UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Are They Responsible?

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Visiting sites of cultural significance harks back to the origins and history of tourism, where religious pilgrimages created some of the earliest travel routes to include tourism infrastructure and services (Goodwin, 2016). Modern mass travel trends can be seen originating in the 1950's and 60's due to increased household wealth in the middle classes leading to more curious travelers visiting a growing number of destinations available globally (Page, 2019). At this time, western powers were focused on maintaining democratic power amidst the tenacious Cold War and came together to form the United Nations (UN) which established the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1946 as a specialized agency for Nation States to focus their efforts towards their idyllic promises of world heritage (Meskell, 2018).

UNESCO's first attempt at saving cultural heritage began in 1960 after the Egyptian and Sudanese Governments requested UNESCO's assistance to protect and rescue the cultural heritage monuments endangered by the 500km stretch of the Nile River known as Nubia that would be flooded by building the new Aswan High Dam (Elsawwaf, 2014; UNESCO, n.d.a). There is plenty of well-deserved praise written regarding the collaborative efforts of the Nubian campaign (Meskell, 2018) as its success led to wider faith in UNESCO's mission globally (Keough, 2011), including leading to the 1972 World Heritage Convention (WHC), and the creation of the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) (Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972). Currently numbering 1154 sites in 2021 (UNESCO, n.d.b), the growing list of World Heritage Sites (WHS's) is managed by WHC policy structured along the *5 Strategic Objectives of the Convention*, known as the 5 C's: Credibility, Conservation, Capacity Building, Communication and - added 5 years after the others – Communities (UNESCO, 2007).

It must then be asked if a global designation can be considered as responsible, and if possible, what needs to be taken into account. There have been many definitions for Responsible Tourism (RT) drafted over the years and a common factor amongst them is that most are written in the context for action, as in defining who is taking responsibility and how (International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations (ICRTD), 2002; Goodwin, 2016). At the forefront of the RT movement, Goodwin, noted that "[RT] is [also] about everyone involved taking responsibility for making tourism more sustainable. The problem is that when something is everyone's responsibility it can end up being nobody's" (Goodwin, 2011, p.31).

In order to address the dichotomy of stakeholder interests and responsibilities at WHS's (Habicher et al., 2019), this paper will look into the choices made by nation states on the world stage and their efforts inscribing sites into the WHL. This will be done in light of the 2002 Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism, which specifically emphasis engaging the local communities with an aim at minimizing negative impacts and maximizing positive one's (ICRTD, 2002). These decisions will be analysed employing the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework (Elkington, 1994) to understand the financial, environmental, and cultural impacts that come with WHL inscription. It is important to note that western perspectives will be given focus in this paper as there are many differences in cultural attitudes east to west and "western perspectives… were well reflected in the WH Convention, [and] the properties on the WHL" (Jimura, 2019, p.11).

The realities of UNESCO's World Heritage nomination and inscription must be further detailed in order to understand if the UNESCO WHL itself would be considered responsible, or if the

listing process is merely a step to the Nation States acting responsibly in the management of their own inscribed sites. UNESCO's convoluted bureaucracy has established the centrality of Nation State's decision-making power (Meskell, 2018) with such fortitude, that the director of the WHC admits that UNESCO "only ha[s] moral power" when making recommendations (Keough, 2011; Usborne, 2014, n.p.). And while the UN makes many statements, it has struggled to adapt to modern global trends where nonstate actors are some of the most destructive forces (Meskell, 2018), suggesting the need for serious transformation of the WHC in order to manage States' obligations to implement proper safeguarding practices of their WHS's (Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage**,** 2003; Keough, 2011).

Many member nations of the WHC use cultural heritage for soft power (Hoggart, 1978), meaning their motives are often politically motivated outside of the WHC walls (Meskell, 2018). Self-interests of individual Nations add a complicated layer to governance as national nominations are submitted with the goal of gaining a new national heritage site that brings funding, media attention and tourism along with it (Keough, 2011, Meskell, 2018). By supporting multi-lateral state control of the process, the WHC is putting it in the hands of the states to manage regulation of their own heritage sites unless the convention adapts further practices to better hold states accountable to the convention text (Jimura, 2019). But with the fractured interests of member states, it is still common to find submitted management plans of newly inscribed sites lacking detail to effectively plan for future growth (Keough, 2011; Labadi, 2013). Heritage scholars agree that implementation of WHC procedures in WHS's will need an integrated approach by all stakeholders involved in order fulfil the Convention's goals of preserving World Heritage for future generations (Imon, 2017).

Issues with many specific sites have been raised over the years, especially amidst times of war (Connor, 2016). Established alongside the WHL, the Convention does keep the List of World Heritage in Danger (UNESCO, n.d.c.) updated yearly, and so far, 3 sites have lost their Heritage status due to loss of *outstanding universal value,* although Gaillard and Rodwell (2015) claim these decisions were inconsistent as the criteria varied for each site. Dresden's Elbe Valley lost its WHS status in 2009 after the residents voted to continue construction of a bridge that would decrease congestion in the city, and while "some officials [warned] the loss will damage both Dresden's reputation and its tourism revenues… more than half of the people living in the city [were] willing to see the title go" (Abramsohn, 2009, n.p.). The people living near a WHS, and thus those impacted by its WHL status, should clearly be the one's making the decision about their city's future. So, if the residents of Dresden - much like those in the redeveloping waterfront city, Liverpool, whose WHS status was lost in 2021 (Bowley, 2021) - are choosing to prioritise their local development, it is not shameful and instead may be enlightening as to which heritage sites actually benefit from a UNESCO listing.

Elkington's TBL (1994) will be used to analyse the impacts of WHS status, beginning with the financial bottom line, which clarifies the dichotomy between political decision-makers and local communities impacted by WHL inscription. It is the Nation States who are most eager to boast of the imminent financial benefits their country will reap from a new WHS inscription, as being listed is thought to bring prominence and increased tourism to the destination (Frey and Steiner, 2011), and hopefully benefiting the local economy by bringing more access to funding (Natural Heritage Protection Fund, n.d.). Locals are initially sold on the notion of economic prospect, but over time the

excessive focus given to these benefits can lead to serious issues like the loss of local purchasing power parity due to inflation (Jimura, 2019) and rise in real estate costs because of speculation (Milano, 2017). Residents in cities like Matera, Italy have moved away from the WHL city centre as they feared further exploitation and larger encroachment of tourists on local life (Molstad, n.d.). To prevent this, RT requires local management by Destination Management Organization's (DMO's) to ensure regional cooperation between sectors (Gajdosík et al., 2015). UNESCO has recently highlighted how the local government of Amsterdam played an important role in balancing tourism revenue and community development in an urban environment (2016) by working alongside private industries to support sustainable tourism innovation in accommodation and transportation (UNESCO, 2016). Showing that it is feasible to strike an economic balance in WHS's, and making it important to see if it is possible environmentally as well.

As growth in local tourism to a destination typically precedes the WH process, nomination and listing have actually shown to be a benefit environmentally for many sites and their surroundings due to the UNESCO regulations that come with joining the WHL (Goodwin, 2009). Though there's no denying that this is not always the case, as management plans for site nomination dossiers don't have required standards to regulate carrying capacity limits (Labadi, 2013) or surrounding environmental needs like water and additional traffic (Jimura, 2019). Meaning the responsibility for additional environmental impacts - like pollution, damaged caused by new infrastructure, and carbon emitted coming from travel to and from a destination - are not a burden taken on by the WHC and responsibility is instead left on the individual (Jimura, 2019). UNESCO's approach of minimal enforcement of standards and its lack of resources for site preservation (Usborne, 2014), have necessitated that local tourism stakeholders reinvest their income in order to preserve their destinations and to raise local awareness of conservation (Buckley, 2012; Jimura, 2019). As seen, individual actions can become a cohesive form of action, which means the key to conserving WHS's may be involving the community in future conservation efforts (Lorenzo et al., 2011).

The necessity of community decision-making around WHS's becomes clear when analysing the cultural bottom line, especially in light of a general consensus between Nation's that it is non-compulsory to create legislation that maximizes community benefits at WHS's, as its not actually stated in the WHC text (Labadi, 2013). Although, a new WHS being listed nearby will be noticed in local people's everyday lives due to new cultural exchanges with visitors and the changes in traffic, shopping, and food that may occur because of the new tourism crowds (Du Cros, 2008; Jimura, 2019). Furthermore, a study of residents' perceptions in Sortelha, Portugal showed that heritage campaigns may bring envy to those who benefit from the increase in tourism, despite bringing collective community pride (Silva, 2014). But it is important to note that the demographics closer to WHS's tend to have a more positive outlook overall than people less connected to the WHS via proximity or culture (Kiura 2019). And while UNESCO boasts of community pride, WHL watchdog, the World Monuments Fund, has listed the Courtyard Houses of Cordoba on its most recent watch list due to locals being crowded out by visitors (2021) leading to a divide between the WHS and its local surroundings. These examples, much like the other strands of the TBL, often originate from state inscription documents that keep quiet about the possible impacts of a new WHS on local communities (Labadi, 2013), possibly because national motivations towards World Heritage may be less altruistic than they seem. (Keough, 2011).

Realities of multi-lateral governance mean that UNESCO's conventions cannot be expected to solve every problem alone, but can instead use their global platform to call for action as done with the 1972 WHC that has inspired responsible involvement across the tourism industry (Meskell, 2018). Recently, the WHC has managed to take further steps by developing its sustainable tourism IMPACT series (Caust et al., 2019) and by using the TBL as framework for its One Planet Vision for a Responsible Recovery of the Tourism Sector (One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme, 2020). Overall, UNESCO's global peacekeeping philosophy of World Heritage will always have its critics (Keough, 2011; Usborne, 2014) and its supporters, both who will point out necessary improvements that need to be made to WHS management and WHC strategy in order to avoid negative transformations of WHS's and the local communities surrounding them (Müller, 2014; Job et al., 2017). But for its limitations, UNESCO has taken onto the challenge of leadership in global responsibility while engaging local communities to take responsibility of WHS's that might otherwise have not been cared for, making UNESCO World Heritage Sites a responsible endeavour overall.

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