

## *Chapter 7*

# *Meanings of world heritage*

The 1972 world heritage convention was introduced to better preserve the world's 'most outstanding' natural and cultural heritage sites. This research has tried to obtain some insights into the surplus value of preserving such heritage sites at the international level, beyond the national or local level. The meanings of the world heritage convention are considered along two lines. First, the three research questions are discussed. And second, the benefits of the world heritage convention are examined through the perspectives of three involved parties – UNESCO, countries and stakeholders at world heritage sites. This concluding chapter discusses future strategy for the world heritage convention and recommendations for further research.

### *7.1 Research questions*

The three research questions, as formulated in chapter one, were as follows: are the 'best' heritage sites selected, does selection raise the level of preservation, and does tourism endanger the site after selection? Ultimately, the benefits of preserving outstanding heritage sites at the international level beyond the national or local level are discussed.

#### *7.1.1 Are the 'best' heritage sites selected?*

The first research question raised the issue of whether or not the world's 'most outstanding' sites find their way to the world heritage list, as well as whether more general sites are excluded. This study yields two main findings. First, the site's quality is often not the only reason for nomination. And second, the interpretation of the selection criterion 'outstanding universal value' has evolved over time. This leads to the conclusion that the world heritage list has become a list of national and local heritage sites whose outstanding universal value is not always apparent.

##### *1) Site's quality gradually loses importance*

The quality criterion plays a role in the selection of sites but factors other than a site's quality have become increasingly important. In particular the considerable role of countries in nominating sites creates new prerequisites. Country-specific circumstances are at least as important as the site's quality in a country's decision of *how many* and *what* to nominate – such as the organisation of national heritage affairs, cultural and political contexts, potential benefits of world heritage listing, and sites' ownership structures.

### *Preserving the heritage of humanity?*

Cultural world heritage listings are often sought after because of the concomitant opportunity to attract tourists, while most actors in the field of natural heritage do not see many benefits in a world heritage listing. In Mexico the representation of various population groups constitutes a dominant motif in its nomination history. And the political power of Spain's autonomous regions contributes towards the increasing number of sites in this country.

The importance of prerequisites other than quality can also prevent the listing of high-quality sites. Jordan's contested political legitimacy to manage the old city of Jerusalem – whose “protection and administration really concerns mankind: the past, the present and future in general, and all Jews, Christians, Muslims and Arabs in particular” (Baslar 1998: 303) – made the nomination a highly contested one in 1981. The 1997 nomination of Central Karakorum by Pakistan in the disputed region of Kashmir was rejected as a listing could signal that Kashmir belongs to Pakistan.

At the continental level, Europe may have more world heritage sites than Africa as a result of a more impressive and lasting ‘cultural production’ in the more recent past. However, contextual circumstances in European countries lend an extra edge in world heritage nominations. The continent consists of many, relatively small, countries with relatively properly functioning national heritage organisations, a high participation degree in the convention and much competition among countries to attract visitors. Most African countries lack such institutional and organisational contexts to ‘produce’ designated world heritage sites.

### *2) Evolution of the criterion of outstanding universal value*

Initially, it was thought that the world heritage convention would entail a list of about a couple of hundred sites (Interview 42), containing the world's ‘most outstanding’ natural and cultural sites. However, the list of nationally produced heritage sites is growing longer and all sites meet the criterion of outstanding universal value. World heritage is a mental (or social, cultural) construct whose meaning has changed over time (see also Fowler 2003: 28), as reflected by the altering meaning of the criterion of outstanding universal value. This has been partially caused by the difficulty of providing an unambiguous interpretation to the criterion, allowing actors in different countries to interpret the criterion in various ways.

In the 1970s, the criterion of outstanding universal value required sites to possess both outstanding *and* universal characteristics. Inscription was justified when nominated sites were thought to elicit the support of most world citizens. World heritage listing was restricted to sites esteemed as ‘global icons’, which were already internationally well known among most lay people *before* their world heritage listing. At the beginning of the twenty-first century sites are often at best of outstanding *or* universal value. Reasons for listing are repeatedly given by heritage experts who point to specific qualities or aspects of the site's uniqueness – representative of a certain genre or school, located in a particular region or from a specific time – that are not commonly known. International fame does not precede but comes *after* a world heritage listing (see also photo 7-1).

The world heritage listing of Tàrraco (Spain) – “a major administrative and mercantile city in *Roman Spain*” (UNESCO 2004a, *italics added*) – highlights the site's importance at the national level. In the 1970s, the world heritage list included the best Roman site

### *Meanings of world heritage*

of the entire former Roman Empire. Today, the best Roman site in each country is inscribed on the world heritage list. Not the comparative quality of Tàrraco within the former Roman Empire, but its (coincidental) location within Spain's contemporary borders is an ascribed quality characteristic.

*Photo 7-1: World heritage sites as identity carriers for states and streets: Grand Canyon and Wouda steam pumping station.*



A high-quality world heritage list is incompatible with geographical and typological balance. Consequently, UNESCO's wish to include more regions and cultures on the world heritage list has contributed towards broader interpretations of the selection criteria. The stress on representativeness of regions and cultures is evident in countries such as Spain where almost all of its autonomous regions are represented and Mexico where its population groups are represented. The participation of various countries and cultures is becoming increasingly important: "Put crudely, for some... [countries] world heritage has become the Olympic Games of heritage" (Turtinen 2000: 20).

#### *7.1.2 Does selection raise the level of preservation?*

Sites listed under the world heritage convention should be preserved by all humanity. In practice, international preservation is often only available for sites which enjoyed fame beyond the national level before their world heritage listing. These are often centrally nominated and nationally owned sites that were already well looked after. The preservation of decentralised nominated or privately owned world heritage sites still depends largely upon the ability of national and local actors.

Not every country has the financial means to take the necessary steps to preserve the world heritage sites in its territory according to 'world heritage standards'. The international designation of the defence line of Amsterdam (the Netherlands) has spurred its fame and national commitment to preserve this site. Similar impacts apply to all archaeological heritage sites in the Netherlands after the world heritage designation of Schokland (Interview 16). However, cities like Zamość (Poland) and Zacatecas (Mexico) – both in dire need of renovation – are not or hardly (financially) supported in their preservation efforts, neither nationally nor internationally. Moreover, the accolade ensuing from world heritage designation is more often capitalised on by the tourism industry rather than accompanied by increased preservation efforts.

A world heritage listing is sometimes regarded as an insurance which through international recognition guarantees international assistance in the event of catastrophes (earthquakes or 'collateral damage' during wartime). Recent world

### *Preserving the heritage of humanity?*

heritage listings of the Buddhist statues of Bamiyan (Afghanistan), and the city of Bam (Iran) show that a world heritage listing is more likely to *follow* such catastrophes. These listings, although well intended, devalue the importance of a 'world heritage assurance' by placing the necessity for action above the quality criterion.

#### *7.1.3 Does tourism endanger the site after selection?*

There are no indications that world heritage sites lose their outstanding universal qualities as a consequence of rapidly increasing visitor numbers after the world heritage listing. The fact remains, however, that most world heritage sites have to deal with many visitors. Most centrally nominated sites already received a lot of visitors before their listing, and the world heritage status leads to more visitors in a restricted period of time. And decentralised nominated sites are most likely to see rapidly rising visitor numbers, because of enhanced reputation accorded to listing. The changing visitor patterns have the most detrimental effects on the quality of the decentralised nominated sites. The world's 'most outstanding' sites face threats from tourism, while the world heritage listing does not offer much in the way of support to alleviate the threats.

#### *7.1.4 Is the heritage of humanity better preserved?*

The impacts of a world heritage listing are related to *how* sites have been nominated for the list. Centrally nominated sites are more liable to receive *international* help in their preservation efforts, attract particularly more *international* visitors and obtain *international* media attention after their listing. The impact on a decentralised nominated world heritage site's preservation, visitors and media attention is often restricted to the *national* level. The different scale levels of impact suggest that decentralised nominated sites are, at least in the eyes of financial suppliers, visitors and the media, of a lower quality than centrally nominated sites.

More assistance from the international level for a site's preservation efforts is mainly limited to centrally nominated, nationally owned sites. International recognition does not add much to most national heritage programmes in the six case countries. The step from national to global heritage is predominantly a symbolic one, as the world heritage convention hardly leads to a better preservation of listed sites. National heritage programmes and the world heritage convention are rather similar in the designation and preservation of sites, and hardly complementary.

At both scale levels a site's nomination depends largely on the willingness of local actors. Regarding the spatial distribution of national heritage sites, Ashworth and Tunbridge (2000) observe that "the application of the national legislation is largely permissive rather than compulsory and depends therefore on the reactions of subordinate authorities to the possibilities offered" (p. 44). Also the preservation of world and national heritage sites is often in local hands (Apell 1998: 97). A *national* designation usually exerts more impact on a site's preservation than an *international* designation. Cahokia Mounds *State* Historic Site and the city of Zacatecas both applied for a *world* heritage nomination, while they have always been against a *national* heritage designation. A national heritage designation would limit these sites in their own abilities to manage the site, while the world heritage status brings some (potential) benefits and hardly any obligations.

The scale level on which a heritage site is designated – that can vary from the local, regional, national, continental to global – is often more influenced by a stakeholder's strategies than by a site's quality. The Wouda steam pumping station (The Netherlands), the Dorset and East Devon Coast (United Kingdom), Pueblo de Taos (United States of America), Zacatecas (Mexico), Kalwarija Zebrzydowska (Poland), and Lugo (Spain) are first of all *world* heritage sites, as the accompanying actors have approached UNESCO. They would be *national* heritage sites if they had approached their national heritage organisation. This means that world heritage sites are not necessarily of higher quality than local heritage sites, as coincidence has played an important role in the composition of the world heritage list.

The world heritage convention as coordinated by UNESCO is often taken to be a form of international cooperation, as most United Nations activities give this impression (see Malkki 1994: 49). The world heritage convention, however, is mainly a national activity, with a national agenda. The world heritage designation of Schokland has made some Dutch aware of this site. Much fewer Dutch will be aware of the Spanish archaeological world heritage site of Atapuerca. The world heritage listing has primarily a bearing at the national or local scale level.

The dependency upon national actors makes it difficult to conceive of the world heritage convention and list as a 'global culture'. Featherstone (1996) describes 'global culture' as "sets of practices, bodies of knowledge, conventions, and lifestyles which have developed in ways which have become increasingly *independent of nation-states*" (p. 60, *italics added*). Country representatives' national orientation towards the selection and management of world heritage sites make it difficult to view the world heritage convention in the same vein as a global culture.

## **7.2 Benefits for various actors**

UNESCO, countries and stakeholders at world heritage sites can fulfil their own agendas rather than the formal convention's aim to collectively preserve world heritage sites.

### **7.2.1 UNESCO**

UNESCO's main aim is "to build peace in the minds of men" (UNESCO 2004b) by emphasising the importance of education, peace, and international cooperation (Dutt 1999: 211). The world heritage convention makes two contributions to this end. First, the world heritage convention is a useful tool to encourage some form of cooperation between countries. And second, the existence of the world heritage convention has contributed towards spreading the idea of heritage to more countries and people.

#### **1) Cooperation among countries**

UNESCO attempts to stimulate cooperation between countries and to educate the public about other cultures. The world heritage convention is a means to channel this. Within the world heritage convention, most emphasis is put on the inscription of sites, the honour that accrues to countries and sites after listing and the participation of as many countries as possible. The 'positive image' of the convention makes it the most widely signed international treaty, and more than one hundred countries have a world heritage site. Much less attention has been given to rejected sites and the accompanying sense of disappointment. For example, it is hard to find a list of rejected sites.

### *Preserving the heritage of humanity?*

UNESCO's attempt to ensure a spatially balanced world heritage list stems from the wish for global participation. The goal to represent all countries dominates over the quality of the sites: "world heritage has... become an activity of global mapping, where gaps and blanks should be filled in" (Turtinen 2000: 18). Countries in all corners of the world participate today, with Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Lesotho and Tonga as the convention's most recent members (UNESCO 2004a). The wish for spatial balance is comparable to the situation in Spain, where the national government encourages each autonomous region to have at least one world heritage site. The dominant contention is that the convention is a platform on which all cultures and regions should be profiled.

#### *2) Spreading the idea of heritage*

The creation or improvement of some countries' national heritage organisations, especially in poorer countries is the second result of the convention. From the outset, the distribution of the heritage idea has been one of the informal goals of the world heritage convention. The convention text requires a country "to set up within its territories, where such services do not exist, one or more services for the protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural and natural heritage with an appropriate staff and possessing the means to discharge their functions" (UNESCO 2004a). UNESCO is a global organisation that has been able to "create actors, specify responsibilities and authority among them, and define the work these actors should do, giving it meaning and normative value" (Barnett and Finnemore 1999: 700; see also Meethan 1996: 325). The world heritage convention has led to a "rapid expansion of [heritage] supply... in all world regions" (Richards 2000: 11; see also Carr 1994: 52). Cheung (1999) states: "The word 'heritage' caught international attention especially in the mid-80's in connection with the UNESCO world heritage convention" (p. 572). Heritage is no longer only "considered a luxury of the affluent" (Musitelli 2003: 327). Relatively 'new' kinds of heritage – modern architecture, industrial relics – are made known to more segments of the world population.

#### *7.2.2 Countries*

Especially affluent countries could make financial contributions for a better preservation of the world heritage sites in poor countries. Instead, countries have used the convention as a tool to mark 'their' own identity, to attract tourists, or leave the world heritage convention (temporarily) on the shelf when advantages are absent.

##### *1) World heritage as a tool to mark the country's identity*

The world heritage convention has gradually moved from a means to save the world's 'best' heritage sites to a platform on which countries are represented: "all states and 'cultures' have a right to equal opportunities of being part of the world heritage. Part of the story is that world heritage increasingly is seen as a resource, not for humankind, but for states, regions, local settings and business enterprises" (Turtinen 2000: 11). The world heritage list is, among others, a tool to construct a national identity.

A country can reproduce and validate an identity through the convention, but power relations within countries influence what is included or excluded. Post-colonial societies, such as the United States of America and Mexico, may represent their pre-colonial as well as their colonial past. 'Older' countries, such as the Netherlands and

Poland, may show one particular historic core. And federal countries often nominate sites from each political region, highlighting their cultural differences.

*2) World heritage as a tool to attract more tourists*

The world heritage status is more used for tourist purposes than local aims. The world heritage status of Durham (United Kingdom) is mentioned in almost every tourist leaflet on Durham, whereas the international listing is almost invisible to the local population. The world heritage convention is often hailed for its opportunity to attract visitors (Interview 57) and primarily used to this end by mayors (Interview 78).

The world heritage status is big business in countries where many people depend upon income from tourism, such as around the Mediterranean Sea and, increasingly, Eastern Europe. The stream of local world heritage requests from these regions can continue unrelentingly, even though these already much-represented countries have been asked to reduce the number of new nominations within the framework of the 'global strategy'. For decision makers in countries where tourism does not have the upper hand – such as the Netherlands and the United States of America – it is easier to comply to the 'global strategy' to give less-represented countries an opportunity to catch up.

Leask and Fyall (2001) are of the view that "by definition of the criteria for inscription, ultimately the time will come when state parties no longer have any sites to nominate" (p. 61). It is doubtful whether the influx of nominated sites from countries where the convention is a success will ever stop. Countries apply a wide range of interpretation of the criteria for listing and categories of what constitutes a world heritage site. This is apparent from the introduction of industrial heritage, modern architecture, cultural landscapes, serial nominations, and intangible properties (Nas 2002: 139-143).

*3) No usage of the world heritage convention when disadvantages dominate*

The convention hardly plays a role when it evokes some resistance or when benefits are absent. Managers at American world heritage sites hardly refer to the status when they try to preserve their site better or to attract visitors, as the positive connotation of the convention has abated since the mid-1990s. A minority of the American population harbours the impression that the United States of America has lost its ownership over the designated sites to, and this makes it even worse, UNESCO. The minority that opposes international cooperation under the umbrella of UNESCO has the upper hand, as the alliance for the support of the convention is even smaller (Araoz 2002: 6). The George Wright Society and US/ICOMOS stand almost alone as supporters for a more active American participation (Gilbert 1997: 17; Araoz 2002: 11). The nomination of several outstanding cities is circumvented due to this opposition (Araoz 2002: 4).

The absence of international support for world heritage sites prevents a more active participation by poor countries. Heritage sites in poor countries do not receive more national assistance after listing: "Basically, there are no benefits for African countries in the world heritage convention. The benefits have to come from the national level, and most of these countries do not have money for anything" (Interview 43).

*7.2.3 World heritage sites*

Almost all managers at world heritage sites are glad that their site is listed as world heritage. The world heritage designation brings hardly any disadvantages, while there

### *Preserving the heritage of humanity?*

are some advantages. Not every world heritage site enjoys the same advantages. Nationally owned, centrally nominated or natural sites receive the least benefits. These sites are positive about the world heritage designation, as it is an honour to be listed and a confirmation of the site's quality. These sites do not 'use' the status, not in the least because their managers never requested the status.

Cowie and Wimbledon (1994: 71) estimated that the number of natural areas on the world heritage list could possibly increase to two hundred by the year 2000, but this has not happened. The absence of decentralised requests by stakeholders at natural areas is one of the main reasons that this prediction has not been accomplished. Site managers at natural parks hardly expect any benefits from a world heritage listing. Natural areas are often specially designated areas without much human interaction. However, the number of natural sites whose nomination is made by an organisation from below the national level may increase in the (near) future, as the role of natural areas gradually changes. There is an increasing awareness that natural areas can "bring social, economic and cultural benefits to local communities, and also environmental, cultural, educational and other benefits to a wider public" (Philips 2003: 42). The world heritage status may be a useful tool to this end.

Cultural sites whose nomination started below the national level have more chances to benefit from a listing. These sites are able to promote themselves as a distinct site and the status can help to avert undesirable changes in the environment. Especially historic heritage cities are aware of the benefits from tourism (see also Boniface 2001: 74), and initiators receive local support to enable a nomination. A city's world heritage status remains a strong marketing tool in an increasingly competitive environment. The status keeps its value, as it is important not to be among those that do not have the status.

### ***7.3 Future strategies for the world heritage convention***

The main conclusion of this research is that the world heritage convention is not a strong and effective international tool that guarantees a better preservation of the world's most impressive heritage sites. Nonetheless, the role of the convention is far from over yet, as "the future... is in heritage" (Brett 1993: 183). At the international scale level, the world heritage convention is regarded as more promising than other kinds of international cooperation (see for example Kunich 2003: 656).

The findings of this research show that participating countries interpret the selection and preservation criteria in a broad way, enabling the usage of the world heritage convention for national purposes. The creation of a truly global culture "is only possible where the identification process is explicitly transcultural, that is, mixed or supranational, not in between, but above" (Friedman 1994: 204). A genuine world heritage convention requires that country representatives should change their scope of vision. The international interests in the selection of sites and the impacts of listing should be put above the national ones.

The nomination of sites should become less country-dependent. This is possible when any country, organisation or individual would be able to nominate sites. Open nomination of a site for the world heritage list will presumably lead to a large increase in local requests for a world heritage listing. The evaluation of nominations by the international organisations ICOMOS and IUCN has to be much stricter to show that the status is highly selective. The criteria have to become stricter in that a nominated site

needs to enjoy *international* recognition from the majority of the world population regarding its 'heritage' values *before* nomination. The question "Do Indonesians have to feel pleased about a world heritage listing of a site located in Paraguay?" has to be answered with a resounding 'yes'. The quality of a site becomes the decisive argument in whether or not a site becomes world heritage, not 'other', secondary circumstances. Sites should be removed from the list when they have lost – despite international efforts – the qualities for which they were listed or when sites with of a higher quality are nominated. This introduces potential disadvantages of a world heritage listing to counterweigh the present situation wherein a world heritage listing brings merely advantages. The potential threat of being removed from the world heritage list will put the preservation of a site's outstanding qualities higher on the local agenda. Site managers will be aware that the site should not only be used for tourism purposes. Alternatively, no new site from a country will be listed as long as that country does not comply with international requests to improve the preservation of inscribed sites. Listed sites should come under the common care of all world citizens. Most world heritage sites can get support, as countries, non-governmental organisations and companies alike are willing to make money available for a list that retains a unique and selective character. A low number of listed sites will ensure that the available money does not constitute a drop in the ocean.

#### **7.4 Further research**

This research has attempted to contribute to the understanding of how sites are selected for the world heritage list and what the impacts of listing are. This research has some particular shortcomings that prevent a holistic understanding of the world heritage convention. More research on the effectiveness of UNESCO's world heritage convention is welcome, in particular where the validity of this research stops.

##### *1) Geographical extension*

The conducted research focused on sixty-seven world heritage sites in six countries. The present world heritage list contains 754 sites in 129 countries. Although the available literature is used as a sounding board to verify the patterns and trends identified from fieldwork, it is recommended that similar research is conducted in more countries, in particular in less developed or developing countries. It would be helpful to see whether the absence of expected benefits discourages 'poorer' countries in Africa or Oceania to participate in the world heritage convention, as this non-participation is an important stumbling block in the goal to preserve the heritage of humanity.

##### *2) Longitudinal impacts at decentralised nominated sites*

The research is mainly conducted at centrally nominated world heritage sites that were inscribed before 1992, as decentralised nominated sites were only included in this study at a later stage. More research on the reasons for decentralised nominations and their impacts of listing would make clear whether the identified differences between centrally and decentralised nominated sites remain relevant. Moreover, only the *short-term* impacts of decentralised nominated sites could be studied. A common trend at these sites is that the number of domestic visitors increases in the short term. Further research should ascertain whether this trend continues or changes in the longer run.

*Preserving the heritage of humanity?*