ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter: background to the new charter

Introduction

This paper introduces the new ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter, approved by the ICOMOS General Assembly in Mexico in October 1999. The Charter was prepared between 1996 and 1999 by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Cultural Tourism, under its Chairman, Mr Hisashi Sugaya.

The new Charter provides an umbrella statement of principles that guide the dynamic relationships and tensions between tourism and places or collections of heritage significance. It suggests the basis of a dialogue and presents a common set of principles to manage these relationships.

Within the international conservation framework established by ICOMOS, the Charter addresses the primary relationships between the cultural identity and cultural heritage of the host community and the interests, expectations and behaviour of visitors – both domestic and international. It promotes the engagement of the host community, including indigenous and traditional custodians in all aspects of planning and managing for tourism, particularly at heritage sites and in historic towns.

In addition to recognising the need to safeguard the enormous breadth, diversity and universal importance of cultural heritage, the new Charter promotes two major concepts:

- That one of the major reasons for undertaking any form of conservation is to make the significance of the place accessible to visitors and the host community, in a well-managed manner.

- That both the conservation community and the tourism industry must work cooperatively together to protect and present the world's cultural and natural heritage, given their mutual respect for it and their concern for the fragility of the resource.

The revised Charter adopted a cooperative approach to the relationship of the conservation community with tourism issues and the tourism industry, avoiding the traditional tensions while protecting issues of concern. It recognises that greater progress will be made by establishing a positive dialogue, rather than conservationists regarding tourism as primarily something to be tolerated under duress.

The Charter is designed as a document for use by a wide variety of conservation and tourism industry bodies, to manage the relationships with both domestic and international tourism. Accordingly, the language and the coverage is deliberately broad and inclusive, rather than specific to any one country or situation. It encourages the further development of specific applications by interested parties.
The development of the revised charter

The original ICOMOS Cultural Tourism Charter arose from an international conference held in Brussels in 1976: it was endorsed by ICOMOS at its subsequent meetings at Rostock and Dresden in 1984. In the subsequent years, the rate of growth in international and domestic tourism escalated dramatically. Equally, the methodologies and objectives of the conservation of heritage places evolved and developed. Obligations to make heritage places accessible to the public were increasingly recognised as a vital part of the conservationist’s lexicon.

The need for a new Charter was first raised at the Cultural Tourism workshops held as part of the 1993 ICOMOS General Assembly in Sri Lanka. The discussions were extended at subsequent meetings of the ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee, most notably in Greece in 1995.

The decision to prepare a revised Cultural Tourism Charter was formally taken by the Committee at the 1996 ICOMOS General Assembly in Sofia, with a call for a new document to be ready for ratification at the 1999 Mexico General Assembly. The ICOMOS Cultural Tourism Committee, under its new Chairman, Mr Hisashi Sugaya, elected Graham Brooks to be the author and international coordinator for the revision process. Graham Brooks was a representative of Australia ICOMOS and had been associated with the Committee since 1989.

The initial recommendation from the Committee was that the revised Charter should commence with the universal primacy of Cultural Heritage and then ensure that Cultural Tourism was a secondary and subservient activity. This would minimise impacts on the survival and integrity of the cultural heritage, especially on World Heritage sites. The Committee debated the commonly held perception that the ‘cultural tourist’ was somehow different from the normal or ‘recreational tourist’ and that the Charter might concentrate on the behaviour of this more aware and sensitive category of visitor. It quickly became apparent that there could be no such differentiation within the crowds who visit many of the famous cultural sites and that the Charter needed to look more closely at the overall relationship between the visitor and the host.

Preliminary drafts were prepared and circulated within the Cultural Tourism Committee between late 1996 and its September 1997 meeting in Evora, Portugal. The initial drafts concentrated on the broad structure and content of the new Charter.

The definition of cultural heritage in the context of the Charter was also expanded well beyond World Heritage sites and the traditional ‘monuments and sites’ inherent in the name ICOMOS. Cultural heritage includes both the tangible and intangible – collections and traditions as well as the built environment, cultural landscape and the imprint of mankind in all its
manifestations. It was also expanded into the idea that culture and cultural heritage are dynamic and contemporary, not just products of the past. The work and experiences throughout the Asia Pacific of my colleagues in AusHeritage reinforced the expansion of this concept, as have the writings of many commentators and academics.

Australia ICOMOS can claim a basic role in the formulation of the Charter by virtue of its emphasis on the importance of 'significance' as the basis for all conservation activities. When the Committee began the task of making the Charter relate to an enormous variety of heritage places and other tangible and intangible expressions of cultural identity and cultural heritage, it became clear that the only way to economically and strategically capture the central concept was to focus on 'significance', its protection and management.

A fundamental turning point in the character of the Charter came from suggestions by a New Zealand tourism industry colleague, who indicated that if the conservation world wanted to work with the tourism industry more closely, we should stop using terms like 'harm minimisation', 'conflict resolution' and 'protection' and start talking about 'cooperative outcomes' and 'maximising shared opportunities'. The directness of this suggestion confirmed the emerging new direction of the Charter. Sometime later, an ICOMOS colleague commented that this fundamental shift was one of the great achievements of the Charter, one that should guide the preparation of other ICOMOS texts.

Following the incorporation of issues and recommendations made in Portugal, the 6th draft of the Charter was translated into French and Spanish and circulated throughout the wider ICOMOS community. Individual national committees were encouraged to discuss the emerging Charter with colleagues both in the conservation world and the tourism industry. Several of the European committees organised workshops and circulated the draft widely among interested parties.

Further revisions were made in late 1997 and early 1998. A full circulation was made to all ICOMOS committees in early 1998, to gain reaction to the penultimate draft. Further workshops were organised in Europe and the United Kingdom, while the Charter was translated and published in the Japan ICOMOS Newsletter.

In September 1998, the Committee met again in Roros in northern Norway, followed by a workshop organised by ICOMOS Norway. The most important issue to arise from that workshop was the widespread concern that the description about access to heritage places being a fundamental human right could be misinterpreted and site managers would lose control of their visitors' behaviour. As a result, the concept that rights of access brought responsibilities was incorporated and the wording changed to emphasise 'well managed access'. The workshop also discussed the tensions that are inherent in the relationship, and the real dangers that poorly managed tourism can and does
have on heritage places. This issue was subsequently given due recognition in the Charter.

One of the presentations at the workshop was to eventually clarify another aspect of the whole relationship between cultural heritage and tourism. The presenter displayed a map that indicated there were only about two or three ‘cultural sites’ in Norway, compared with the hundreds in countries such as France, Germany or Italy. In his definition, a place had no cultural value unless it was an archaeological site or some great historical work of architecture. Accordingly, he concluded that there was virtually no point in considering Norway as a cultural tourism destination, all policy formulation and commercial planning should focus on ‘recreational’ tourism.

In reality, there could be no other response to the limited definition of cultural tourism than to utterly reject it. All visitors to Norway are fully emersed in the combination of landscape and urban centres, of contemporary food, language, design and lifestyles, as well as the art, architecture and music. Some will visit the museums and archaeological sites but all will experience the daily life of their hosts. All visitors to another place, whether it be within their own nation or another part of the world, experience the broadest aspects of contemporary life at that place. On the assumption that ‘culture’ and ‘cultural heritage’ are not dead or simply archaeological concepts, but living, developing experiences within every community, then all forms of tourism have a cultural component. Sitting in a café in Melbourne, for example, is a cultural tourism experience for the visitor.

Cultural tourism is not, therefore, a narrow or elite market segment, but part of the activities undertaken by all visitors when they travel to somewhere beyond their daily living environment.

This shift in thinking is fundamental to the way the tourism industry should be looking at and evaluating the experiences they offer their customers. It is also fundamental to the way that host communities present their urban and natural landscapes to both their own people and to visitors. Is it sufficient to concentrate physical conservation efforts on an archaeological gem or historic building when the visitor has to be driven through the most ghastly modern slums or industrial wasteland to reach them? The concept should spread into the management of the broader curitile, avoiding for example the cheap hotels and retail outlets that now clog the approaches to the Pyramids or Angkor Wat.

The final draft of the Charter was endorsed by the ICOMOS Advisory and Executive Committees, in Stockholm, in September 1998. This confirmed the rigorous process required by ICOMOS for the preparation of new Charters, including two reviews by all national and international committees.

The October 1998 Australia ICOMOS Workshop in Melbourne reviewed that
same draft. Anne McConnell prepared a review of that workshop for the December 1998 Australia ICOMOS Newsletter. Some of the comments arising from the workshop were incorporated into the final version that was circulated prior to Mexico, others were already in the Charter, but had perhaps not been noticed by those who only saw the document for the first time on the day.

- The Charter by its nature as an international document already contained the principle of involvement and decision making by indigenous and traditional custodians. Clearly this includes Australian Aboriginal people as much as the indigenous peoples of many other lands.

- There is no need to rename the document as the Charter sits within and reinforces or compliments the wider ICOMOS conservation framework. The subtext, ‘Managing Tourism at Places of Heritage Significance’, clarifies the role of the new Charter.

- Unfortunately, in the International ICOMOS context, the suggestion of a Charter revision process being undertaken every five years is simply not realistic. Instead, ICOMOS is developing doctrinal texts such as the Cultural Tourism, Underwater Archaeology, Historic Towns and other Charters to expand the application and contemporary relevance of the core philosophies.

- The concept of ‘carrying capacity’ was already included in the Charter, but in its contemporary terminology: ‘setting limits of acceptable change’.

The final text of the Charter was submitted to the ICOMOS General Assembly in Mexico in October 1999, where it was unanimously endorsed. The Charter was recognised as fitting well with current ICOMOS thinking that one of the most important challenges facing the conservation community is the ‘wise use of the heritage’ and that the process of managing change is fundamental to this task.

The quality and strength of the end product is a testament to the close working relationships forged among those members of the International Cultural Tourism Committee and others who participated in the process, of the quality and vigour of their comments and the breadth of lateral thinking about the contemporary and dynamic nature of the issues. Excellent input was received from many parts of the world, including Japan, China, Indonesia, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Holland, Hungary, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, Egypt, the United States and New Zealand, as well as Australia.

I must give my personal thanks to the Committee Chairman, San Francisco based Mr Hisashi Sugaya, the members of the Committee and many other international colleagues for their wonderful support in making this review process achieve such a successful conclusion.
The next steps

The ICOMOS Cultural Tourism Committee is now working to introduce and encourage use of the Charter as widely as possible across the cultural heritage conservation community and tourism industry.

One of the next steps will be to use the Charter Principles and Guidelines to develop a consistent evaluation methodology to analyse the relationship between conservation and tourism at a wide variety of heritage sites around the world. The initial framework will be tested by UK/ICOMOS on some 25 sites this summer and the results reported back to the Committee.

The Charter experienced one of its early examinations at the recent UNESCO Heritage and Tourism Conference in Bhaktapur, Nepal. The UNESCO Bangkok Office, in conjunction with the Nordic World Heritage Office, has funded a program of case studies evaluating the relationships between tourism and heritage at nine sites in Asia and the Pacific, many of which are World Heritage listed. The meeting debated at length the dangers and opportunities from excessive tourism in heritage towns. It is fair to say that many of the concerns and recommendations that arose from those discussions were already covered in the Charter framework.

In essence, it must be remembered that the Charter is not a final or closed document, but a framework for cooperation between the conservation community and the tourism industry. There will be many opportunities for its framework to be further developed and applied to specific situations and requirements. The Charter encourages this to happen.

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