

World Natural Heritage Sites – Triggers for Sustainable Development Processes?

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Abstract

World Heritage (WH) sites enjoy high popularity and their numbers are continuously increasing. Currently, WH status attribution raises diverse expectations in addition to conservation, particularly with regard to tourism or regional development. By means of a global survey on 128 of the 211 natural and mixed WH sites listed in 2011, this paper highlights these changing expectations towards WH status and the associated influence on sustainable regional development. The survey results show that WH sites do in fact contribute to sustainable regional development on different levels, especially if the concept is understood in its broader sense as a process that equally contributes to the advancement of social, economic and environmental goals on a regional level.

Keywords

World Heritage, conservation, tourism, sustainable regional development

Introduction

World Heritage (WH) sites enjoy increasing popularity, spearhead global conservation efforts, and are bound to a broad range of development expectations. This particularly holds true for the 211 World Natural Heritage sites, of which 28 are mixed natural and cultural sites (UNESCO WHC 2011). Although protected area labels (which include World Heritage) are discussed as a promising strategy to promote sustainable regional development (SIEGRIST et al. 2009; MOSE 2007; HAMMER 2003), these interrelations have received little attention in research on WH sites. In addition, most published work on WH sites and their effects are single case studies or commissioned studies (e.g. REBANKS CONSULTING & TBR 2009; HAMBREY 2007), meaning that consistent and comparative research on the effects and impacts of WH status attribution is largely missing.

For natural WH sites, being part of this “heritage of humankind” is no longer only about preserving natural and cultural values for future generations. Indeed, inclusion in “the list” raises various expectations in terms of promotion, marketing, tourism, and regional development (LI et al. 2008; SCHERER et al. 2005). This paper traces these changing motivations and compares them to the reality on the ground by drawing on the results of one of the first global and comparative surveys on WH sites and sustainable regional development.

Method

Based on a sustainability framework within the conservation-use context, a comprehensive set of questions with regard to WH sites, sustainable development, tourism and conservation was developed. This online questionnaire also integrated findings from the project “Benchmarking World Heritage & Tourism” which assessed the interrelationships between WH sites and tourism development (CLIVAZ et al. 2013).

The online questionnaire was available in six languages and sent to all 211 site managers of the natural and mixed WH sites listed at that time. The questions addressed the current state (also drawing on statistical data), the respective development trends, and the influence of the WH site listing.

The survey featured a very high response rate of over 60% – possibly an indication that there is an increasing interest in how WH site status can influence sustainable regional development processes. The following table (Figure 1) provides an overview of the data collected in the WH survey.

Building on the quantitative data, 12 in-depth interviews were carried out and complemented with 22 interviews from the aforementioned benchmarking study. Detailed analysis was performed with SPSS 21 for the quantitative data and Atlas.TI for the qualitative data.

| | | Survey | Listed Sites (2011) | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|---------------------|------------|
| | Total Number | 128 | 211 | 61% |
| Participating WH sites | Completed | 123 | 183 | 58% |
| | Partially completed | 5 | 28 | 2% |
| Geographical distribution | Africa | 28 | 38 | 74% |
| | Arab States | 4 | 5 | 80% |
| | Asia & the Pacific | 27 | 61 | 44% |
| | Europe & North America | 45 | 69 | 65% |
| | Latin America & the Caribbean | 24 | 38 | 63% |
| Site types | Natural WH sites | 113 | 183 | 61% |
| | Mixed WH sites | 15 | 28 | 53% |

Figure 1: Overview of data (own table)

Changing motivations for WH status

The WH convention was established in 1972 with the consciousness that natural and cultural heritage were increasingly threatened, that the disappearance of heritage was a loss to all the nations of the world, and that hence, increasing efforts to conserve outstanding universal heritage were necessary (UNESCO 1972).

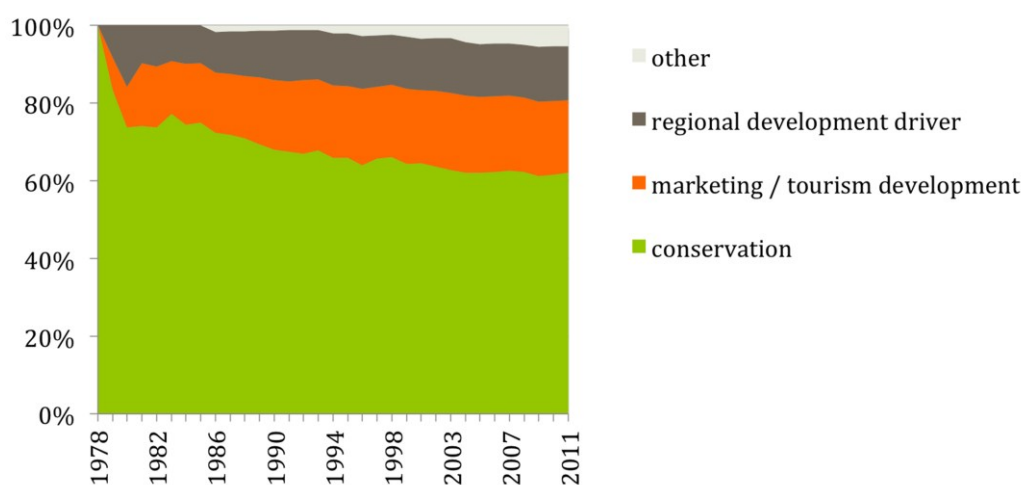


Figure 2: Main motivation for WH status application (by the main applying party preparing the candidature), own figure, n = 127, multiple answers possible

While conservation was the single most important reason when the WH status was created, additional expectations have emerged over time, such as the hope that the WH status will improve site attractiveness, promote tourism, or boost regional development in general (see Figure 2) (see also CONRADIN 2013). Results of the global survey indicate that the inscription of 63% of the participating WH sites was motivated mainly by conservation, whereas 37% had concrete expectations with regard to regional development and/or tourism development.

These changes in motivation for WH status from “pure conservation” to “conservation and development” can be seen as the reflection of a fundamental paradigm shift in the meaning and management of protected areas that took place in the course of the 20th century. In the light of progressing industrialisation and exacerbating environmental pollution in the early 20th century, “static-conservatory” approaches (WEIXLBAUMER 2005) were for a long time the gold standard of environmental conservation. However, such approaches are exclusive not only in terms of human interventions, but also in terms of participation and decision-making (HENDERSON 1992). The subsequent increase in protected area designations in the first half of the 20th century, as well as the emerging sustainability debate some decades later, eventually led to a paradigm shift that allowed more inclusionary concepts to thrive (“dynamic innovation approach”, WEIXLBAUMER 2005). These concepts pay tribute to the fact that particularly in populated areas – which are, specifically because of the proximity of natural and cultural landscapes, often rich in habitats and biodiversity – exclusionary concepts were not only unrealistic, but would often not lead to a fulfilment of conservation goals. Today, it is widely recognized that conservation and development are mutually dependent (see e.g. SIEGRIST et al. 2009; MOSE & WEIXLBAUMER 2006; HAMMER 2003). BERGHÖFER (2010) even argues that “[...] calls for strict protection are not only misleading – they are unhelpful in delicate political processes of innovating conservation.”

With regard to WH site designation, this paradigm shift does not only manifest in changing motivations – as shown in Figure 2 – but is also reflected in the increasing number of natural WH sites that constitute buffer zones: Of all natural and mixed sites inscribed between 1978 and 2000, only 6% had a buffer zone; from 2001 to 2011, the percentage had increased considerably, and 29 of the 51 newly inscribed WH sites were created with a buffer zone. On a WH policy level, these developments are partially reflected in the Durban accord or the Budapest declaration, which seek to equitably integrate the interests of affected populations into conservation goals and create synergies between conservation, the maintenance of life support systems and sustainable development

(UNESCO WHC 2007; WPC 2003). The WH Convention, as well as UNESCO's operational guidelines, remains unchanged.

Effects of WH status with regard to regional development

Certainly, these debates influenced the motivations of state parties to apply for an inclusion of natural heritage sites on the list. But can WH status really trigger sustainable regional development? It is important to remember at this point that regional development cannot only be understood as economic development, but as all processes and developments that contribute to an advancement of the environmental, economic and social issues within a defined region.

Participation and cooperation

With the changing paradigms in conservation approaches, participation of involved stakeholders with regard to protected areas management has increased in importance. Participatory and trans-sectoral decision-making processes that ensure that development needs and conservation goals are balanced are the foundation for sustainable regional development.

The attribution of the WH status has a significant influence on participatory processes. Of all participating sites, 56% found that participation had increased as a result of WH status attribution, specifically in areas such as management plan development, conservation, monitoring or conflict resolution, and had also led to greater international cooperation in conservation. Managers frequently mentioned the involvement of indigenous population groups and key industries in decision-making processes. With regard to cooperation, more than 75% of all participating sites felt the level of cooperation had increased as a result of WH listing. The ability of the site management to bring different stakeholders together so as to foster new forms of cooperation is probably one of the key factors promoting sustainable regional development.

These results are important, because only approaches that manage human utilisation instead of simply excluding it stand a chance of linking conservation and regional development goals. Despite the fact that from the quantitative data alone, no conclusion can be drawn about the quality of participation (i.e., whether stakeholders were primarily consulted, or whether they were really given a chance to play a part in developing a common vision and management approach, see also WALLNER & WIESMANN 2009), these figures still highlight how WH status can lay the foundations for broadly supported sustainable regional development processes.

Institutional management

Related to participation and cooperation are institutional management processes. Two thirds of all sites were of the opinion that the management of the site had improved due to WH status attribution. This is certainly a tangible effect of the operational guidelines of UNESCO that demand that each WH site develop a management plan and has a management body with clearly defined responsibilities. Clearly defined site management, as well as a management plan that takes into consideration both the conservation of the site as well as sustainable development is – just as participatory decision-making – a crucial basis to induce sustainable development processes.

Tourism and visitor numbers

WH status can have a significant influence on visitor numbers. More than 60% of all participating sites indicated that WH status attribution had resulted in more visitors. This effect has been extensively described in literature (LI et al. 2008; HAMBREY 2007; SCHERER et al. 2005; TISDELL & WILSON 2001). However, as SCHERER (2005) notes, these effects differ substantially according to whether a WH site is already an established “brand name” (such as, for e.g. the Galapagos Islands or Mt. Kilimanjaro) or whether it is a rather unknown site. In the latter case, the effect of WH status attribution is naturally more perceptible, as international recognition grows. Yet, apart from a quantitative growth, participating WH sites also indicated that the quality and range of tourism offers had improved as a side-effect of WH status, and that many tourism offers had become more sustainable (e.g. increased compliance with sustainability standards, improved tourism policies, eco-tourism offers). In addition, almost a third indicated that the attribution of WH status had a mitigating influence on the environmental pressures caused by tourism.

Environmental conservation

As mentioned, regional development is more than economic advancement. The specific landscape, local biodiversity or intact scenery are key resources of many of the inscribed sites. As such, conservation is a significant aspect of regional development. Despite the various meanings that WH status has for site managers, more than 80% of all sites are of the opinion that WH status contributes to the conservation of the outstanding universal values for which the site has been inscribed and just as many indicate that the condition of the site has remained stable or improved. Interviewees frequently commented that the importance of conserving a site increases with its inscription in the WH list, as the conservation of the specific values has now become a global concern (see also MATYSEK et al. 2006; SCHERER et al. 2005; WIESMANN & LIECHTI 2004).

Overall contributions to sustainable regional development

Participating site managers indicated numerous areas where WH status directly contributed to regional development and displayed a broad understanding of this concept in the sense of the definition aforementioned (see Figure 3).

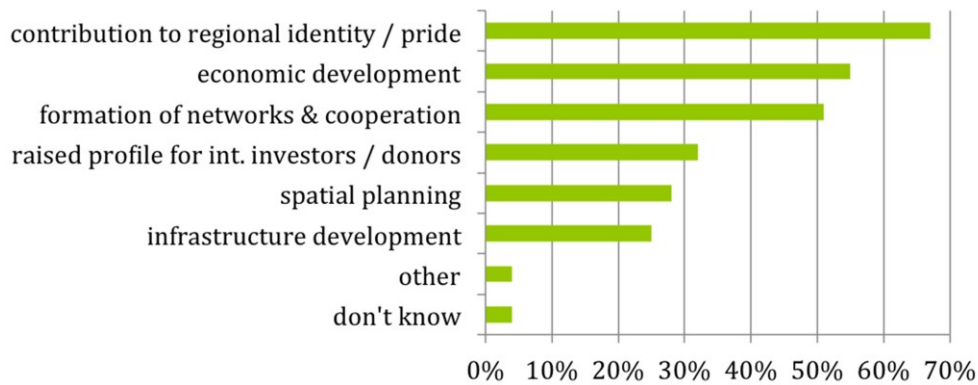


Figure 3: Contributions of WH status attribution to regional development in a broader sense, own figure, n = 118, multiple answers possible

Many stressed the contribution to the formation of a regional identity or of instilling regional pride (which is conducive both to social cohesion and participation/cooperation), but also suggested the raised profile for international donors and investors was a notable effect. The meaning of this contribution is perceived to be significant: A quarter of the involved site managers felt that WH status had “strongly fostered” and another 41% felt it had “generally fostered” sustainable regional development processes (for case studies see also CLIVAZ et al. 2013).

Discussion

The effects generated by WH status attribution are neither obvious nor generic. Apart from external factors such as specific context and socio-economic setting, the effects delivered by WH status are a result of clear goals, an effective involvement of and cooperation between different stakeholders, as well as a strong and capable management and the support of the local population.

However, results of the survey also clearly show that establishing a natural WH site can have a notable influence on regional development in a broader sense. In particular, the contributions of establishing a consolidated management, increasing cooperation (also international), and involving stakeholders are promising signs. Yet, WH sites do not automatically deliver benefits. Positive results are, as REBANKS CONSULTING & TBR (2009) conclude, “overwhelmingly the result of coordinated and well thought through efforts to achieve targeted change”. Sites that do achieve benefits with regard to regional development had carefully planned the application process and the management plan, and had also identified issues at stake and how they could be addressed with WH status denomination.

Conclusion

WH status is, first of all, an opportunity that can – if well used – be instrumental in achieving defined targets with regard to sustainable regional development. However, the aforementioned survey has also shown that WH status attribution can and does result in perceptible benefits with regard to regional development. Though some of the effects induced do not directly result in net profits, to say that WH status attribution only results in “soft changes” falls short in many respects. First of all, it does not suffice to narrow down regional development as economic development. Sustainable regional development must imperatively be seen as a much larger process that encompasses social, institutional, and environmental aspects in addition to economic advancement. Yet all too often, the “missing link” between WH status and regional development is considered to be tourism.

Under the precondition that WH status is attributed following comprehensive guidelines that take into account today’s reality (which is, that WH sites can in most cases no longer serve pure conservation goals), WH status attributions can act as a powerful catalyst for sustainable development in a broader understanding: be it in allowing stakeholders to take their fate into their own hands, by contributing to conserving essential means of livelihood or be it by actually contributing to making tourism more sustainable. WH status is no panacea – but it can be an important piece of the puzzle on the way to sustainable development.

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