has only an advisory role in World Heritage Site management since the Convention does not imply its direct intervention."

The research by Rakic included a sample of 180 heritage professionals based in 45 countries, with each country represented by a world heritage site manager, a cultural attaché, and a chairman or highly ranked representative of the IUCN and ICOMOS.

An overwhelming 92.3% of heritage professionals is reported to perceive that the World Heritage status "had become more important for the purposes of the tourism industry than for conservation."

Rakic notes that a few heritage professionals view the phenomenon of tourism, which accompanies the world heritage status, as a contribution to a more rapid deterioration of sites.

There are also references to the world heritage status as a 'brand' or a 'trademark,' even though it was created to ensure conservation, implying that its popularity in tourism has led to its identity as "an authenticity stamp for the heritage tourist."

She concludes that it is uncertain whether the world heritage list will grow to be too big, and if the need of humanity to preserve the listed sites for future generations, or "to 'consume' them in [the] present through tourism development" will prevail.

Acquiring the world heritage label is neither necessarily an honour for the local population, nor a useful leverage for tourism and

environmental organisations, as indicated by the discussion paper, entitled 'World Heritage as NIMBY? The Case of the Dutch Part of the Wadden Sea'.

Relating to the trilateral nomination of the Wadden Sea by Denmark, Germany and The Netherlands, the paper was produced in 2002 by Bart J.M. van der Aa, together with Peter D. Groote and Paulus P.P. Huigen.

Discussion in the paper focuses on the growing "opposition to handing over local or national heritage to all mankind, as represented by Unesco; the few benefits for local populations; and the avenues through which local stakeholders can challenge imposition of the world heritage status."

It reveals that local stakeholders, in public consultation within the Netherlands, did not support the nomination, and seemed to have adopted the 'Not in my backyard (NIMBY)' approach to World Heritage inscription.

The Wadden Sea has recently been inscribed on the List under the nomination of Germany and The Netherlands.
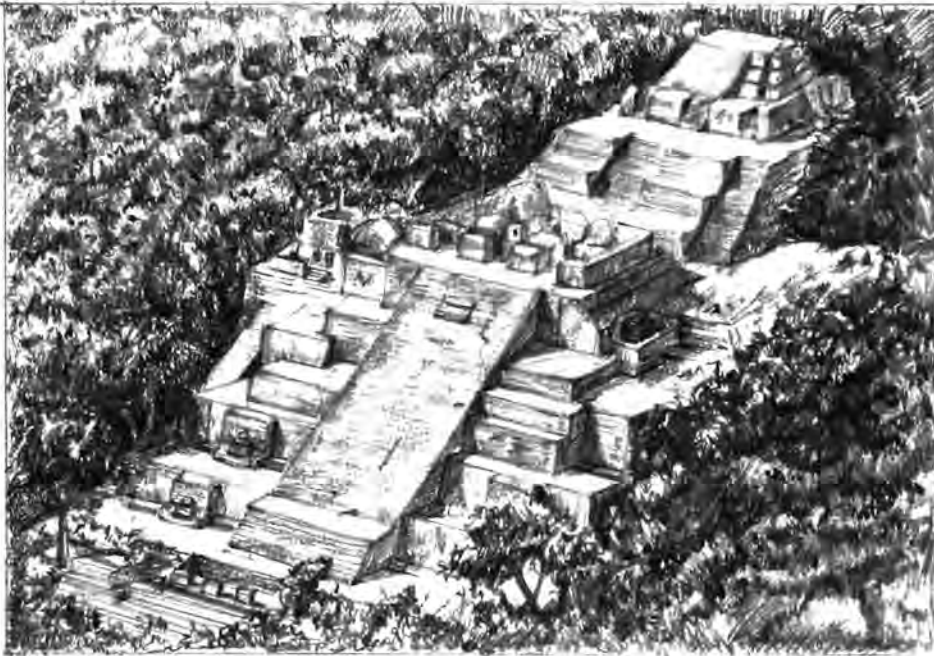
Cakakmul, Mexico
(Seth Kugel wrote that 15,643 visitors entered the site in 2005, compared with just 8,962 in 2001, the year before it was inscribed)

The paper studies the factors which affect the nomination process; opposition by locals, the tourism industry and environmental agencies; and interests at stake that complicate benefits and costs evaluation and the assessment of the World Heritage status from a rational rather than emotional perspective.

Southeat Asia: world heritage list controversy

In a recent address to the UN General Assembly, US President Barack Obama said "sadly, but not surprisingly, this body [UN] has often become a forum for sowing discord instead of forging common ground."

With regard to world heritage designation, the government of Thailand has – in similar vein – criticised Unesco's inscription of the Preah Vihear temple in 2008 as a decision leading to conflicts rather than promoting peace and cultural conservation for the people of two neighbouring countries, Cambodia and Thailand.

The decision to inscribe, while a bilateral dispute over territorial sovereignty intensified between both Southeast Asian nations claiming territory on which the temple is situated, has provoked border clashes and gunfire exchanges between opposing armies.

Thailand is challenging the decision to list the temple on the ground that the registration process and world heritage principles stipulated by Unesco had been breached.

It concludes by raising the possibility that "far from being atypical, the lack of local support for the case of the Wadden Sea may be representative of a more general trend."

As reported by Underhill in his article, Dresden city councilor Jan Mücke makes a strong point of it, giving attention to the locals, who supported the bridge plan in two referendums, and to whom "ridding the city of choking traffic was more important than any accolade."

The city councilor said: "In a democracy, we cannot have a dictatorship of a minority that, acting out of esthetic grounds, thinks they know more than the overwhelming majority of citizens."

Local or international

Examining the issues in depth, the above-mentioned paper refers to the English site of Stonehenge, which dates to a time when identifiers such as 'English' or 'British' had yet to be developed.

It says that the English should be prepared to share Stonehenge with the rest of the world as a legacy, but the national English Heritage, which arranged the nomination for inscription, seems to want "to keep it for themselves."

The sign at the site reads: 'Stonehenge belongs to the nation and falls under the guardianship of English Heritage'.

Despite the obligation following listing that ensures international protection of the site, the authors argue that tangible protection of the site must be carried out at the national level, making international assistance impractical, particularly since Unesco requires that a national World Heritage Act be implemented as a condition for inscription.

Stonehenge
Illustration by Parinee Srisuwan

Underhill notes that some countries in the developed world may harbour resentment toward outside interference, and presents the U.S. as an example.

He points to the case of Unesco placing Yellowstone National Park on its endangered list in 1995 (after a private company proposed gold mining in the vicinity of the park) as a cause for American mistrust of U.N. interference, and a possible explanation of the absence of any proposal for new sites in the U.S. to be listed.

The Convention is a primary symbolic attempt to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of humanity at the international level, Aa observes in 'Preserving the heritage of humanity'.

"The step from national to global heritage is predominantly a symbolic one, as the world heritage convention hardly leads to a better preservation of listed sites," he says, adding that "most actors involved in it – Unesco, countries and stakeholders of world heritage sites – have been able to use the convention for their own purposes."

While it is difficult to ascertain that tourism is a direct consequence of a world heritage award, the fact remains that heritage sites are increasingly being commercialized through tourism development.

Aa says that by putting a site under a "spotlight" (through inscription), it is under great danger as it attracts a large number of tourists, and "heritage preservation seemed to have a very problematic co-existence with tourism at most World Heritage Sites."

According to him, "this stirred debates over numerous management issues caused by high visitation numbers, such as managing the increased numbers of visitors, finding the balance between conservation and commercialization of the site, producing and implementing an appropriate management plan and implementing appropriate site monitoring systems."

He points out that cities, such as Zamose (Poland) and Zacatecas (Mexico) are both in dire need of renovation, but receive scant national or international financial support in their preservation efforts, and that "the accolade ensuing from world heritage designation is more often capitalized on by the tourism industry rather than accompanied by increased preservation efforts."

Zacatecas Plaza de Armas, Mexico

Filling the gaps

Ultimately, as Underhill affirms, "there is no question that Unesco can exert a positive influence", and the agency can help to avert the worst depredations.

In 2004, Icomos produced a study, compiled by Jukka Jokilehto, to provide quantifiable evidence in assisting the effort to ensure that world heritage is adequately reflected on the List.

Titled 'The World Heritage List: Filling the gaps – an action plan for the future', it contains an analysis on both the World Heritage and Tentative Lists that could be used for developing the Global Strategy for a "credible, representative and balanced" List.

Addressing gaps in the list for cultural properties, this study proposes an Action Plan to redress the perception that several of these properties do not reflect "the total corpus" of the world's cultural heritage, in all its diversity and complexity.

Certainly, after more than 30 years of implementation of the Convention, more critical assessments of its contributions toward preserving the world's most outstanding heritage properties are to be expected.

Such assessments shall be beneficial in making the Convention more effective, such as by rendering more emphasis on the international rather than national in the selection of site and impact of listing; addressing the two major management issues of 1) reconciling conservation and commercialization, and 2) dealing with an increased number of visitors to sites; and ensuring that the value of world heritage status will not depreciate as more sites and properties are added to the List.

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