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Issues of Visitor Management at Heritage Sites and Implications for Training and Curriculum Development

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ABSTRACT

The presentation offers observations related to heritage natural and cultural site visitor management interventions. Observations include the need for the more robust planning and management frameworks and processes that permit and guide discussion among the different constituencies; making the diverse values usually contained in the tourism and conservation dynamic explicit. The presentation suggests processes that encourage, because of economic and social self-interest, essential links between heritage site management, local communities and the tourism industry. It suggests training needs for implementing these frameworks and processes.

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The claim of this paper is to offer some observations on visitor management issues and training. I've always wondered why more resources don't go into these efforts - training young as visitor management professionals. After all we are told by UNWTO that tourism is a growing industry. They report a steady growth of 5% and that cultural tourism is even growing at a greater rate.

We also know there is a crisis in youth unemployment. Parts of the Middle East and North Africa have youth unemployment stuck at 25%. In Spain about half of young would be workers are unemployed; globally around 75 million people aged 15 to 24 are jobless. The International Labour Organization expects the overall unemployment rate of 13% to increase.

A recent McKinsey survey pointed out that too many young people lack employable skills in a world that has too few skilled workers. This is a robust survey of more than 4,500 young people, 2,700 employers and 900 education providers across America, Brazil, Britain, Germany, India, Mexico, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Survey results reported:

Some 40% of employers reported they struggle to fill entry level jobs because candidates have inadequate skills.

Nearly 70% of employers blamed inadequate training for the shortfall of skilled workers.

Nearly 60% of young people around the world said they would pay more for an education that would improve the likelihood of securing an attractive job.

And interestingly 70% of employers said they would pay more for the right talent, if only they could find it.

So we know that heritage-related tourism is increasing, we know that training is needed in visitor management to meet increasing numbers, and we know there is a crisis in youth employment. To me there seems to be a tremendous opportunity here and it seems Hercules and universities that teach these things are on the right track to connect up the needs.

Just by way of background information, my work over the years has been on protected area management issues, mostly dealing with the push and pull of conservation needs and economic development demands.

In my work, in dealing with this conservation and development dynamic, what I have come to observe is that most of the big issues facing protected area management are not technical.

Questions like what is appropriate visitor experience for a particular World Heritage site or what are the appropriate limits of acceptable change for tourism infrastructure development, or what do we really mean by sustainable tourism? These are all political and policy questions; they are not solved technically.

These big issues inhabit a complicated environment, clear management goals and

objectives may not be evident, shared values may not exist and where power struggles and imbalances make consensus difficult. But this brings me to the first observation:

Observation 1: The big issues facing protected area management are not solved by technical, rational or science based solutions.

Technical input is of course needed and I'll say more about this – market demand surveys, interpretation materials on mobile phone applications, better ways to design footpaths to accommodate more visitors, designing infrastructure in low impact ways are all needed, just to name a few. But the big values based issues aren't addressed by these techniques.

I'll use the issue of carrying capacity to illustrate the point. Carrying capacity is used as a technical solution to limit visitation; it implies there is some number that will indicate when the balance is tipped and a resource is being harmed.

However, we know that carrying capacity doesn't get at the essential issues needing to be addressed, even though many agencies and organizations continue to use the term. Why is it not effective?

Socially we know that different user groups have different tolerances for crowding. Many people are not bothered with a more developed approach to heritage.

We know that, communities are not uniform, some communities are more resilient and resistant to tourism pressures than others, some members may support tourism; others might find it offensive. The Sherpa of Nepal may provide a good example of a group of people that have used tourism for great benefit but have kept their culture intact

Environmental impacts from tourism are also not straightforward. It turns out the relationship between visitor numbers and many environmental impacts are curvilinear. A little bit of use results in disproportionately high impacts. Conversely, for areas already experiencing high visitor use, use increases may have little additional impact.

For example, at a desert environment such as Wadi Rum, in Jordan, additional vehicles may not add much damage to an already impacted driving track. In fact, because of this curvilinear relationship with some impacts we may be able to increase visitor numbers without much further damage at all. Of course we change the visitor experience if we do that.

At cultural sites, like cathedrals and museums, to protect the resource and to accommodate more visitors we can do things like construct more walkways to harden the site, but again when we do this we also change the visitor experience.

So what we have found is that in finding long-term viable solutions to such things as visitor limits, is that we need to use the more robust planning frameworks, frameworks that guide us in making explicit the many value judgments attached to a particular issue or a group of issues; frameworks, such as the Limits of Acceptable Change, and

the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum. These frameworks encourage discourse and deliberation that help make these values explicit and open for scrutiny.

Just to be clear, this is not to say that numbers cannot or should not be generated to control the volume; it's the process on how you come up with them that's important.

So in developing training programmes it's essential to provide, I think, training in the use of these frameworks, and to reach agreement within the universities teaching visitor management that these are recommended working approaches.

Because these processes encourage discourse and deliberation, facilitation skills are extremely beneficial for framework implementation and training courses would be well-served to include them.

Observation 2: Consider the public and not just tourists!

It's been my experience that it's useful to consider visitor management in the broader context of public use, not just tourism. It's useful to reflect on how tourists integrate with, educational groups, recreation interests, scientific research, and even at some sites the film industry. It's useful to consider the people who use the resource for local cultural and spiritual activities, so as to avoid unnecessary visitor conflict.

So with this in mind, it's very helpful for protected area management to know something about the structure of these different groups. A more than basic knowledge of the tourism industry and its segments is of course obvious. It's important to know the structure and practices of the other public use groups and their interests. What archeologists do, for example, and what are the issues working with this group. Not to leave out the technical hard skills, training is needed in such things as the design of visitor preference survey instruments.

Observation 3: It's important to promote processes that link protected areas, communities and the tourism industry and that these are motivated out of self-interest.

It's important to connect the dots between the three major groups by promoting as many practical processes as possible that bring the different groups together because of economic and social self-interests. So here are some examples of process that can promote this dynamic.

One is identifying, prioritizing, and mapping a destination's or region's cultural and natural tangible and intangible heritage assets. I refer you to the experiences in the Douro Valley in Portugal and several areas in the US, Mexico and South America using the National Geographic Map Guide initiative. These initiatives form stewardship councils generally using existing tourism associations and protected area management systems and then through surveys identify and prioritize community-based heritage attractions and their related products. They put these on a map with brief descriptions of each and most of the time everyone likes this; it's in everybody's interests.

One of the hooks for businesses is the marketing prospect for being associated with a particular attraction identified and described on the map. One of the hooks for protected areas is to help distribute visitation from one site to another, if the satellite sites are well planned and managed.

Another process related to this might include a robust analysis of the supply and demand potential of different communities and the development support needed to create high quality heritage-related products. Site and regional authorities, and communities could determine with the tourism industry which heritage assets have most potential and the most potential to bring in higher paying visitors.

By the way, it was estimated by James Reebanks in his study from the United Kingdom, that a small shift of 1% in the visitor profile of a potential World Heritage site like the Lake District with its 8–9 million visitors could result in an absolute economic impact of up to about €20 million per year.

By changing the visitor profile backed up with data that shows the potential gain of this market segment, it also might make it easier to suggest visitor limit policies that everyone can agree on, because nobody loses revenues; we may be able to make more money with fewer visitors.

Another suggestion for a process that makes the link between the three major stakeholder groups relates to interpretation messages and generating community investment. Heritage funders suggest that they are more willing to invest in projects if there is a strategy that spells out how different sites or heritage assets can complement each other to create storylines that lure visitors across the landscape, creating with it a greater potential market. This means it would be useful at a cultural landscape or within a region, to create shared story lines or interpretation messages emanating and associated with the different protected areas, and various heritage assets.

Creating shared story lines or interpretation messages could be a complementary process that helps development but also helps management with the distribution of visitors from an iconic protected area to other neighboring sites.

It also makes sense if these interpretation messages were linked to related local products. The Rice Terraces of the Philippines come to mind as a potential example. The Rice Terraces have a species of rice that's extremely rare, it's a one of a kind species that can grow in these high terraces; the rice has great biodiversity significance. I've always thought that the story of the rice and its unique agricultural production would provide a great visitor interpretation story. It could sensitize tourists to the rice and the rice could be sold in the local villages to tourists. If there was the ambition it could be linked to the development of an effort to market the rice to specialty markets around the world.

The work of linking protected areas to local products is not new. The World Heritage site at Cinque Terre in Italy has been reported as working with agricultural producers to find ways to add value to products, and to get visitors to spend more on local high

quality food. This apparently is helping to keep the young people in the area and the terraces intact at the site. These types of actions would seem help to motivate and bring together both economic and social interests.

For training, basic skills in market analysis and product development are useful. Taking students on field visits to communities successfully engaged in these sorts of efforts – could provide valuable insights. For interpretation training this means not only developing the desired interpretation messages for materials, it means training in developing an interpretation strategy that creates linkages between heritage assets and enhances local product development.

Observation 4: Building pride – It's not all about money

I think that while delivering economic incentives to local communities is essential, solely economic efforts are not sufficient to promote positive conservation outcomes. Awareness raising and building community pride of what a protected area is protecting is essential for long-term conservation. This is nothing new, awareness rising and a pride building campaigns have been developed at a number of World Heritage sites. World Heritage status in and of itself has in fact been used for generating public awareness. But it needs to be implemented, I think, with all tourism development interventions.

As far as training goes, training in social marketing skills, working with young people, training in writing press releases is all very important.

Observation 5: Most tourism initiatives are better served through a suite of interventions; it takes a specialist trained in these interventions to be able to bundle them together to raise the possibility of successful outcomes.

It's been my experience when designing projects and interventions that if a suite of these sorts of activities and processes can be bundled together, this provides such a more robust outcome. For example, not only doing planning but doing planning and creating strategic interpretation messages based on a protected areas goals and objectives, and these are linked to local products but also pride building and awareness raising and maybe also site financing strategies.

The frameworks and processes suggested are not new, but what I think what could be progress is promoting the concept of a package of these integrated processes or working approaches and institutionalizing these within protected area systems and certainly in any professional development training.

Particularly in the developing world, protected area systems can be severely underfunded, and management teams may not be trained in visitor management methods. Having a special person trained in the suite of planning, management, business and skills is so terribly important to make the essential links between the

protected area, community and the tourism industry.

But how best to raise the bar on the profession of protected area manager, with universities playing the key training roll as regional learning platforms is the key challenge.