



Siem Reap Declaration on Tourism Development in Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites

The Regional Conference on Tourism Development in Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites, held in Siem Reap, Cambodia on 1-3 November 2013, was co-organised by the Government of Cambodia and the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). The event brought together tourism authorities, experts and practitioners to discuss and review opportunities and challenges of sustainable tourism at Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites. The aim of the conference was to showcase the cultural, natural, historical richness and heritage of the Asian Region by presenting case studies and country experiences on successful policies, guidelines for sustainable site management, preservation and strategies for cultural tourism development.

A. Key Issues highlighted by the Conference:

1. The need to conserve and sustain Natural and Cultural Heritage Sites, which are major tourism attractions for many of the UNWTO Members States in the Asia Pacific Region

Natural and Cultural Heritage Sites are major tourism attractions across the Region. They are unique and vulnerable to human activity within and surrounding the sites. Tourism is well placed to generate awareness and support for the protection and presentation of the unique biodiversity and rich cultural heritage of Member States, each with their own combinations of features and sites, on which tourism depends. Tourism development must be carefully planned and managed so that it has a positive impact on the diversity of natural and cultural heritage assets and the host communities, and responds to the many challenges posed by economic growth, urbanisation and climate change.

2. The important role of tourism in the Asia Pacific Region in supporting both heritage conservation and host community development

Tourism, particularly domestic and intra-regional, has grown strongly across the Asia Pacific Region over recent decades, and remains an important driver for sustainable development in smaller States and regional communities located away from the major urbanised centres. Therefore, tourism must feature strongly on the sustainable development agenda of Member States and be given high priority in programmes that support smaller or more vulnerable communities across the Region. Tourism development at the major heritage sites must also be managed to generate socio-economic benefits for local communities and ensure that the heritage remains meaningful to them.

3. Partnerships and connectivity as a basis for achieving more

Sustainable outcomes from tourism can be achieved more effectively if tourism development at heritage sites is undertaken by inclusive partnerships between national and local stakeholders across the heritage and tourism sectors, as well as public and private sectors. Regional connectivity is also important as linkages and exchanges between peoples have been the fundamental characteristics of the Asia Pacific Region over time. In addition, many elements of natural and cultural heritage have significance and cultural relevance beyond State borders. The overarching challenge and opportunity for sustainable tourism in the Asia Pacific Region is to support further economic growth while protecting the environments and communities, including their natural and cultural heritage places.

4. The importance of sustainable tourism for Cambodia

As the Conference host, Cambodia showcased its major heritage sites, in particular Greater Angkor, which is symbolic of cultural and historic links across mainland South East Asia, and which has simultaneously become a symbol of national pride and identity, and one of the Region's major tourism



attractions and greatest conservation projects. Tourism at Greater Angkor has grown exponentially over the past two decades and in the process has become an important international case study in the challenges and opportunities facing host nations and their people.

B. Challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism in the Asia Pacific Region

The Asia Pacific region hosts 222 World Heritage Sites in addition to many sites of local or regional significance. Visiting heritage attractions can be an intrinsic part of a trip and a major motivator for selecting a destination. Heritage sites are often among the best known tourism attractions in a country and can constitute a gateway to the larger national or regional offer by destinations and their tourism products.

The Siem Reap Conference on Tourism Development in Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites was structured around four major themes:

1. Managing tourism at World Heritage Sites

While tourism can be a vehicle for both heritage protection and local development, unplanned or mismanaged tourism can be socially, culturally and environmentally disruptive. Responsible management of tourism involves effective management of visitors and preserves the integrity of the site while providing a high quality visitor experience.

2. Communicating heritage significance as a component of the tourism experience

Heritage communication adds value to the tourism experience by building an understanding and an emotional attachment. The tourist's personal motivation to visit a heritage site is highly influenced by the messages they absorbed from the media, friends and relatives or travel promotions.

Different countries in the Asia-Pacific region are by their very nature, distinctive places to visit, with their unique character, environmental features, historical development and appeal. There are great opportunities to use this strength of diversity to develop and project distinctive national brands, which in turn can guide the products and messages that shape the tourism offer.

3. The value of "Green" tourism in Heritage Sites

Ecotourism, community based tourism and other forms of sustainable tourism generate positive environmental and social impacts in heritage sites and surrounding communities, while also contributing to poverty alleviation. The role of tourism in contributing to the sustainability of local communities has become a significant focus and opportunity in recent years.

4. Tourism development in Heritage Sites

The large number of heritage sites across the Asia Pacific region and beyond provides a wide variety of challenges and opportunities for tourism authorities, managers and experts. A series of case studies including the experiences of Japan, Korea, Lao and Myanmar, as well as best practices, tools and lessons learned from the industry experts in the development of tourism in these heritage sites were presented.

The case of Greater Angkor in Cambodia is just one example in the Region that demonstrates the power of a large heritage site to become a major regional tourism attraction and dynamic driver for associated development in the nearby community of Siem Reap. It is also an example of how a major attraction can seed the development, use and presentation of smaller related sites around the attraction to spread tourism benefits.



C. Outcomes and Recommendations

Accepting the importance of tourism to the economy and sustainable development of many countries in the Asia Pacific Region, and the specific opportunities and challenges facing many of the Region's Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites, the Conference called on national and regional governments across Asia and the Pacific, on national and local authorities and representatives of the tourism private sector to:

1. Recognise that the distinctive identities and attractions of destinations and their host communities across the Asia Pacific region are often interwoven into complex tapestries, distinguished by their natural environmental context, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity, long traditions of production, trade and exchange across the Region and their historical development demonstrated by many layers of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
2. Ensure that tourism development based on natural and cultural heritage attractions is responsible, inclusive and sustainable, and that it contributes to the socio-economic development of host communities and improves their well-being.
3. Ensure that tourism contributes to the enrichment and safeguarding of the cultural identity of the destination by promoting cross cultural exchanges between visitors and the host community.
4. Encourage the establishment and development of close and effective partnerships between public and private sectors, while involving the host community, for the achievement of agreed common goals.
5. Promote respect for, and commitment to the core cultural and ethical values of host communities and their local environmental contexts in the development of tourism programmes based on their tangible and intangible natural and cultural heritage assets, and strengthen inter-cultural exchanges with visitors.
6. Empower host communities in the protection, conservation, authentic presentation and contemporary expression of their distinctive tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the context of tourism, through increased awareness, a sense of pride and ownership.
7. Seek a more sustainable model for the development of diverse cultural and eco-tourism products, which are based on sensitivity to vulnerability and other limitations.
8. Explore new and innovative approaches to the management of tourism flows to and within heritage sites to protect the integrity of the sites and their settings while effectively communicating their values throughout the entire tourism supply chain.

Sincere appreciation and gratitude were extended to the Ministry of Tourism, the Royal Government of Cambodia and the provincial government of Siem Reap for their warm hospitality and the excellent arrangements for the conference, as well as their contribution to advance the agenda of sustainable tourism in heritage sites.