

Saint Peter's University High School Model United Nations

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Topic A: Protecting UNESCO Sites from the Impacts of Climate Change

Introduction

Since its founding in 1972¹ UNESCO's World Heritage Convention has been a popular and important program for the protection of both natural and cultural areas of global significance. Through the provision of funding and technical assistance, UNESCO aids local governments in preserving such areas "as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole."² The Convention helps to protect both cultural assets (e.g., monuments, buildings, sites) and natural assets (e.g., natural features, areas of biological diversity, areas of natural beauty).³ Currently there are 1,154 sites under the World Heritage designation.⁴ Climate change has the potential to have big impacts on World Heritage sites and UNESCO must be proactive in ensuring their future.

In 2007, UNSECO commissioned a series of case studies to investigate the potential impacts of climate change on both cultural and natural sites.⁵ The report detailed several examples of climate induced impacts. For example, the melting of glaciers will change the nature of some preserved sites and sea-temperature changes can severely damage coral reef systems. Changing local climates will vary vegetation and may shift locations of preserved forests. Local climate changes can also damage cultural properties, as building materials face climates they were never designed to withstand. Rising sea levels also endanger both cultural and natural sites.⁶ At the same time, natural World Heritage areas (e.g., forests and wetlands) can also be an important component in the mitigation of climate change impacts.⁷

Current Situation

In 2021, UNESCO undertook a process to revisit and update its 2007 strategy to reflect changing climate realities and new predictions of related impacts.⁸ The effort has resulted in a draft report that emphasizes the following climate action goals to be met by 2030:

- **Risk Assessment:** identifying potential reversible and irreversible damage to World Heritage sites

¹ UNESCO. "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/> Accessed 2 January 2022.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ UNESCO. "World Heritage List Statistics" <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/stat> Accessed 2 January 2022

⁵ UNESCO. *Case Studies on Climate Change and World Heritage*. May 2009. UNESCO World Heritage Centre: France.

⁶ Ibid, p. 14

⁷ Gibbs, David et al. "Quantifying climate benefits from World Heritage forests." *World Heritage*, No. 100, pp. 20-25. October 2021. UNESCO: London.

⁸ UNESCO World Heritage Committee. *Draft updated Policy Document on the impacts of climate change on World Heritage properties*. 4 June 2021. UNESCO: Paris.

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- **Adaptation:** creating climate adaptation frameworks for monitoring, assessing, and reducing climate risks to sites
- **Mitigation:** encouraging the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and taking actions to safeguard natural ecosystems
- **Knowledge sharing:** improving education, awareness, and human capacity to highlight the importance and contributions of World heritage sites⁹

Since heritage sites are usually administered by national governments UNESCO must develop a strategy to partner with member states to provide the best chances of protecting these areas of special significance to humanity. The draft report details several recommendations in governance, financing, and technology to help meet these goals.¹⁰

Since most World Heritage sites are also popular tourist destinations, UNESCO also must consider the adaptation of the tourism industry to climate change and its impacts.¹¹ A 2016 report pushes for changes in the industry to both reduce its climate impact and to help the industry adapt to a changing climate.¹² The recommendations in the report are aimed at international, national, and local actors and include increasing World Heritage status of natural areas that assist in climate-change mitigation and to require sustainable tourism models as part of the nomination and designation process.¹³ Engaging the global public with World Heritage through tourism is an important component of the program, but its impacts on and susceptibility to climate change need to be considered.

Questions to Address

- How does UNESCO increase education and awareness about the role of climate change and the preservation of World heritage?
- What policies can UNSECO implement to increase participation and coordination among member states to protect World heritage sites?
- How can World heritage tourism become both more sustainable and protected from climate-change impacts?

⁹ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 15-20.

¹¹ Markham, A., Osipova, E., Lafrenz Samuels, K. and Caldas, A. *World Heritage and Tourism in a Changing Climate*. 2016. UNEP, Nairobi, Kenya and UNESCO, Paris, France.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 27-29

Topic B: Travel and Tourism During and After the COVID Pandemic

Introduction

Tourism plays an important role in promoting engagement and understanding among cultures – one of UNESCO's primary objectives. Tourists travel to visit important sites (e.g., World Heritage sites) and to experience local cultures and creative arts. The COVID pandemic has severely curtailed the tourism industry and has endangered its continued sustainability and viability. At the outset of the pandemic, many countries instituted travel bans that prevented international trips for all but the most essential purposes – tourism obviously not among them. In addition, fear of contracting COVID and the inconsistency of both government and industry action has caused potential tourists to fear travel and withhold from making travel plans. While the tourism industry is no doubt resilient, it will certainly need assistance in adapting to a “new normal” in the post-pandemic world.

The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that in both 2020 and 2021 international tourism trips were down by more than 70% from pre-pandemic levels.¹⁴ While tourism expenditures contributed US\$ 3.5 trillion to the global economy in 2019, this number is estimated to be only US\$ 1.9 trillion in 2021.¹⁵ The effects of this loss are not equally distributed however, as many lower and middle-income countries rely on tourism for a greater share of GDP.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 has also affected UNESCO World Heritage sites. The pandemic has led to reduced employment and work to maintain sites, a reduction in hours of public access, and a reduction in tourism expenditures.¹⁷ At the height of the pandemic, 95% of museums had closed and 9 out of 10 countries closed access to their World Heritage sites.¹⁸ The pandemic and the mitigation efforts in response have also negatively affected the cultural industries (arts, music, culture) that produce goods consumed in tourism.¹⁹

Current Situation

After two very difficult years for the tourism industry, it is an open question as to whether and how the industry will rebuild, and what that implies for UNESCO sites. The UNWTO met in September 2020 in Tbilisi, Georgia to discuss and strategize about the industry's recovery. The

¹⁴ UNWTO. “International Tourism and COVID-19.” <https://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-and-covid-19> Accessed 5 January 2022.

¹⁵ UNWTO. “UNWTO World Tourism Barometer.” <https://www.unwto.org/unwto-world-tourism-barometer-data> Accessed 5 January 2022.

¹⁶ UNWTO. “Economic Contribution of Tourism and Beyond.” <https://www.unwto.org/statistic-data-economic-contribution-of-tourism-and-beyond> Accessed 5 January 2022.

¹⁷ UNESCO. *World Heritage in the face of COVID-19*. May 2021. UNESCO: Paris.

¹⁸ UNESCO. *Culture & COVID-19: Impact and Response Tracker*. 24 June 2021. UNESCO: Paris, p. 1.

¹⁹ UNESCO. *Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the cultural sector and the public policy response*. 22 April 2020. UNESCO: Paris.

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result was the so-called “Tbilisi Declaration”, which listed a number of policy directives and strategies for building a more sustainable tourism sector.²⁰ Concerned with the challenges facing both cultural production and World Heritage sites as a result of the decline in tourism, UNESCO has also begun to work towards greater sustainability and resiliency within the industry. UNESCO defines such sustainable tourism as that in which “cultural and natural heritage is safeguarded, livelihoods are protected and local communities are the first to benefit.”²¹

In fact, the “pause” in tourism activity resulting from COVID can provide a rare opportunity to design and implement new tourism models.²² Such models should include local communities in the planning and management of tourism and ensure that the bulk of economic benefit is experienced locally.²³ Also, weening the dependency of heritage sites on physical tourism revenue may be necessary. As a recent UNESCO report stated:

“The current situation highlights the imminent need to address and rethink travel and World Heritage destinations, especially at sites that have become overly dependent on visitor generated revenues for their maintenance.”²⁴

Funding the conservation and protection of World Heritage sites without tourist dollars will be challenging. The proliferation of online virtual tourism experiences provided by many museums and artists during the pandemic may be one avenue for future sustainability.²⁵ Nevertheless, only a more comprehensive approach will make tourism truly sustainable.

Questions to Address

- How can UNESCO engage with the tourism industry to help it become more sustainable?
- What steps can UNESCO take to help make World Heritage sites available in the absence of international travel
- How can UNESCO better ensure that tourism revenues benefit local economies?

²⁰ UNWTO. *Tbilisi Declaration: Actions for a sustainable recovery of tourism*. 16 September 2020.

²¹ UNESCO. *Sustainable & Resilient Tourism Q & A*.

²² UNESCO. *Culture & COVID-19*, p. 2.

²³ UNESCO. *Policy guidelines: Defining the relationship between World Heritage and sustainable tourism*. 2010. UNESCO: Paris., p.3.

²⁴ UNESCO. *World Heritage in the face of COVID-19*., p. 28

²⁵ UNESCO. *Culture & COVID-19*, p. 8.