Establishing a rational World Heritage tourism strategy

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1. Introduction

The origin of tourism in the modern world is closely linked to recognition and appreciation of cultural heritage. When the Roman civilization was "rediscovered" by the culture of the Renaissance, the Italian peninsula, and especially Rome, became a destination for those who wanted to take direct contact with the relics of the Roman past, which was taken as a source of inspiration for the artistic production of the time. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the "Grand Tour" consisted in trips of aristocrats and wealthy people from different European countries to the Italian peninsula in order to visit historic monuments, archaeological sites and museums. This took to the provision of infrastructure and services to satisfy the needs and requirements of the travelers, including transportation systems and accommodation facilities. This initial form of tourism included some components of its current definition: the idea of "tour" meant that travelers returned to their places of residence once their expectations had been met, they were motivated eminently by cultural purposes and funds invested in the destination came from their home countries. In modern terms, the Grand Tour was a practice of cultural tourism, reserved for a select social group in terms of education and economic position.

The interest in nature typical of the scientific realm between the 17th and 18th centuries was transferred to the field of art especially by the 19th century Romanticism; the natural environment was considered as a source of contemplation and relaxation for body and spirit and, especially after the impact of industrialization in Europe, the mountain or the seashore became fashionable tourism destinations.

The major economic, social and cultural changes induced by industrialization took to new modalities of tourism and middle classes were progressively incorporated to this activity. Over the 20th Century the workers reached the right to free time, leisure and holydays; the facilitation of transportation and the possibilities to enjoy holydays induced to mass tourism, especially after World War II. The typical modality of mass tourism was sun and beach, but gradually cultural assets became also a motivation for mass tourism. It is not strange today to see long lines of people to enter a museum or to visit a historic monument.

Over the last decades, the expansion of the concept of heritage has been accompanied by new tourism modalities; there is, for instance, gastronomic or enologist tourism. At the same time, there is a change in the habits of tourists; the long summer holydays have been replaced for shorter periods distributed throughout the year, sometimes even weekends. People look for new relaxing and inspiring experiences not necessarily far away from their homes, making tourism a top economic activity at international level and, for many countries and regions, a primary source of financial benefit, creation of jobs and overall development of local communities. In this framework, tangible and intangible cultural heritage becomes a primary asset for developing tourism; World Heritage properties arethe most promoted and usually more attractive places to visit.

2. World Heritage and tourism: opportunities and threats

In some cases, properties inscribed on the World Heritage List are very well known before the inscription but, in general, one of the impacts of an inscription is that properties become appreciated at global scale; their values and attributes are widely promoted by UNESCO and other organizations and institutions, including mass media and become, therefore, major tourism attractions. There are only few exceptions of properties were the number of visitors has not increased after an inscription on the List, especially when they are located in areas with war conflicts or political unrest or in very remote and difficult locations.

Beyond the positive effects of tourism and a possible harmonious relationship between heritage conservation and tourism development, in the absence of proper planning, there may also be negative effects, making tourism a threat.

1. The basis for a rational strategy

I would like to start talking on a rational tourism strategy recalling that the main purposes of such a strategy should be:

- Preserve the OUV of the property
- Preserve its integrity and authenticity
- Balancing conservation with enjoyment
- Guarantying sustainability
- Providing visitors a positive experience

The goal should be reaching sustainable tourism in World Heritage properties, which, according to UNTWO is:

- Ecologically bearable in the long term, economically viable, ethically and socially equitable for local communities.
- A guided process which envisages global management of resources so as to ensure their viability.
- Enables our natural and cultural capital, including protected areas, to be preserved.

In 2004 UNTWO proposed further explanations to the idea of sustainable toruism to include:
- Informed participation of all relevant stakeholders.
- Strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building.
- Constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary.
- Maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists.

In order to propose some basis for a rational World Heritage tourism strategy, four main aspects will be discussed:

- From the cultural resource to the tourism product
- The estimation of carrying capacity
- Presentation and interpretation
- The role of different social actors, especially local communities

It is necessary to stress once again that all strategy aiming at the tourism use of a World Heritage property, as in general to its management, must be based on the preservation of its Outstanding Universal Value and of the attributes that convey that value. Any activity or action that could jeopardise those values, the integrity and/or authenticity of the sites must be firmly avoided and the tourism policies and strategies must be defined in the framework of the protection and conservation policy.

a. The tourism product

In principle, heritage assets are cultural resources that, to be "consumed" and enjoyed by visitors, need to be converted in tourism products. Specific literature defines the tourism product as the resource that has been provided with required and adequate infrastructure; in other words, with the complement that makes that resource accessible to the public.

Among the necessary infrastructure the route to arrive to the site is the first component to be mentioned, but also parking areas, hygienic services, visitation routes or circuits, resting areas, gastronomy services, etc. Accommodation and related services can be provided in the neighborhoods of the heritage site and this can include entertainment or relation with other type of tourism attractions. Once the tourism product had been elaborated, then promotion and commercialization can be done, and the product is therefore included in the tourism offer of the city or region.

The big question, especially when dealing with World Heritage properties, is how to provide that infrastructure without jeopardizing the outstanding universal value of the site. In this sense, it must be recalled that the main goal of an inscription on the List is the preservation of the values and of the attributes that convey those values. All these services and infrastructure must be provided in a way that they do not constitute an aggressive presence within or next to the World Heritage property. Adequate location, moderate dimensions and neutral design and colours can be some of the key aspects to take into account. All this is related to the number of visitors that will be allowed in the site, something that will be commented in the following paragraph.

b. Carrying capacity

Among the negative impacts of tourism on heritage sites, the excess in the carrying capacity appears as one of the main factors of risk for adequate conservation. The concept of carrying capacity refers, in principle, to the use or exploitation that an ecosystem can support without suffering harming alterations. This concept applied to tourism use of heritage (buildings, ensembles, urban or rural areas) refers mainly to the number of people that these sites can support, simultaneously, without changes that may impact on their conditions or their values

The estimation of carrying capacity is a crucial aspect for a rational tourism strategy, since, as we have seen, the surpassing of the limits of simultaneous visitors may become a source of damage and deterioration to the site but also a cause for an

unsatisfactory experience for visitors. Although there have been attempts to establish general formula to determine the carrying capacity, the experience shows that, besides general principles, specific cases require specific solutions.

The issue of carrying capacity and its control is closely linked to the category or type of heritage we are dealing with. It will be difficult to control the number of people that access a heritage city, but it can be done in the case of a historic monument or archaeological site. In these cases, one important aspect is estimating the length of the visit, with the possibility of different types and extension of circuits. This estimation will allow, in turn, estimating how many tours we can imagine daily in a specific place.

c. Presentation and interpretation

Presentation and interpretation are also fundamental aspects of a rational tourism strategy. The main questions to be posed by policies makers and site administrators is what we want the site tell the visitors; in other words, what we want the visitors to know on the site itself or what kind of information the site can provide and how will we assure that visitors will understand the meanings, significance and values of the property.

With regard to the alteration or distortion of values and heritage message, we must recall that heritage is a system of properties to which society assigns values linked to history, art or science. In this regard, the heritage conveys meanings and values, through the conservation of material substance, from one generation to another. Adequate understanding and interpretation of these values is therefore essential to understand the true meaning of heritage, to ensure their appropriate use and to keep its authenticity, understood not only as the preservation of the material components but also of intangible ones, as functions, vocations, associated traditions, etc. In this sense, a conflict that appeared with the spread of mass tourism is that heritage sometimes becomes a spectacle and an object for consumption. It may happen that while a heritage site is well preserved and its ability to receive visitors remains at appropriate degrees, dedication to tourism involves risks to its authenticity. This is a situation observed often in historic centres or urban areas. When we refer to threats to authenticity, we do not mean only the damage it can cause to the material components of the heritage assets, but also the risk of intangible aspects: many historic centres or old quarters of cities are well preserved; both buildings and public spaces have good and proper maintenance, but excessive dedication to tourism means that entire neighbourhoods are dedicated to visitors, commerce is intended for tourists, former

residences are now hotels or restaurants, etc. The problem is that while the material substance can be, as mentioned, properly preserved, that sector of the city has lost its meaning and its original functions. This aspect tends to be one of the most complicated issues when dealing with some heritage types, such as historic centres.

It is necessary to clarify that not all visitors are motivated the same way; some of them could be very well prepared and motivated by cultural interests while other can be seeking to spend a good time, no matter exactly what they are visiting. We must admit that those alternatives, and the others that can be placed in-between, are valid and legitimate. Perhaps the clue can be in providing different possibilities of experiences for different people.

The phenomenon of gentrification is often related to the above mentioned situation and can be observed in historic centres worldwide, especially in economically disadvantaged countries where traditional inhabitants prefer migrate to other neighbourhoods and sell their properties. The problem of this process is that buildings are acquired by people who usually use them as second residence and occupy them over short periods throughout the year. This implies that the neighbourhood gradually loses its population, which means, as we discussed above, to put at risk some aspects of its authenticity. In this case, although material building components can be in good condition, even improved in relation to its previous situation, a loss of authenticity of functions and vocations appears.

d. The role of different stakeholders

Another type of problems is related to the relationship between visitors and local communities, especially in the cases where there are social and economic differences between them. In developing countries, it is possible to notice how local population is often aliened in visitors' expectations and desires, which becomes, in the end, another cause to threaten authenticity.

Some studies of tourism demand have demonstrated that tourists are not usually especially interested in heritage or motivated for expanding their knowledge or contacting a different culture but their main motivation is living pleasant experiences that can include heritage among other resources. In this framework, it becomes difficult to define who really cultural tourists are and how to foster heritage interpretation. In any

case, the work of heritage conservators needs to be complemented by the participation of other professionals to guarantee sustainable tourism.

The definition and implementation of a rational World Heritage tourism strategy implies the common work among different social actors, each of them with specific roles and responsibilities. The programme "Sustainable tourism in World Heritage sites", launched by the World Heritage Centre, proposes different roles for different stakeholders.

National and local authorities are responsible to develop and implement protection and conservation policies, to guarantee that tourism activities will be respectful to the outstanding universal value of the property, appropriate and sustainable and that the World Heritage sites will not be threatened by tourism.

Sites administrators are expected to manage the impact of tourism on the outstanding universal value and to define management tools, conditions of the visits to the sites, including opening hours and restrictions. They are also expected to lead the presentation of the sites and to assure significant experiences for visitors. They must also work with the tourism sector and work together with local communities and tourism enterprises in favour of the conservation and development of the site.

The tourism sector must work together with the sites administrators to contribute to protect the outstanding universal value, to recognize and participate in the shared responsibility to maintain the World Heritage properties as tourism resources and to contribute to provide good quality experiences.

It is important to mention the role of local communities in the World Heritage tourism strategy. It is widely agreed today that the condition of World Heritage must become an opportunity for the sustainable development of local communities; that they must benefit from that condition in terms of a general improvement of their ways of life. Local communities must be consulted and invited to participate in the decisions making process. The possibilities of creation of jobs must benefit local communities, at the same time providing the possibility of creation of capacities and training.

In summary, World Heritage properties, and related communities, can benefit from tourism and tourism as economic activity benefits from World Heritage. One of the clues for a rational tourism strategy is to understand that relationship and to try to find

the balance between preservation of the outstanding universal value and transmission to future generations and use and enjoy by the present generation, which implies the common work among different stakeholders, among them the local community.