

«World Natural Heritage Sites and Sustainable Regional Development»

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UNESCO established the World Heritage (WH) convention in 1972, noting that the World's cultural and natural heritage "was increasingly threatened with destruction" and that the protection of this heritage "often remain[ed] incomplete because of the scale of the resources which it requires" (UNESCO 1972). Today, there are 1,007 WH sites globally, of which 779 are cultural sites, 197 are natural sites and 31 are a combination of the two; so called mixed sites (UNESCO 2014). In the past forty years, WH status has undergone considerable changes. Originally created as an international seal to safeguard the conservation of the World's most outstanding natural and cultural heritage sites, WNH status today raises additional expectations such as increased visitor numbers, economic benefits or contributions to sustainable development in general. Similarly, approaches to protected area management have changed considerably, from rather strict approaches that treated protected areas as isolated islands to approaches that pay tribute to the intricate relationships between protected areas and their surrounding regions.

At the same time, little is known on a global and comparative level about the effects induced by WNH status on the region surrounding the site. Of particular interest is whether and how WNH status encourages sustainable regional development, which is understood to encompass all processes and developments that contribute to an advancement of environmental, economic and social issues within a defined region (Siegrist et al 2009, p. 103). The goal of this thesis was therefore to answer the following questions: What effects does the attribution of WNH status have in regard to sustainable regional development? Which are the factors that influence the delivery of such benefits? And what would WNH-policies have to look like that equally contribute to conservation *and* sustainable regional development?

In order to answer these questions, case studies were conducted at Jungfrau-Aletsch (Switzerland), Mt. Kenya (Kenya) and Mt. Kilimanjaro (Tanzania). Based on the results of these initial case studies, an extensive questionnaire was created to capture the impacts of WNH sites on the different aspects of sustainable regional development worldwide. The questionnaire was sent as an online survey to all of the managers of the 211 natural and mixed heritage sites listed in 2011. Managers of 128 sites completed the questionnaire (61%). In addition, 34 in-depth interviews were conducted with managers, public authorities or scientists to complement the extensive quantitative database with more explicative information.

The results of this thesis are presented in six research articles that follow a logical structure. The first article deals with the motivation to apply for WNH status and presents a brief overview of potential effects induced by WNH status. The second one presents the results of the case studies. The third and fourth articles analyse the survey results according to different independent variables. The fifth article looks at the factors that influence the delivery of benefits, based primarily on qualitative interview data. The sixth article analyses the reverse effects of sustainable regional development approaches on WNH sites and examines how a policy framework fostering such developments should look.

The thesis shows that the impacts of WNH status in regard to sustainable regional development are manifold and go well beyond conservation. WNH status can also contribute to the establishment of improved participatory governance structures and to increased collaboration among stakeholders. It can boost tourism arrivals and contribute equally to improving the sustainability of tourism offerings. WNH status can create additional employment, mainly through tourism and its related industries, and it can strengthen regional identities. Even more importantly, these developments may in turn have beneficial effects on conserving the core values at stake. A regional approach to managing WNH sites is therefore of paramount importance. However, WNH status is of course no panacea, and the effects are not simply a given. None of the induced effects occur of their own accord; they are the result of careful planning and a complex interplay of hard and, in particular, soft success factors. Sites that have been able to use their WNH status to carefully devise an appropriate management strategy, focus on an integrative approach, and benefit from an enabling institutional environment deliver more positive effects than those for which

WNH status is simply another label. WNH status is a unique opportunity that has to be seized in a careful and balanced way.

In order for WNH sites to contribute to sustainable development, a regional approach to WNH management with a focus beyond the management site itself is necessary. Ideally, such an approach would be requested by UNESCO and would combine stricter protection approaches (such as those applied in national parks) with approaches that focus on balanced development (such as those used in regional nature parks) or the like. The WH Convention is a powerful and internationally accepted tool that can influence protected area management approaches worldwide. It is important that UNESCO reacts to societal needs (and to reality) in a timely manner by gradually embracing policies that emphasize permanent environmental compatibility. Yet, as necessary as this strategic adaptation is, WNH sites must nevertheless remain protected areas at their core. Sustainable development approaches can help ensure the protection of the core values and increase regional support for the site. Development goals should be pursued primarily in buffer or transition zones bordering the WNH sites, or in such a way that they do not interfere with conservation aims. Sustainable regional development can become a new and promising activity of WNH sites – but not at the cost of trimming core conservation goals.

The entire dissertation can be downloaded from <http://bit.ly/1HVnako>

References

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