

CHAPTER 5

VISITORS AND THE LOCAL POPULATION

The extension of tourism away from the World Heritage Site itself and into the local community must also be carefully managed. Visitor education about the residents is as important as resident education about tourists.

All World Heritage Sites have neighbors. Historic urban towns and areas include residents and businesses. In other locations, settlements have grown up in, on or tightly around the historic site as, for example, at Borobodur in Indonesia. In still other situations, the local people, although outside the World Heritage Site boundary, are themselves part of the living history, i.e. the aborigines at Kakadu and at Ayers Rock in Australia. Local residents also may comprise part of the work force and be the suppliers of services; they may be worshippers, donors and political allies.

Often, the local population are themselves part of the destination product. Their open market, handicrafts, houses, cuisine, businesses, civic and religious centers and songs and dances may be part of the continuity of the site and appealing to the visitors. A visit to the community can give the visitor a special understanding of the monument.

Thus a visit to a World Heritage Cultural Site has two dimensions: first, to gain an understanding of a past culture and to perceive a link between the past, present and future; and second, to experience the local culture existing presently around the site.

The process of outside visitors gathering information on another culture was restricted for centuries in many parts of the world. Travel to make these studies was a privilege limited to a relative few. The knowledge they sought was sometimes about culture -- more often about politics -- and they most commonly sought to meet royalty or leaders of religions. In the past, institutional owners did not want intrusions from visitors on their grounds. Large-scale visitor access to many of these sites was restricted until the 19th century.

Today, more and more local communities are beginning to develop hostile or, at least defensive, attitudes against visitors who are flooding their communities. A World Heritage listing may give a site international attention but unless there is continuous and careful involvement of the local people, they may consider their "fame" as a nuisance to their previously quiet way of life.

This chapter looks at issues that may arise between visitors and the local population. While many of these issues will occur beyond the boundaries of a World Heritage Site, they will concern the site management team because of its role in attracting visitors. Site staff will need to prepare themselves to address public and private forums concerned with these issues.

The Visitor Interface

Numbers of Visitors - Visitors use a great many facilities and services that have mainly been built by and for the residents. Too many visitors can place a strain on these facilities and services -- be it electricity, water, roads, parking places, toilets, etc. The quality of life for permanent residents may decline.

Vehicular Transportation - The circulation, unloading, parking, loading and servicing of the visitors, vehicles -- be they private automobiles, buses, taxis and/or boats -- intrude upon and deny the local residents the freedom of movement, parking and services that they need and expect. The resultant noise and air pollution encourage residents to move out of the area.

Business Conversions - The basic, everyday businesses used by the residents -- food stores, cleaners, hardware stores, cobblers, etc., -- are forced out of their traditional locations by the increased rents charged for strictly visitor-related services such as souvenir shops, fast-food outlets, up-scale gift and clothing shops, etc.

Excessive Commercialization - Private business owners and commercial company promoters seek to maximize their exposure through a combination of public advertising, signage and perhaps sound effects. Large and poorly designed signs can be irritating. The concentration of visitors also attracts many types of people seeking opportunity - unlicensed street vendors, entertainers or beggars.

Public Behavior - Together with the accumulation of restaurants, bars, discos and other entertainment attractions comes disturbing public behavior -- loud music, drunkenness, vandalism, littering, crime, indecency, solicitation, etc. Local residents must bear the burden of increased public safety expenditures and bear the insult to their way of life. Sometimes the contrast between local residents and visitors may be confusing and dislocating, especially among the young who attempt, without any possibility of success, to emulate the visitor's holiday patterns.

Locals may also come to resent the treatment they receive from visitors. Locals work out of necessity as waiters, chambermaids, porters and launderers. The sensitive site manager must be on a constant lookout for indications that social conflicts may be brewing. At the first sign of trouble, the site staff must take decisive steps to protect the traditional cultures with the same vigor and zeal that are spent in protecting all other cultural assets. They must stand ready to respond with whatever steps are necessary, including instituting educational programs that will imbue the local community with a profound sense of pride in its traditions, and allow them to make evolutionary choices without the pressures that mass tourism sometimes unleashes.

Case Study: Safranbolu

In Turkey on the Black Sea, the town of Safranbolu is a World Heritage Site. Restoration of monumental structures -- the Old Mosque and the Old Baths (1322) -- was matched with the adaptation of the 17th and 18th-century merchant houses as guest houses. The monuments were saved but the fabric of the town -- the major and minor houses in the town -- were also brought up to World Heritage quality. It was the participation of the residents that made conservation possible and profitable.

There was settlement here in antiquity and Silk Road traffic came through here regularly. By the 18th-century Safranbolu was an important city along the Asia-Europe trade route. The trade created jobs for those making leather goods such as saddles and shoes and blacksmiths prospered. A silk and textile industry flourished.

When the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English ships began sailing around Africa, the town's economy weakened. It was finally crushed by the expansion of railroads and the building of the Suez Canal. Commerce shifted, the rural population moved in. The town stood frozen in time until 1975 when various out-of-towners -- scholars, planners and painters -- joined by helpful government officials, saw tourism as a way to preserve the important unused buildings and provide jobs for the local population.

In 1981, the residents welcomed the idea of tourism but 77% of the population had never had contact with a tourist. Yet 77% of the population also knew that foreigners bring new money to town. Local custom dictated that a visitor must be housed and fed -- the idea that guests would be asked to pay for room and board was unthinkable.

Today, local customs have been adjusted sufficiently to support a fine hotel in a rehabilitated building, and numerous guest houses operate in the old houses. There are many fine restaurants with total seating for 600. The citizens have formed a foundation to guide, control and manage their growth. Utility lines have been buried, incentives have been offered for residential rehabilitation, and citizens have become critical of poor workmanship.

It was the nearly intact ensemble of an old trade-route city that justified listing it as a World Heritage Site. It was new values, tourism values, that have justified the expense of restoring the monumental buildings. Further, jobs were provided; tourism has employed and satisfied the residents.

Improving Economic Relations

Wherever possible and appropriate, local citizens need to be encouraged to be participants and beneficiaries from the development of increased tourism. This can occur in a number of ways:

Employment - The restoration and management of a World Heritage Site is work intensive. Frequently, scholars from afar have to be brought to the site to plan and supervise the necessary conservation work. It is expected that local labor will be trained to do the field work and that some will eventually rise to take over the curatorship, management and planning. At Angkor in Cambodia, it is estimated that eventually 800-1,000 local people will be employed at the various monuments.

And so it is with tourism. Hotels and restaurants are work intensive and provide many jobs that allow for great upward-mobility. The owners conduct on-the-job training programs to improve the delivery of services and to keep up with their competition. Long-term career training and part-time or seasonal employment are common. Day labor is most apt to be drawn in during construction periods. If there is an up-side for the residents of the nearby community, there may also be a down-side for the site administrator: tourism may push up the wage-scale for local labor at conservation projects.

Construction - Most community social problems related to tourism development tend to occur during the period of construction of new hotels, roads or other transportation facilities. This work is usually done by large national or international contractors who tend to bring in their own work crews. Only seldom will the local community have enough workers with enough skills to work on a modern construction project. The presence of this imported, transient labor force can be disruptive to community values.

Employment and construction problems can be managed if they are anticipated. Unfortunately, many local officials do not prepare themselves sufficiently for these construction-related problems. The site administrator may play an important role by participating in this advance preventive planning. It is important that as many of the local labor force as possible get jobs on these construction sites. Stipulations can be written into contracts. The contract can also require that a certain amount of on-the-job-training be conducted to help improve the community skills-bank. These skills may transfer easily into permanent maintenance jobs on the grounds, buildings and equipment. Some of these skills may also transfer to maintenance and conservation of the site's fabric.

The local community can also craft objects for guest rooms and public spaces of local design and materials. Carvers, trained on the site, may be able to get commissions from the developers for decorative elements in the hotel. Pottery, woven goods, paintings and metal-work can contribute to interior design and the inventory of retail shops. Again the site administrator should be prepared to participate in efforts to get the best quality of work from the residents and also to get the best price for the products of their labor.

Food Supplies - Frequently, the presence of a tourism facility will also lead to the development of local community supply-lines. A hotel has to have a reliable daily supply of fruits, vegetable, fish and meats. The community will probably have to re-organize its own traditions to do the job. As was learned by the community near a new resort in Malaysia, men can't just go fishing when they feel like it; someone has to go fishing every day to justify the Catch of the Day on the local hotel menu.

Handicrafts - If the site allows the opportunity for an official shop or concession, the administrator will have an important opportunity to provide an outlet for traditional products and to help revive lost craft skills. Adapting a suitable building within the site as an atelier for local artisans working in the traditional arts may have the advantage of bringing them together in a central location for easy interaction with the visitors. In some instances rent may not be charged but rather the sponsor receives a percentage of each item sold. The site's prestige value may be enough to justify some national distribution or international export of high-quality, identifiable handicraft items. Training programs, improved access to goods at wholesale prices and loans to improve the marketing of local products are other possibilities to explore.

Illegal Site Exploitation

The inscription of a cultural site on the World Heritage List will bring with it international publicity and attention. For sites with a rich archeological heritage, this process may raise the site's profile with collectors and dealers. Objects already in the market place having an association with the site may increase in value, and additional objects may be sought for sale to visitors. Sophisticated international smuggling networks find easy entree where local incomes are marginal or inadequate. Illegal excavation and pillaging can quickly move objects out of the site and into the international market place. In such instances the site administrator must establish and maintain a close working relationship with police and customs authorities to halt any such activities. National governments can be pressured to both ratify and use international conventions designed to eliminate such activity.

Creating Support for Tourism

Nurturing traditional and acceptable handicrafts for a site shop or concession is a good place to begin to increase awareness and develop an economic program in the community. Residents can be helped to see themselves as representatives of the community -- local hosts -- not just guides and taxi-drivers. The quality of their interaction with visitors can set the tone for the site visit. Residents can also establish the right sense of security for visitor satisfaction.

Frequently, the formation of a local site advisory council can give focus to problems and a wide range of solutions. Your role will be pivotal in the success of such an advisory council. You must be prepared to listen to the council's problems and suggestions and to patiently explain the conservation requirements and the government's rules and/or the administration's decisions. Many of these advisory councils frequently participate in site operations. They may volunteer to keep fresh flowers on an altar or a tomb, or to serve as guides during holidays and festivals and to raise money for some special, beyond-the-budget project.

Contribution to the Public Purse

The site administrator must keep in mind the drain on the local public purse that too many visitors may create. The problem can be anticipated by budgeting either a cash payment in lieu of taxes or some compensating adjustment to the community for its support and services. The site must fit into the daily life of the community; it must be seen as a supportive good neighbor.

Involving Other Agencies

Today, many international agencies may have programs and staff in or around World Heritage Sites. These agencies include The World Bank, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), World Food Organization (WFO), World Health Organization (WHO) or the World Tourism Organization (WTO). These agencies are also trying to promote community development using the same participation concepts. They can be made partners in common efforts. A successful example comes to mind from the Cultural Triangle project in Sri Lanka. A WFO food distribution allowance was used as payment in lieu of wages for workers on some conservation sites. This kind of partnership can extend, or give an appealing new perspective, to foreign aid or relief programs.

There is no set formula. It is just a matter of meeting colleagues, learning, listening and being ready to respond to opportunities.