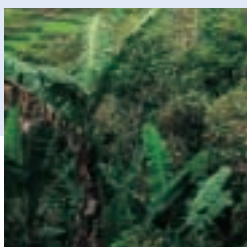
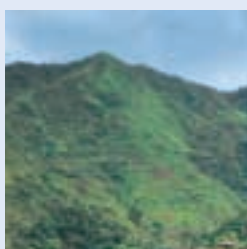


Sustainable authenticity

The case for World Heritage Sites

ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) is the non-governmental organisations responsible for the evaluation of all cultural nominations to the World Heritage List. We asked **Dr Henry Cleere**, World Heritage Coordinator of ICOMOS, to explain the range of World Heritage Sites, the objectives of their inscription on the List, and how World Heritage status is helping to sustain and protect environmentally and demographically sensitive sites.



Among the 690 sites and monuments currently on the UNESCO World Heritage List, there are many cultural properties that are deservedly world-famous, and which already attract many thousands of visitors every year. These include historic town centres in destinations such as Fez, Prague and Mexico City, archaeological sites such as Angkor, Pompeii and Machu Picchu, and architectural masterpieces such as Versailles, the Taj Mahal, and the Buddhist temples of Kyoto and Nara. All of these, and many others, figure prominently on tourist itineraries and almost all have effective visitor management programmes in operation. It is highly unlikely that the inscription of such places on the World Heritage List has led to a significant increase in their already substantial levels of visitation.

Less well known are the monuments of the industrial heritage, such as the Canal du Midi in France and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, both of which are still efficiently discharging their original transportation functions and have management programmes in place. Then there are National Parks, such as those at Cilento in southern Italy, the Mont Perdu region in the

Pyrenees (spanning the frontier between France and Spain) and Tikal in Guatemala. All are massive in size, and all incorporate tourism as a major component part of their management plans.

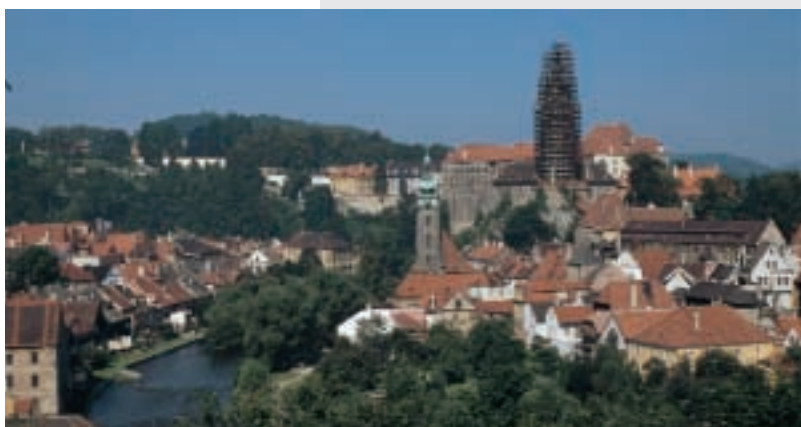
For many World Heritage Sites and Monuments, however, inscription on the List brings with it significant increases in tourist pressure, as the World Heritage cachet becomes more widely known in the tourist industry.

Guarding against threats

For small towns such as Luang Prabang in Laos, Vigan in the Philippines or Lunenburg in Canada, new problems arise as their World Heritage status attracts large numbers of tourists for the first time. These problems become more acute at small archaeological sites such as the Bronze Age cairn cemetery of Sammalahdenmäki in Finland or the remote Cueva de las Manos in Patagonia, with its magnificent prehistoric rock art, which were hitherto known only to a small group of specialists. New pressures are also being created in cultural landscapes such as the spectacular rice-terraces of the Cordillera of central Luzon in the Philippines, where tourism may have a disastrous impact on tightly knit traditional socio-economic systems.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee requires candidates for listing to have in place 'adequate ... protection and management mechanisms to ensure the conservation of the nominated cultural properties.' In the earlier years of the Convention this requirement was not strongly enforced, but over the past decade it has become an essential prerequisite. Nonetheless, the importance of properly managing the impact of tourism has been slow to be recognised.

It is only recently that ICOMOS has begun to insist upon the inclusion of adequate visitor handling programmes in all management plans. These must include tourist infrastructures for the



Cesky Krumlov, Czech Republic



The rice terraces of the Cordillera of Central Luzon, Philippines

accommodation of visitors, information and interpretation facilities, and proper provision for transportation and parking.

The Sammalahdenmäki Bronze Age cairn cemetery provides a good example of how this operates. These impressive stone burial cairns are ranged along a wooded ridge overlooking the sea in southern Finland. The number of annual visitors to the site was in the past no more than two or three thousand, and as a result the management plan was a simple one, confined to the removal of vegetation from the cairns and the clearance of leaves from the paths along the ridge that were followed by visitors who were left to their own devices on site. Following inscription there is now a better marked and surfaced trail with simple interpretation boards at intervals, accompanied by regular supervision and monitoring of the monuments themselves.

The situation in the Philippines rice-terraces is a more complicated one. At present, access to the region is by means of a narrow winding road, in bad condition because of frequent rock falls. Upon arrival, visitors find only one hotel at their disposal, albeit a well-equipped and managed one. Improvement of the access road and the creation of more tourist accommodation might seem to be the obvious solution to this problem. However, over-provision of tourist facilities would inevitably lure many of the local people into service activities, at the expense of the integrity and sustainability of the landscape of rice-terraces. This would prove to be counter-productive if the objective of tourism, the terraces themselves, were to deteriorate seriously as a result of their owners preferring to gain their living looking after visitors instead of cultivating their lands. The search for a satisfactory solution remains a major preoccupation of national and local authorities in the Philippines.

All tourism management programmes for lesser-known sites and monuments need to be formulated with infinite care and attention to the needs of visitors and the local communities. We are all familiar with, for example, small towns and villages of great historical or architectural interest where the interests of visitors have come to engulf and obliterate their living cultural values. Over-pretification and the abandonment of traditional community activities in favour of the needs of tourists, in the form of cafes, restaurants, souvenir shops, and the like, are to be seen in small towns all round the Mediterranean, in south-east Asia, in the Caribbean, and elsewhere. It must be conceded that World Heritage sites are not wholly exempt from this sterile tendency, but considerable efforts have been made in many places to avoid it. The delightful little towns of Cesky Krumlov in the Czech Republic and Campeche in Mexico, for example, demonstrate that it is possible to cater to the requirements of the ever-growing tourist industry without sacrificing the authentic way of life of their communities.

The objective of the World Heritage Convention as set out in its preamble, based on the belief that 'parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be protected', is a noble one. It has been, and continues to be, implemented wisely and constructively. Nonetheless, it is essential that its impact should not be lessened as a result of its success. Inscription on the World Heritage List is potentially a major source of economic benefit, more particularly in developing countries, but that benefit should never be allowed to threaten and degrade the very qualities for which sites and monuments are inscribed on the List.

Images courtesy of ICOMOS Documentation Centre, Paris