

World Heritage Listing: Blessing Or Curse?

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Abstract

The World Heritage List, managed by UNESCO, aims to identify and protect sites of significant cultural and natural value. While inclusion on this list can enhance a site's visibility, attract tourism, and secure funding for preservation, it also presents challenges such as excessive tourists and excessive commercialization. This paper explores the dual nature of World Heritage listing by examining its benefits and drawbacks. Case studies, including Rapa Nui, George Town, Malacca, Lijiang, and Mont Saint-Michel, highlight the complex impact of this designation. The paper concludes that the impact of a site's inclusion on the World Heritage List is complex and cannot be simply categorized as a blessing or a curse. To maximize the benefits of World Heritage listing while mitigating its adverse effects, a balanced approach to site management is essential.

Keywords

World Heritage List; UNESCO; Cultural Heritage; Tourism.

1. Introduction

The World Heritage List is managed and overseen by the World Heritage Committee of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Its primary goal is to catalogue, name, and preserve sites of outstanding cultural or natural significance in terms of geography and history. These sites include ancient ruins, historic buildings, cities, deserts, islands, forests, and lakes, all of which hold considerable cultural, historical, and geographical value. The purpose of protecting these world heritage sites is to ensure their longevity and promote intercultural and international cooperation and exchange.

UNESCO classifies World Heritage sites into three categories: cultural heritage (e.g., temples), natural heritage (e.g., rainforests), and mixed heritage sites (locations possessing both cultural and natural value). As of now, the World Heritage List includes 1,157 sites, comprising 218 natural heritage sites, 900 cultural heritage sites, and 39 mixed heritage sites. These sites not only exhibit the diversity of Earth and human life but also reveal humanity's millennia-long history of development through creative displays in arts, architecture, religion, and industry. They epitomize the essence of human culture. However, these heritage sites are also fragile and non-renewable resources. The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage is an international treaty aimed at safeguarding sites designated as World Heritage. During the 1960s, many countries recognized the risks of loss and destruction facing global cultural and natural heritage, prompting the drafting of this convention. It was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 1972, establishing an international legal framework for the protection of World Heritage.

Despite its noble intentions, the UNESCO World Heritage List remains a topic of considerable debate. Proponents argue that it enhances the visibility of sites and promotes local tourism development, while critics contend that excessive tourism may damage these sites, leading to negative impacts. This paper seeks to examine this issue from a balanced perspective, arguing that the World Heritage List is neither purely a blessing nor an absolute curse for heritage sites. The analysis will cover two main aspects: the potential benefits of a site being inscribed on the

World Heritage List and the possible drawbacks. Overall, the paper posits that the effects of World Heritage listing are complex and multifaceted, requiring a nuanced consideration of both its advantages and disadvantages.

2. Benefits of World Heritage Listing

When a site is inscribed on the World Heritage List, the possible benefits include increased global visibility and tourism appeal, as well as access to more financial and technical support.

2.1. Enhance Global Visibility and Tourism Attractiveness

Inclusion on the World Heritage List can significantly increase the global visibility of a site and attract more tourists to the site.¹ Some scholars point out that "being included in the World Heritage List brings great prestige to a country and can influence future planning decisions in certain places." This international prestige not only helps with the protection and promotion of the site itself; Enhance its place in global culture and history.²

With increased visibility, the site will attract more visitors. In 2004, biologist Buckley published a study on how World Heritage designation affects the number of visitors to national parks. He believes that being included on the UNESCO list usually helps increase the number of tourists. In Australia, for example, visitor numbers began to increase a century before sites were even listed as World Heritage sites. Scholars analyzed, "This may be related to publicity. Once people know that Kakadu, Fraser Island or the Great Barrier Reef will be included in the list, the international media will begin to report a lot, and the increased reports will attract international tourists."³ High-end Timmer, the head of the travel company, also stated in the media, "Relics with World Heritage status really increase the attractiveness of a destination to travelers, especially those who want to understand the historical and cultural significance of the destination." "More tourists will boost the local tourism industry and economy.

Specific examples illustrate this point:

Rapa Nui, or Easter Island, is a 180-square-kilometer Pacific Island known for its giant stone statues, and the island's desolate landscape and extraordinary sculptures have become a tourist attraction. In 1995, Rapa Nui National Park was listed as a World Heritage Site. Some 3,000 residents rely almost entirely on heritage tourism for their livelihoods. Being included in the World Heritage List has significantly increased the number of tourists on Rapa Nui and promoted the development of the local economy.

In Lalibela, Ethiopia, tourism provides vital revenue that supports the salaries of 560 priests and deacons, festival expenses and church maintenance.⁴ This shows that being included in the World Heritage List not only attracts more tourists, but also brings considerable economic income to the local area and supports the development of the community.

These examples demonstrate that inscription on the World Heritage List can significantly enhance the international prestige and attractiveness of a site, thereby boosting tourism and the local economy.

2.2. Improved Access to Funding and Technical Support

The World Heritage List not only raises the visibility of sites, but also provides them with greater access to funding and expertise. UNESCO officials point out that World Heritage status can attract external funding, international attention and assistance from world-class experts to protect endangered cultural heritage.⁵ Some scholars believe that after a site is listed on the World Heritage List, its status is elevated to a global symbol and national treasure, and thus political and financial support is obtained.⁶ The Australian government, which has 20 World Heritage sites, confirms this: "The World Heritage List has high prestige, and its benefits include

increased tourist numbers, increased employment opportunities and income for local communities, and better management and protection of local areas."⁷

The following examples illustrate this point:

Krakow is the third largest city in Poland. Although located in the southernmost part of Poland, it is the cultural, religious and historical center of Poland. In 1978, Krakow was listed as a World Heritage Site.

Since then, the national government has established a special fund to provide about \$10 million per year for the restoration of Krakow's monuments. This fund, which is usually supplemented by joint funds, is used mainly to preserve and improve the old town and provide tourist facilities. This fund was particularly important for the restoration and protection of monuments in Krakow after decades of pollution caused by the steel mills on the outskirts of the city. Krakow has successfully used these funds and its old town is in a significantly better state of repair than many other Polish towns. In contrast, the nearby town of Kazimierz, which did not receive similar funding, has monuments in a much worse state. The example of Krakow shows that World Heritage status can greatly benefit the maintenance of sites by prompting the state to provide special funds for restoration and protection.⁴

The village of Ninstints in Gwaii Haanas (Queen Charlotte Islands) features thirty-two carved burial and totem poles made by the Haida Native Americans. In 1981, the village was inscribed on the World Heritage List.⁴ Since then, Parks Canada has provided \$106 million to establish a park reserve dedicated to the protection of the site. The example of the village of Ninstints once again proves that World Heritage status can attract special funds from the state for the restoration and protection of the site, which is greatly beneficial to the long-term maintenance of the site.⁸

These examples show that after being included in the World Heritage List, the site can more easily obtain the necessary financial and technical support to ensure its effective management and protection.

3. Challenges of World Heritage Listing

While being inscribed on the World Heritage List brings many benefits to the site, it also comes with many challenges, including overcrowding, management issues, and the threat of over-commercialization.

3.1. Excessive Tourists and Management Problems

The Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx are among Egypt's most iconic landmarks and are known as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Although these sites enjoy a high reputation and attract tourists from all over the world, their preservation is seriously threatened by high levels of tourist misconduct and poor site management.

First, the inappropriate behavior of many tourists caused direct damage to the ruins. For example, tourists often unintentionally walk in sensitive areas, ride horses or camels, climb monuments, explore archaeologically sensitive areas, litter, take away "souvenirs", graffiti and even urinate on limestone structures. These actions caused serious damage to the structure and appearance of the site, threatening its long-term preservation.

Secondly, due to the huge number of tourists, the cost of management and maintenance increases significantly. In a country like Egypt with high unemployment, the local tourism industry thrives on tourist demand but is managed inefficiently, leading to further problems. For example, local travel agencies sell numerous tour bus tickets to the Giza Plateau and the Egyptian Museum every day, private taxis offer customized tours, and residents offer camel and horse rides. These activities have led to an increase in exhaust emissions, an increase in garbage,

sewage, and animal feces near the monument, and even dead camels have been found within the site.⁹

As can be seen from the examples of the Giza Pyramids and the Sphinx, excessive tourist activities not only increase the risk of damage to the site, but also increase the management burden of the site. Without effective organization and management, these problems will further worsen, seriously threatening the preservation and protection of the site.

3.2. Threat of Over-commercialization

Inclusion on the World Heritage List also carries the threat of over-commercialization of the site. The following concrete examples illustrate this point.

George Town, the capital of Penang Island, Malaysia, is a typical case. George Town was listed as a World Heritage Site in 2008 for its rich colonial and immigrant history and diverse landscape. This once prosperous commercial center experienced a large population loss in the 1960s, but after being listed as a World Heritage Site, the population began to return, and the tourism industry developed rapidly. However, the influx of tourists has disrupted the lives of residents, and the originally peaceful community has been eroded by noise and commercialization. Traditional fishing activities have been replaced by souvenirs and food stalls, and George Town has gradually lost its unique historical style.¹⁰

A similar situation also occurred in Malacca, Malaysia. As a city with a rich historical and cultural background, Malacca has attracted many tourists after being designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. However, the city is also facing the threat of over-commercialization. However, the city is also facing the threat of over-commercialization. The increase in tourists has led to a surge in real estate and rents, high-rise hotels and shopping malls, and the original historical buildings and communities have been replaced by commercial scenes. Residents and cultural heritage have been impacted, and Malacca has changed from a quiet community full of unique flavor to a tourist destination full of commercial atmosphere.¹¹

For example, Bert Tan, head of the local Malaysian History and Heritage Club and a Malacca resident, once described the town as "full of unique flavors, mixed races, the smell of incense, wooden houses, muddy rivers, and the sound of craftsmen working." But he lamented that after being listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the town has changed from a quiet community to a commercialized tourist and commercial monster. Old shops have been replaced by high-end bars and hotels, and the town now has "cartoon heritage, huge, weird projects, Hello Kitty buildings."

Lijiang in Yunnan Province, China has also experienced a similar transformation. This originally quiet mountain village welcomed 4 million tourists in the first year after it was listed as a World Heritage Site. The influx of tourists has caused the river to be occupied by restaurants and gift shops, and the traditional cultural atmosphere has been destroyed. Lijiang has gradually lost its original purity and charm.¹¹

France's Mont Saint-Michel is another site that has suffered from over-commercialization. This small island of only 247 acres attracts up to 2.8 million tourists each year. Crowded tourists and commercialized streets have turned this once peaceful pilgrimage site into a commercial market, losing its historical and cultural uniqueness.¹⁰

These examples show that although being listed as a World Heritage Site can bring tourism prosperity and economic growth, excessive commercialization may have a serious negative impact on the site if there is a lack of effective management and planning. The development of commercialization not only destroys the original characteristics of the site but may also bring about a series of problems such as environmental pollution and damage to cultural heritage. To protect these precious sites, it is necessary to find a balance between tourism development and site protection.

4. Conclusion

This article explores the possible pros and cons of World Heritage inscription. While inscription can increase a site's global profile, increase visitor numbers, and generate economic benefits, it can also exacerbate overcrowding, commercialization, and even damage cultural and natural heritage.

Case studies of sites such as George Town and Malacca in Malaysia, Lijiang in China, and Mont Saint-Michel in France demonstrate the reality of these challenges. The transformation of these sites from quiet communities to commercialized tourist hotspots and from traditional culture to commercial activities highlights the tension between conservation and development.

To effectively address these challenges, sustainable management policies must be developed and implemented. These policies should focus not only on visitor services and economic growth, but also on protecting the uniqueness of the site and the sustainability of the environment. Managers need to find a balance between attracting tourists and protecting heritage, ensuring that both local communities and the site itself benefit from tourism.

As Graham points out, "The symbiotic relationship between heritage and tourism requires careful consideration to ensure that conservation and visitation complement, rather than conflict with, each other."¹¹

Thus, only by thoroughly evaluating and weighing the positives and negatives can management strategies be developed that both protect the site and promote sustainable development. If this balance can be achieved in management, the World Heritage List will become a powerful tool for site conservation and sustainable development, rather than a burden.

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