

Editorial to the Special Issue ‘World Heritage and Tourism Innovation: Responding to the Challenges in a Changing World’

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Heritage tourism has become an integral part of the global economy, with World Heritage Sites among the most popular destinations. World Heritage Sites (WHS), listed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), are recognized as having outstanding universal value and attract millions of visitors each year. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, international tourist arrivals to heritage sites increased by 6%, outpacing the overall global tourism growth rate of 3.5% (UNWTO, 2020). Tourism revenues from World Heritage Sites amounted to approximately EUR 120 billion in 2019, with 600,000 jobs directly generated by these sites. This represents a significant contribution to the local and national economies of countries hosting World Heritage Sites. On the other hand, the high number of visitors has put a strain on infrastructure, cultural sites, and natural habitats, and led to negative impacts on the environment and local communities (UNESCO, 2021). In addressing negative impacts, World Heritage Sites have experienced a steady increase in innovation rates. However, the pandemic forced World Heritage sites to innovate more in order to survive and develop sustainable tourism practices.

The aim of this special issue is to address tourism innovation in line with the principles and objectives of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and its World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme. The potential of tourism innovation at World Heritage Sites has not been fully explored and is rarely considered from an interdisciplinary perspective. There is growing interest in exploring innovative tourism

practices that can help protect World Heritage Sites and the people and ecosystems that surround them. Tourism management at World Heritage Sites can foster sustainability-driven innovation by using not only new technologies, but also new visitation and communication strategies, new methods for measuring impacts, new approaches to site and infrastructure planning and design, new social and institutional forms of collaboration and networking, and more.

Research on tourism innovation, and in particular on sustainability-oriented tourism innovations for World Heritage Sites, is crucial for three reasons. First, World Heritage Sites must be preserved for future generations, as they provide insights into the history, culture, and natural environment of our world and have significant value to humanity as a whole. Therefore, it is critical to explore new ways to ensure their long-term sustainability while facilitating access for international visitors. Second, it is important to develop sustainable tourism practises that protect World Heritage Sites while generating revenue for their funding, for local communities, and for the economies of the countries that host World Heritage Sites. Last but not least, research on sustainability-oriented tourism innovations can lead to the development of new technologies and methods that can enhance the visitor experience and engage local communities in the management and preservation of World Heritage Sites.

This volume brings together a selection of research papers presented at the 7th UNESCO UNITWIN Conference on World Heritage and Tourism Innovation, held in Portorož in 2022. The conference highlighted

the need for greater engagement between stakeholders, including local communities, tourism operators, heritage managers, and policy makers. Such collaboration can lead to the development of innovative approaches to visitor management, conservation, and community engagement. Many insightful manuscripts were submitted for this publication, but the editors had to limit the number of papers selected in order to follow the journal policy. The nine papers in this special issue present different research agendas developed by scholars with diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, addressing key issues in tourism innovation for World Heritage Sites, such as sustainability-oriented innovation, digital transformation and knowledge dissemination.

The first paper offers an innovative approach to the categorization of cultural sustainability elements for World Heritage Sites. Based on the analysis of cultural World Heritage Sites in Switzerland, authors Rafael Oliveira, Silvia De Ascaniis, Renata Baracho, Hebert Salgado and Lorenzo Cantoni propose five categories of elements that need to be considered when developing sustainability strategies for World Heritage Sites. With the proposed categorization the authors argue for a proactive lead in setting new groupings of sustainability elements for addressing complex tourism management challenges at WHS.

The second paper introduces a research agenda on the transformative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the visitation of the World Heritage Sites. The results of comparative analysis of World Heritage Sites with other tourism destinations in Czech Republic, show that UNESCO list inscription was rather a disadvantage at the beginning of the pandemic crisis, but brought a faster recovery in the following years. Although this study by Zuzana Kvítková and Zdenka Petru does not specifically focus on the sites' resilience rate, it certainly opens up new ways of understanding the non-linear stability and the ability of World Heritage Sites to adapt to difficult situations.

In the third paper, Ilaria Rosani, Maria Gravari-Barbas, Silvia De Ascaniis and Lorenzo Cantoni look at the innovative use of digital technologies in heritage tourism education and training. With the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, the usefulness and flex-

ibility of eLearning have become the key element for an industry's survival and success. The authors analyse the case of a particular type of eLearning phenomenon: that of so-called Massive Open Online Courses, or 'MOOCs.' Through the example of a MOOC series 'Tourism Management at World Heritage Sites (Vol. 3),' they outline the characteristics of its learners, as well as the relevance of eLearning for World Heritage Sites.

The fourth paper is based on big data analytics as an imperative of digital transformation for WHS. Its focus is big data performed on geotagged photographs of Plečnik's architectural heritage uploaded by visitors to the photo-sharing platform Flickr. Authors Gorazd Sedmak, Dejan Paliska and Aleksandra Brezovec used big data to analyse the patterns and structure of spatial visitor behaviour in Ljubljana, Slovenia, by focusing on the spatially dispersed architectural World Heritage Site. The results lead to a better understanding of the behavioural patterns of dispersed WHS visitors, their structure, and the role of these attractions within the destination.

In the fifth paper, Tadeja Jere Jakulin proposes a systematic approach to the sustainable development of World Heritage Sites. Based on the emblematic case of the Bahá'í Gardens WHS in Haifa, Israel, this study examines the principles of systems thinking into practice. The data for the causal-loop model within the framework of system dynamics was obtained through a field survey. Results of the in person interviews with Bahá'í religion's representatives show they anticipate the feedback loop to ensure that all activities at the site are planned with the respect for natural and cultural environments.

The sixth paper also focuses on the new approach to sustainable development. It explores the role of higher education institutions (HEI) in the sustainable development of WHS. Lombuso Precious Shabalala presents tourism at WHS as a vehicle that can be utilised by higher education institutions towards mitigating poverty alleviation and socio-economic development, which contributes to addressing Sustainable Development Goals. The case under study is Mapungubwe WHS in South Africa. This study highlights the new value of community engagement projects

undertaken by HEIS as potential drivers of a holistic and more sustainable management of World Heritage Sites.

The seventh paper looks at the strategic communication nature of cultural tourism of Zadar, Croatian town with its City Walls inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. Using the City of Zadar and Zadar County as a case, this paper explores the heritage content in social media marketing for attracting low-cost carrier (LCC) travellers to Zadar. UNESCO World Heritage is one of the main motive destinations use to attract tourists. However, Božena Krce Miočić, Tomislav Klarin and Gabrijela Vidić found that culture was not used as a primary strategic communication of Zadar's tourism promotion authorities while attracting LCC.

The last two papers look at tourism innovation for WHS through the marketing lens as well. The eighth paper focuses on tourism product innovation from the perspective of heritage storytelling. It explores an innovative heritage tourism product development based on archaeological heritage of Cyprus. The Ancient Life Stories Tourism depends on and connects the elements from the UNESCO Representative Lists of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as well as other products and services. Based on the findings of the cluster analysis technique, authors Antonis Theocharous, Petros Kosmas, Maria Panagopoulou, Hristo Andreev, Petros Giannoulis, Katerina Pericleous and Kirsi Lorentz, identified market segments for ancient life story based tourism.

In the last paper, Anđela Šormaz and Engelbert Ruoss shed new light on social media as a management tool for heritage destinations. By using quantitative content analysis of social media posts and reviews for heritage destinations in Switzerland (13 parks, five World Heritage Sites, and two UNESCO Biosphere Reserves), they emphasize the link between social media popularity of heritage sites and unsustainable tourism practices in these sites. Data collected from the tourism-related digital platforms serve as a basis for the identification and management of potential over- and undertourism spots within larger protected heritage destinations.

Overall, this special issue of the *Academica Turistica* provides a valuable contribution to the growing body of knowledge on sustainable tourism and innovation in World Heritage Sites. It highlights the importance of collaboration, technology, and context-specific approaches in promoting sustainable tourism and protecting our World Heritage for future generations. We hope that this issue will inspire further research and innovation in this important field.

References

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