

Summary

The 1972 world heritage convention was established exactly one hundred years after the creation of the world's first national park, Yellowstone. The world heritage convention was intended to be an international tool to preserve the world's 'most outstanding' natural and cultural heritage sites more effectively, as well as to raise awareness and encourage international cooperation. The preservation of the 'best' heritage became a responsibility of 'all humanity' rather than solely a national task. And the convention can be regarded as a success. Between 1978 and May 2004, 582 cultural, 149 natural and 23 mixed sites have been designated and 178 countries have ratified the convention.

Conceptually, one may critique the world heritage convention's effectiveness. For example, heritage is by definition a contested resource: a site cannot be simultaneously claimed for (opposing) local, regional or national purposes. Furthermore, world heritage listing is awarded to sites that meet the criterion of 'outstanding universal value', but there is ambiguity in meaning. Should the site be of educational or scientific value; should it be of interest to Indonesians or Paraguayans or to both; should it be of importance at the national or international scale-level; should it be of past, contemporary or future value; and should it be exceptional or representative of a general phenomenon? Is the international community willing to support and able to act when foreign world heritage sites are threatened? Do countries supply financial means through the world heritage convention and are countries willing to receive foreign assistance? Or, are world heritage sites more threatened due to increasing visitor numbers after listing?

The effectiveness of the world heritage convention to preserve the 'heritage of humanity' is analysed along three research lines. The first line of inquiry is whether the 'best' sites are selected on the list. Second, we examine whether inscription on the world heritage list raises the level of preservation. And third, the effects of tourism are analysed as to whether it poses a threat to a site after its selection on the list.

The four main conclusions that can be drawn from this research are as follows:

- 1) The implementation of the world heritage convention is mainly determined at the national level.
- 2) It can be doubted whether all sites on the world heritage list meet the criterion of outstanding universal value.
- 3) The world heritage status is a useful tool for local and national actors to achieve particular aims (reputation, preservation or tourism).
- 4) The convention's international dimension lies in the cooperation between countries.

Preserving the heritage of humanity?

In practice, the nomination of a potential world heritage site depends on the ability and willingness of the country wherein the site lies. This has prevented the nomination of some high-quality sites until May 2004, such as the heart of Islam (Mecca) and the glaciers in Iceland. Such dependency on countries may contribute to thematic and geographical biases. There are four cultural world heritage sites for every natural site and about half of the cultural sites are located in Europe. This leads to questions such as whether or not European heritage sites of a higher quality or whether European countries are more willing and better able to nominate (cultural) sites. Most European countries are determined in nominating sites and they have continued nominating historic cities and religious buildings unrelentlessly, even though UNESCO had asked them to reduce the number of nominations.

It has been decided to conduct a number of case studies to obtain insight into countries' selection mechanisms. Are natural sites not nominated to enable their future exploitation? Is the number of sites dependent upon (changing) domestic political situations or the availability of a national heritage organisation? Case studies are also helpful to better comprehend the impacts of a world heritage listing. The explorative study has been executed in geographically restricted areas, in six countries with varying political, cultural and economic circumstances: the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Poland, Spain, the United States of America and Mexico.

Sites nominated by countries for the world heritage list are not only selected because of their quality. Other factors also play a role in the selection of sites: country-specific circumstances, shifts over time in actors that initiate the nomination, and different attitudes between actors in the field of cultural and natural heritage towards the world heritage convention.

The nomination mechanisms in the six case countries follow three trajectories. National decision makers in Poland and the Netherlands have chosen to put forward sites that lie in a particular historic core of the country. The sites illustrate a specific part of these countries' past. The two countries in the New World, the United States of America and Mexico, have both consciously nominated sites that stem from their pre-colonial as well as their colonial past. These countries' various cultures and population groups are represented. Spain and the United Kingdom have nominated heritage sites from most regions within their territory. The relative neat spatial distribution of world heritage sites over Spain and the United Kingdom is the consequence of their federal organisation, as each political unit has been requested to recommend possible sites from their territory.

Neither are decentralised nominated, often more recently listed sites, solely nominated for their qualitative characteristics. Local and regional stakeholders as well as NGOs representing certain kinds of heritage push the nomination of 'their' site to preserve the site better or to attract more visitors. Local stakeholders desire a world heritage status as a tool for tourism or preservation ends.

Actors in the field of natural heritage, both at the national and local level, are often less interested in the world heritage convention. The convention is not a priority for these actors as natural areas are often already well preserved, while they do not want to attract more visitors. These actors leave the convention on the sidelines and hardly participate in the national selection committees.

Summary

There are a number of mechanisms in the convention that lead to a qualitatively diverse list. The broad selection criterion of outstanding universal value can be interpreted in various ways, and most nominated sites fulfil the criterion. It is unclear at what scale level a site should be of 'outstanding universal value' and on which grounds. International comparisons with similar kinds of sites have not been consistently applied, while specific characteristics – such as location or age – are put forward to underline the site's uniqueness, and thereby its supra-national importance.

In addition, quality should be the only criterion for selecting world heritage sites. There are, however, five other factors that also play a role in the selection process. Countries pay heed to the World Heritage Committee's guidelines, as this increases the chance of a successful nomination. It is compelling to nominate the most feasible sites – those that are heritage visitor attractions and sites that are in the spotlight at the moment of selection. Countries with a high-level heritage infrastructure and the political willingness to actively participate in the convention have more world heritage sites. Countries also take into consideration whether they can control the potential nominated site after listing. And favourable local circumstances become increasingly important. Local financial assistance is often necessary to produce a nomination document and management plan, whereas local opposition can prevent a nomination.

The preservation of world heritage sites requires, according to the convention text, a common international effort. Preservation of the high quality values is necessary, as world heritage sites are exposed to daily spatial uses. The convention offers four instruments to preserve sites: the international recognition leads to obligations for sites, countries and companies alike; management plans have to be produced and bodies created before listing; financial support may come from the world heritage fund; and a site may be inscribed on the list of world heritage in danger.

In practice, the impacts of the world heritage listing on a site's preservation are limited, as the preservation mainly depends on national and local activities. The most support to face threats, solve issues and for financial support comes from the local level. Support from organisations at higher levels (national or international) is largely restricted to centrally nominated, often nationally owned sites. The introduction of separate world heritage site legislation, the production of management plans, and the listing as world heritage in danger largely depends on countries' willingness to comply with their obligations as laid down in the convention. For example, the Spanish central government makes its regions responsible for the management of their world heritage sites, while in contrast the United Kingdom government has produced management plans for most of its world heritage sites.

Most world heritage sites, except most of the sites in the Netherlands, are popular tourist attractions. They experience relatively high visitor pressure as most visitors arrive in a restricted season. The number of visitors at centrally nominated sites was often already high before such sites were inscribed on the world heritage list. Increasing visitor numbers after a world heritage listing occurs primarily at decentralised nominated, cultural sites.

Centrally nominated sites receive more international visitors thanks to their world heritage listing. The world heritage status is a quality label that induces foreign tourists

Preserving the heritage of humanity?

to cast their tourist gaze while travelling abroad for a short period. Decentralised nominated sites benefit from the high-standing status of the world heritage list. These sites may be included in tourist routes, be more actively promoted or receive more media attention after listing. Actors at decentralised nominated world heritage cities in Spain, Mexico and Poland are most active in the promotion of their respective sites.

The high visitor-induced pressure at most world heritage sites could have a positive impact on managing these sites, as visitors presumably only continue to visit high-quality environments. The world heritage status, however, has not had much influence on sites' visitor management. The number of visitors is hardly ever limited and access to the site's most valuable parts is often unrestricted. Meanwhile, cities' physical environment may be adapted to make the centre more welcoming for tourists. This approach has a reverse side for the local population whose houses are sometimes expropriated.

The world heritage convention is primarily a symbolic attempt to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of humanity at the international scale-level. However, most actors involved in the world heritage convention – UNESCO, countries and stakeholders of world heritage sites alike – have been able to use the convention for their own purposes. The world heritage convention has been a useful means to encourage peaceful cooperation among countries and the concept of heritage has been spread. Countries have been able to use the world heritage convention to mark their own identity or to attract more tourists. And most world heritage site managers are content with their site's universal recognition, as the listing bestows the site with standing and a promotional tool.

The world heritage convention's effectiveness may be heightened in the future by making the selection of sites and impacts of listing more international, less national. Any actor should be able to nominate sites, but it should only be listed if its qualities are exceptional from an international point of view. A smaller number of world heritage sites allows for a more profound common effort to preserve sites. The possibility to remove sites from the list once they have lost their outstanding universal qualities will make stakeholders in countries and at sites more aware of their responsibility to preserve listed sites.