

Challenge of Conserving and Protecting Heritage Sites

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Introduction

Asia has emerged as the second largest travel destination after Europe. In 2014 Asia Pacific received 263 million tourists or 23% international tourist arrivals, and derived USD377 billion in tourism receipts. Growth in travel and tourism within Asia has been propelled by the rapidly rising household disposable income as well as improved accessibility and connectivity with more airlines servicing the region. One of the main attractions for Asia is its wealth of cultural and artistic treasures, which presents a strong selling proposition to tourists within the region and world wide.

A strong tourist performance will always bring credit to the tourism promotion agency as a measure of success in their promotional efforts. But this is not always so for the agencies involved in the protection and conservation of heritage sites. Degradation, damage and destruction of heritage sites can be brought about by unplanned and uncontrolled tourism. Infrastructure development in and around the heritage sites that are not appropriate or inconsistent with the site's heritage values can also generate pressures on cultural and natural heritage assets.

Heritage Destinations Under Threat

Tourism development brings the concentration of visitors in increasing level and pace to key destinations, especially at World Heritage Sites. Large numbers of visitors will bring a whole set of problems to site managers and park authorities who are interested in the preservation and conservation of these heritage sites, together with transmitting their values to current and future generations.

The examples of Angkor Wat and Lijiang can be given to demonstrate the effect of rapid tourism growth on heritage destinations in Asia. Angkor Wat, the prime tourist attraction for Cambodia, was built in the 12th century that bore testimony to the immense power and wealth of the Khmer empire. Recent satellite imaging revealed Angkor to be the largest preindustrial urban centre in the world, about the size of Los Angeles today. Angkor Wat and the many temple complexes near Siem Reap have seen a phenomenal increase in tourist arrivals by over ten times in 16 years. The large volume of visitors to Angkor Wat and the nearby temple complexes poses critical threats to the temple complexes.

According to the report by the Global Heritage Fund entitled "Saving Our Heritage: Safeguarding Cultural Sites Around the World", mass tourism is threatening the fragile archaeological site, with millions climbing over the monuments every year. The mushrooming of hotels and restaurants is sapping the region's local underground water and weakening the

foundations of some temple complexes that are built upon the hydraulic system.

Lijiang, an ancient town in the mountain landscape in southwestern province of Yunnan, struggles to accommodate the 11 million visitors it receives in a year. Being a world heritage site comes with the acute pressure of mass tourism in China, which experiences high domestic tourism numbers with more than 2.6 billion trips last year. Despite its quaint beauty, the level of commercialization has risen to very high levels. Locals have moved out of the old city to rent out their homes to businesses, discos and karaoke bars. Even doubling the admission ticket prices in a bid to reduce visitor numbers has little impact.

Pressure from High Volume

The volume of tourist traffic at the well-known heritage sites have raised several issues:

- Can the tourism infrastructure cope with the volume of tourism?
- Do the monuments have the capacity to cater for visitor flow?
- What to do about the pollution on monuments generated by tourist traffic? In the case of the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, located in the Gobi Desert in China, the centuries-old cave Buddhist paintings and sculptures that are in an amazing state of preservation in the arid desert environment are harmed by the moisture from visitor breath and sweat.

There is always the challenge for all parties to balance their competing goals and responsibilities to protect the sites while presenting them well to visitors. Careful planning and decision making are essential for success. There is also the need for close coordination and cooperation between conservation and tourism managers at heritage sites.

Is Tourism a Threat or Opportunity?

The question of whether tourism is a threat or an opportunity for heritage sites depends to a large part on the management of sustainable tourism at the heritage site. There are many outstanding heritage sites, which are highly visible 'must see' places, where tourists go to every year for unique and special experiences. Tourism will continue to grow rapidly, thereby making it crucial to manage these sites in a sustainable and responsible manner. These sites presents a tremendous potential for tourism development to enhance the well-being of the host communities, while at the same time conserving the natural and cultural heritage of these sites.

Heritage sites could be the starting point in developing sound and sustainable policies to enhance the relationship between tourism and heritage. Establishing good policies and managing the destination in a way that integrates the sites with the surrounding region would help to bring about regional economic development. Heritage tourism can have a high degree of social impact on villages in the vicinity and a powerful tool for poverty alleviation. But the locals must be given the necessary training and assistance to benefit from the tourism activity in their neighbourhood.

Heritage Tourism to Benefit Local Communities

For heritage tourism to be sustainable, it should accomplish the following:

- Make optimal use of environmental resources, maintain essential ecological processes and conserve natural heritage and bio-diversity
- Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities

- Provide economic benefits to all stakeholders and ensure that they are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities

Policy measures for sustainable tourism should not be confined to a special market segment or a particular tourism activity. The adoption of sustainable tourism guidelines and management practices must be applied to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, covering both mass tourism and niche tourism segments.

Sustainability principles encompass the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic aspects of tourism. A suitable balance must be achieved between each of these dimensions for long-term sustainability, while aiming to maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction so that tourists keep returning to the destination.

Sustainable tourism requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. There should also be the continuous process of the monitoring of impacts so that preventive and corrective measures could be taken quickly.

Community support through active involvement and collaboration among tourism managers, local authorities and stakeholders will be the key to sustainable sustainable tourism at heritage sites. The examples of successful heritage site management demonstrate that the empowerment and increased participation of local communities are important. Local communities must become the beneficiaries of heritage tourism for them to be well motivated in supporting the management and operation of heritage sites and products.

Conclusion

Given the pace and volume of tourists within Asia and other parts of the world, tourism will continue to grow at existing and new heritage sites. Good destination planning and management of the sites with sustainable practices can enhance the benefits of tourism while mitigating the negative effects.

There must be strong commitment for sustainable tourism at heritage sites for long term sustainability where every one is a stakeholder who must take good care of the 'goose that lays the golden egg'. But more importantly, if heritage tourism is to have the potential to increase the standard of living of the rural people, it needs to be managed and marketed well so as to ensure that economic benefits accrue to them.

Long term sustainability is only possible through concerted actions and collaboration among various players along the long and complex supply chain. They include the relevant ministries dealing with site conservation and tourism policy, the tourism private sector, the investors, as well as the local communities.