Mary Sheehan

Mary Sheehan has a keen interest in cultural tourism. She is a professional historian and heritage practitioner who has tutored in Heritage Tourism at Monash University. She is currently a member of the Historic Environment Editorial Committee and is a former member of the ICOMOS Executive Committee.

editorial

Heritage tourism: sites to be seen

Those who have seen the Chevy Chase film National Lampoon Vacation might remember the Griswold family embarking on a journey across the United States to visit Walley’s World. It was easy to laugh at their journey, in particular their plan to detour a considerable distance to see the ‘largest free-standing mud dwelling ever built’ and the ‘second largest ball of twine on the face of the earth’. Yet, in many ways, their fictional journey has its counterpart in many actual journeys today. Many people are persuaded to visit sights because they are the oldest, first or biggest.

Tourism is now considered to be one of the world’s largest industries. It is also recognised that cultural heritage is frequently an integral part of tourists’ travel experiences, so the historical framework and interpretation of the places tourists visit are becoming crucial to their marketing. The historical framework and the interpretation of places are also being recognised as a vital component of a total process in developing sound conservation and management practices for cultural heritage tourist sites.

David Huxtable, in his paper ‘Interpreting Heritage’, highlights the importance of applying solid conservation and management principles. He outlines the different approaches adopted in presenting Fort Nepean, in south east Victoria, and the Gold Exhibition at the Old Treasury Building in Melbourne, as tourist destinations. ‘Who has an interest in these places?’ was the first question asked before the interpretative process commenced. In the case of the Fort Nepean site it was discovered that the most popular reasons for people visiting the park were to see the coastal scenery and to have a family activity. Seeing the fortifications and other historical places of interest were further down the list for most. The Gold Exhibition proposed for the Old Treasury Building was different. Instead of being located in an unsupervised environment, it was to be housed in a controlled environment in one of Melbourne’s premium buildings. The visitors it attracted would be different from those visiting Fort Nepean. By identifying a profile for both sites, the first step was taken to develop a conservation and management plan on firm footings.

But addressing visitor interest and needs is only the first step. The development of a conservation and management plan also requires the identification of archival, documentary and physical condition information about a place, as well as determining its significance. Huxtable examines the processes involved and the importance of basing interpretative facilities on solid research to allow the material to be presented in a provocative, challenging way that encourages visitors to learn from their experience.

Sandy Blair in her paper ‘Travelling Routes’ also highlights the importance of rigorous research as the foundation for determining significance and interpreting places. She shows, too, the effectiveness of linking historic sites and features into a thematic travel route which would provide layers of information about our cultural roots, Indigenous and European. But she also reveals the difficulties associated with
contemporary recognition of the sites; the complexities involved in their management and presentation as heritage trails.

Management practices have evolved in an attempt to ensure that tourist visitation is both educative and sustainable, and that heritage values of the resource are maintained. With the best intentions, however, it has not always been achieved. Clark examines, in his paper 'Sacred Sights and Feral Tourism Management', some management practices adopted in the Grampians-Gariwerd National Park that have actually contributed to site vandalism and damage to the fabric of valuable art sites.

Despite the undoubted significance of cultural artefacts, social relations and traditions in attracting tourists, the possibility still exists that tourism will destroy the cultural resource on which it is based. How do we as practitioners deal with this dichotomy? Clark suggests thoughtful and sensitive signage and protection around sites helps to prevent destruction. He also shows the vital importance of naming places, and even the placement of toilet facilities, in the management of sites. In addition, he highlights the importance of constant monitoring, evaluation and review of cultural-tourism destinations.

This constant monitoring, evaluation and review is the final tenet in sound conservation and management practice in cultural tourism. Greg Young stresses the importance of adopting a strategic cultural tourism approach in Australia in his paper, 'Rites of Passage'. He proposes a five-point agenda and suggests that, by combining conservation, personal cultural growth and creative commerce, cultural tourism will have a sustainable and exciting future.

In October 1999, ICOMOS adopted the International Cultural Tourism Charter. The Charter is included in this issue of Historic Environment. Graham Brooks has prepared a paper which provides background information and explains the evolution of the Charter, and suggests the next steps to be taken in applying the Principles outlined in the Charter.

The Australian Heritage Commission, together with the Tourism Council Australia, have also published Heritage Tourism Guidelines in draft form. The guidelines, which have been made publicly available for comment, take into account the interests and practices of tourism operators, heritage practitioners, and tourists alike. They provide a focus for discussion and the development of a sound and sustainable heritage tourism industry.