

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Who really cares?

As the former head of public relations at Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, Katie Foster, Director of Katie Foster Associates, knows what it's like to promote a World Heritage Site. Here, she discusses the destination benefits offered by World Heritage Site status, real and imagined, and argues that a re-evaluation of funding and promotional priorities is required not just by UNESCO but also by the strategic national agencies on the ground within host countries.

In the era of global marketing and brand initiatives, it is no surprise that the World Heritage Site label has started to jostle for a place. The allure of a bright, new, shiny UNESCO button to add to all the others is simply too hard to resist. Although the World Heritage Site has been around in embryo since the mid-1960's it is only of late that the number of such sites has really begun to blossom.

So why is this? What has suddenly made all the difference? Is it that we have all become more caring and sensitive about our built and natural heritage (almost certainly) or is it that the chance of a UNESCO brand endorsement is too compelling to miss (probably)? The World Heritage Certificate for the Ironbridge Gorge living above my head for many years was a constant reminder to strive for ... what exactly? Notwithstanding the rationale lying behind the motivation of any particular site to seek World Heritage Status, the question that begs an answer is 'Why bother?'

What is it that the status 'World Heritage Site' brings? What additional benefit can be accrued to the Taj Mahal, Stonehenge or Borobudur simply because they carry the WHS logo? Funding? Administrative and managerial support? Greater world acclaim? The answer to these three is no, no, and no again.

Benefits - real or imagined?

The World Heritage List was embodied in an international treaty adopted by UNESCO in 1972 (see Jess Harris's piece in the preceding pages), that sets out a series of aims and objectives relating to the protection and enhancement of heritage sites 'for whose protection it is the duty of the international community as a whole to cooperate'. In simple English, then, it is about the preservation of international heritage assets whose importance transcends national or sovereign boundaries and is a 'concern to all nations'.



At a headline level this sounds a noble and worthy cause, but the problem comes in the form of the detail. In the first instance, it is the responsibility of the country in which a potential World Heritage Site lies (the host) to make an application to UNESCO for listing. An applicant must meet a series of criteria relating to status and provide a detailed management and protection plan (more on this later). After taking advice, the World Heritage Committee makes a decision as to whether or not a site should be included on the World Heritage List. It is unclear as to whether or not there is an appeal process.

The benefits that flow to a newly anointed World Heritage Site are stated as public awareness, international assistance, international recognition, and funding and

support. Once again, these benefits seem worthy enough, but one has to ask what help and benefit the newly acquired status *really* delivers.

It must be questionable whether or not the Aswan Dam or the Pyramids need help in generating increased public awareness or recognition. At the other end of the spectrum, the obscurity of the Geghard Monastery in Armenia is not going to be changed through its ability to emblazon the WHS logo on its letterhead. Some World Heritage Sites like St Kilda don't especially want public awareness and others such as Ziggurat are inaccessible and remote anyway.

The deep irony here is that in the majority of cases the last thing a World Heritage Site needs is increased awareness and recognition. It is, after all, the sheer volume of people trekking through these places that is causing so much damage. The Sagarmatha National Park (Everest) would be better off without the morass of high altitude waste (human and other), and rapidly accumulating number of corpses. Likewise, Bath would be a better place without the huge number of car parks and complex road networks that have been created to deal with the invasion of tourists, as the watery welcome extended to open-top bussing visitors demonstrates! Bigger, better, more and more often is not the desirable end point it might at first appear.

In terms of international assistance, funding and support, the picture is no more appealing in reality. The total available funding to the global total of almost 700 World Heritage Sites is a meagre US\$3 million (a number that makes the UK's Heritage

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Lottery Fund look like the 'king' of funders). That's an average of circa £2,500 a year per site. Hardly the stuff of giants. Background information makes the valid point that inscription of a site on the World Heritage List may assist in opening the way for financial assistance from other bodies, but I suspect that it is only the better organised and higher profile sites that are successful in this way. That being the case one has to ask, again, what value World Heritage Site status adds? This point is evidenced by Westminster Abbey's complete failure (deliberate or otherwise), to mention its status as a WHS on any of its literature. A trawl through other similar literature produces a rather mixed picture and, indeed, presentation of said status.

The need for consistency

Accepting the fact that a scheme such as this can never achieve perfection, and that, with or without the UNESCO 'sites in danger' register, the Bamiyan Valley Buddhas in Afghanistan (a non-member country) would still have been destroyed by the Taliban, the biggest weakness of the scheme relates to consistency, standards and absence of real power or sanction.

A prerequisite of the application procedure is, nowadays, the production of a management and protection plan (presumably against which progress can be monitored, although this is left unsaid and probably unactioned). There is absolutely no indication of how standards of care and protection will be controlled or the implementation of these plans will be monitored. Without a common 'language', what can really be achieved? Ironbridge, inscribed in 1986, has only just got its management plan.

World-wide, there is a lack of will, wherewithal, resource and inclination to genuinely make this scheme work. The notion of a World Heritage List is apparently little more than a back-slap for a host country, which can be used to develop some tourism mileage and national profile. Let us not underestimate that foreign exchange income via tourism is a mighty important economic driver of many developing countries. But this end game conflicts with the conservation and protection intentions of the overall initiative. The Swedes may have got it right. They have declared all future effort on their part will be to help developing countries protect their World Heritage Sites.

The underlying dynamic is all wrong. Developed countries are able to understand their sites of World Heritage merit, but even they are not necessarily able to act upon this knowledge and fund the required actions. Australia, for example, has the resource and finance available to protect the Barrier Reef unlike, say, Ethiopia, which has fewer funds to protect the Simien National Park. In the developing world, meanwhile, 'needs must' and a different set of imperatives exist: the Indian Government need Fatehpur Sikri and the Convents of Goa to work as tourism drivers. Do the objectives of both UNESCO and India work in unison in this instance? I doubt it.

The heritage and cultural resource of even the most developed nations is already stretched to breaking point, without the need for additional administrative and implementation burdens. If a global scheme such as the World Heritage List initiative is going to facilitate better management and protection of the planet's unique heritage, natural and built, it must be set up so to do. At a pretty basic level this means adequate funding to enable the necessary management of the assets on the List. This management

must be implemented through a well-resourced, central administration that can both distribute funds as necessary and offer advice and assistance as required on a site-by-site basis.

Until the point at which the system is genuinely able to offer the type of help required by so many of its members, UNESCO WHS status will be little more than a marketing gimmick for use in leisure and tourism literature, and in many cases, it isn't even that! Alternatively, it can be seen as a way of avoiding difficult planning decisions or as a reason to urge a local authority to stop developments. A potential educational role for World Heritage Sites, however, is now emerging. A new project, 'Connecting Communities Through Learning', involving the Travel & Tourism Studies Department at Telford College, University of Wolverhampton, Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, local authorities, UNESCO, English Heritage and myself, is looking at ways in which the Ironbridge World Heritage Site can be used as an educational resource for students. As well as trying to provide local students with links to students studying other World Heritage Sites, the project is also aiming to provide these students with opportunities to visit these Sites first-hand.

As is so often the case with ambitious international initiatives, it seems the World Heritage is in danger of becoming little more than a 'nice idea'. I suspect the scheme's inherent failings could well be its eventual undoing, as the currency of WHS status is slowly undermined by the high profile members that disregard its value and the increasing number of submissions. If something is to happen to change this ebbing tide, it needs to happen soon. Will UNESCO use its '2002: Year of Ecotourism' initiative as the opportunity to take this action? We hope so.