

# QUEBRADA DE HUMAHUACA, ARGENTINA: OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS OF TOURISM ON A WORLD HERITAGE CULTURAL ROUTE.

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**Abstract:** Quebrada de Huamahuaca is a narrow valley in northern Argentina that runs north-south some 150 Km. It served as communication over 1000 years between the Andean high plateau and southern valleys that take to present Argentinean planes; it is a portion of two significant cultural routes: the pre-Hispanic network of Andean roads (Qhapaq Ñan) and the Spanish Intercontinental Royal Route. On the basis of the tangible and intangible heritage components, the site was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2003. The inscription had an impact on tourism, since the number of visitors increased dramatically, along with the provision of infrastructure for visitors. Tourism became an opportunity for development of local communities but, at the same time, it represents a threat for the preservation of the environment and of the heritage assets, including traditional ways of life. This paper introduces the main features of the property and the impact provoked by tourism after the inscription on the World Heritage List.

## 1. Introduction

*Quebrada de Humahuaca* is a narrow valley some 150 Km long in northern Argentina. It has served as natural communication between the Andean high plateau and the southern valleys over a period of 10000 years; in this sense, *Quebrada de Humahuaca* is a portion of two significant cultural routes: the Qhapaq Ñan, or main Andean pre-Hispanic roads system, and the Spanish Intercontinental Royal Route. After the Independence of Argentina from Spain, it has also served as communication between the new country and Bolivia. The area presents tangible heritage components that testify the occupation by man over a span of 10000 years and, at the same time, a rich intangible heritage that bears testimony of the merging between Amerindian and Spanish traditions.

This portion of a cultural route was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2003. Although *Quebrada de Humahuaca* was a well known tourism destination in the country, from the inscription on the List onwards, the number of visitors has increased drastically. Tourism became one of the most important issues related to the management of the property. Even if tourism has become a source of income for entrepreneurs and also for local communities, the lack of an adequate management plan has been the cause of threats, among them the

invasion of rural lands by the construction of lodging facilities and the lack of respectful consideration for traditional ways of life. In this framework, the purpose of this paper consists in exploring the consequences of the lack of adequate management planning on a World Heritage cultural route.

## 2. Heritage components

The area inscribed on the World Heritage List encompasses natural and cultural, tangible and intangible heritage components that make it a unique place and justify its outstanding universal value. The route itself continues running along the valley, constituting presently a portion of the route that connects Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, with the north extreme of the country and Bolivia. The main heritage components are:

### a) Natural and cultural landscapes

The valley is located between mountains that run north-south and constitute the eastern portion of the Andean cordillera. From south to north, the valley increases altitude from 1200 to 3000 metres. This change of altitude produces differences in the natural landscape, since aridity increases according to the altitude. The mountains present variations in coloration due to the presence of different minerals, something that constitutes one of the most remarkable features of *Quebrada de Humahuaca*. The flora is mainly represented by cactus while next to the banks of the river that runs along the valley humidity allows the presence of trees and grass. The valley is also a cultural landscape due to the practice of agriculture in the areas next to the river, where there is the possibility of irrigation. Corn and a variety of potatoes are the typical products of the region, cultivated much before the arrival of the Spaniards; diverse species of foreign vegetables and trees were introduced over the last four centuries. As a result, the valley can be considered an organically evolved cultural landscape (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. The landscape of Quebrada de Humahuaca

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### b) Archaeological sites

Archaeological heritage is represented by the remains of pre-Hispanic settlements. Among them, the most remarkable are the *pucarás*, defensive structures, generally located on high points that allowed watching the territory. The most remarkable archaeological site is the Tilcara *pucará*, intensively restored in the 1950s; in addition to the fortification itself, in this case there are remains of a small urban settlement that includes houses, plots for agriculture for the breeding of llamas. Other *pucarás* can also be visited, although not easily accessible as the one in Tilcara. Besides these archaeological structures, some 26 sites containing pre-Hispanic rock painting have been identified (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Tilcara *pucará*, pre-Hispanic fortification and urban settlement

### c) Villages

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the valley constituted the entrance road for the Spaniards coming from Peru through the Andean high plateau, now Bolivia. Once the Spaniards occupied and colonized the territory, some villages were settled, with the main purpose of gathering indigenous population. These villages were established according to the Spanish layout based in a grid pattern and a central square as social and religious core of the town. The villages are located along the valley, linked by the main road, and constitute the present urban centres of the site. Most of them have undergone scarce extensions and a slow process of development, something that allows perceiving the typical colonial atmosphere (Fig. 3).



*Figure 3.* Purmamarca, one of the colonial villages along the Quebrada.

d) Architectural heritage

The main buildings constructed over the Spanish period are chapels, generally located in the centre of the villages or next to the main road. Although modest, these buildings can be considered remarkable examples of colonial vernacular architecture. All of them are constructed in *adobe*, raw earth bricks, and the roofs are supported by *cardón* structures, the typical cactus specie. Originally some of them they had straw roofs, later replaced by tiles. Most chapels present one tower, being exceptional the cases of two-towered colonial churches. Although the exterior expression is quite modest, some chapels house interesting works of art. These chapels have been restored using traditional materials and techniques and present a quite acceptable state of conservation (Fig. 4).



*Fig. 4.* Colonial chapel.

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Civil architecture of the colonial period consists in urban and rural houses, where the Spanish patio layout was employed. As in the case of churches, these buildings also present a modest and austere image, practically lacking decoration. Architecture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is represented by the railway buildings, especially stations, and by some buildings like Humahuaca village town hall, responding to the neo-colonial architectural trend of the 1930s.

### e) Intangible heritage

*Quebrada de Humahuaca* is a living territory, where traditional communities practice agriculture and cattle breeding and conserve traditions that merge Amerindian and Spanish influences. These traditions are especially related to religious festivities that constitute part of the rich intangible heritage of the site. Among them, the Holy Week or feasts related to Virgin Mary are the most typical. Rites previous to the arrival of the Spaniards have also survived; the most significant is the *Pachamama*, or Mother Land, a ceremony where the land is given food and other gifts in order to ensure harvests and food. Traditional gastronomy also constitutes part of the intangible heritage; it is characterised by the use of products like a vast variety of potatoes, *quinoa*, or llama meat.

The Spanish language spoken in the valley reflects linguistic structures of Quechua; while in music, indigenous musical instruments are successfully mixed with Spanish guitars, and Quechua tunes combined with Aymara music introduced by the Incas.

### 3. The inscription on the World Heritage List

*Quebrada de Humahuaca* was recognized as one of the most significance places in Argentina since the beginning of the process of identifying and protecting historic monuments and sites. Once the National Commission on Historic Monuments and Places started its task in 1940, all the churches of Humahuaca were protected at national level. Some villages were inscribed as national historic places in 1975 and the archaeological sites were protected in 2000. The same year, the property was declared protected landscape at provincial level. Further provincial laws protect folklore and craftsmanship as well as heritage of provincial importance.

The recognition of the exceptional values of the site led to the provincial government to propose the nomination of *Quebrada de Humahuaca* to the World Heritage List. The national government supported the proposal and the site was inscribed on the List in 2003 under criteria (ii), (iii) and (v). It is worthy to note that at that time the concept of “cultural route” had not been incorporated to the Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention; even if the title of the nomination dossier refers to the

property as a cultural route, the site was assessed as a cultural landscape.

ICOMOS, while recommending the inscription on the World Heritage List, proposed some further recommendations taking into account some threats that appeared on the site. Among the possible causes of risk to the values of the property, the following were identified: flooding, urbanisation, intensification of agricultural processes, re-building or building extensions and increasing tourist pressure. The main recommendation was oriented to the elaboration and implementation of a management plan, which was in process of elaboration at the time of the nomination.

The project of management plan included, among other specific actions, the strategic plan for integral management, an education project, the tourist development plan, the environment education programme and community involvement workshops. An important principle of the management plan was the involvement of local communities. Although there has been a continuous work, the management plan has not been completed so far.

#### **4. Impact of tourism after the inscription on the World Heritage List**

Tourism in *Quebrada de Humahuaca* started at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at regional and after national level. Over the second half of the century, the site was one of the best known tourism destinations at national level but few foreigners arrived to the northern extreme of the country. Since the inscription on the World Heritage List, the place became better known at international level and tourism increased notably with respect to previous decades. Official information reports that the number of visitors in 1994 was some 7000 and in 2006 this figure had increased to more than 100000.

This explosive augmentation of the number of visitors was accompanied by changes in tourism modalities. Traditionally, the site was the object of a one-day tour, since it is not far away from the provincial capital city; tourism facilities were scarce and modest and adapted to that modality. Once the site was inscribed on the World Heritage List, it became common to spend several days in the site, with the opportunity to explore less known areas or practising other tourism modalities as trekking or mountain-bike. The construction of accommodation facilities, restaurants and other tourism services started a process that has not stopped since.

The encouragement of investment in tourism, especially by policies launched by the provincial government, include, among the main goals, attracting high revenues visitors, diversifying the existing tourism offer and improving the quality of tourism facilities and services. In order to attract investors, some encouragement measures were adopted, such as taxes reduction or low rates loans.

The increase in the number of visitors and in the rate of staying in the place produced revenues and contributed to the creation of jobs;

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all this imply an opportunity for the development of local communities. But it is possible also to identify some threats that could even jeopardize the site's outstanding universal values. Among the current threats it is worthy to mention:

- Construction of accommodation facilities: these include not only hotels but mainly complexes of bungalows equipped with social and sport facilities. This modality of accommodation requires significant plots, which are usually located next to the existing villages and towns. The construction of these ensembles implies the extension or urban areas and the invasion of lands traditionally devoted to agriculture. Some ensembles have been constructed according to traditional construction materials and techniques, but it is also possible to see odd architecture in relation to the features of the site. Some members of local communities denounced the increasing presence of "foreign" investors who enjoy priority for buying urban rural plots.

- Increasing and changes of commercial activities. Craftsmanship was one of the traditional features of the site, including ceramic production and textiles. The augmentation of the number of visitors implied an opportunity for local population to obtain revenues through merchandising, but not only artisan's products are offered but also industrial ones, in some cases strange to local traditions, jeopardising the authenticity of functions and vocations.

- Threats against traditional ways of life. The impact of tourism affects not only tangible heritage components but also intangible aspects related to traditional communities settled in the valley. The realization of festivals and traditional feasts is currently oriented not only to the local communities but also to satisfy visitors' expectations. Tilcara, one of the main towns in the valley undergoes in January the "invasion" of young people from the provincial capital city that are used to spend weekends in Quebrada de Humahuaca. Habits of visitors are often contrary to traditional ways of life of these quiet villages, something noticeable in some reactions from local population against the impact of uncontrolled tourism.

- Problems caused by the augmentation of motor traffic in the route itself and in the towns and villages.

These problems appear mainly because of the lack of proper planning, especially with regard to tourism. One possible explanation to this situation that jeopardises the outstanding universal values of the site can be found in the fact that *Quebrada de Humahuaca* was a cultural resource that was launched to the tourism offer without following an adequate process of planning regarding management. Perhaps the logical path would have been converting the cultural resource in a

tourism resource, a tourism product and finally the tourism offer.

With regard to tourism use of cultural routes, the ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes states that “*tourist visits should be managed on a rational basis in accordance with prior environmental impact studies and with plans for public use and community participation, as well as control and monitoring measures intended to prevent the negative impacts of tourism*”.

At the same time, according to the World Tourism Organization, the concept of sustainable tourism is based on three considerations: optimal use of environmental resources, respect for social and cultural authenticity of local communities and ensure economical activities that produce social and economic profit for all social actors. It is possible to state that none of these conditions have been accomplished. In this sense, *Quebrada de Humahuaca* constitutes an example of how tourism can impact positively in some aspects but can also produce negative impact at environmental, social and heritage levels.

Argentinean authorities and the provincial government are aware of the risks; intense work is currently done in order to control the situation. The formation of a site committee is intended to ensure the active participation of all stakeholders in the management process. The definition and implementation of a management plan is expected at short term. A wise plan that takes into account the variety of interests and of interrelated components that define the values of the site is foreseen as the only possibility of guarantying sustainable development and preserving the outstanding universal values of *Quebrada de Humahuaca*.

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