



PAPER for OCHRONA ZABYTKOW

# THE GRANDS SITES DE FRANCE NETWORK AND HERITAGE : A LEVERAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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"Grands Sites de France" network is a national association, which brings together elected local authorities responsible for both day-to-day action and long term evolution, conservation and presentation of heritage sites both natural and cultural, protected for their landscape value.

37 sites and 27 million visitors annually, these two figures mean very strong tourism pressures, and some major challenges for their managers: How to find and maintain a balance between the need to protect our heritage and its undeniable tourist potential? How to develop it in a sustainable manner?

In France, a national policy is currently carried out in cooperation with local authorities to manage sites with respect for their cultural and/or natural values, the genius loci and local populations. The policy aims at creating local economic development in cooperation with local populations linked to the sites' values without damaging them. Local authorities, in agreement with state administration, are the main driving force in implementing this strategy of sustainable tourism development in heritage sites.

State administration guarantees legal protection of the Grands Sites, decides on their classification and issues authorisations for restoration or modifications within protected areas. But with the exception of a few major monuments, which remain managed directly by the State, local agencies created and directed by elected local authorities are now responsible for the management of the Grands Sites.

The Grand Sites are more than places of outstanding beauty and immense value, they are more than just the monument or protected area in their centre, they are territories where people live and work, they comprise fields, pastures etc. and site managers integrate this reality into their management. Heritage Sites cannot be apprehended only as sites for tourists, but also as living spaces and the fact that populations are taking part in the Grands Sites' actions is essential for it helps local economic development, it brings better understanding and pride to the inhabitants. We always need to think of a site in its environment.

Our article will bring the practical accounts of on-the-ground managers, and will focus on the key role of local authorities in the partnership between the tourism sector and conservation sector, and in the integration of tourism planning in the management of heritage sites as well as the importance of working not only for tourists but for local populations as well, all in the aim of sustainable development in all its dimensions (environmental, social and economic). The article is based on our approach and is illustrated

by three examples of heritage use in order to elaborate generally valid proposals for a sustainable development policy built on heritage value. The chosen examples are: Grand Site Sainte-Victoire (near Aix-en-Provence), Grand Site du Marais poitevin (Poitevin marsh in Western France) - both of these sites having obtained the label Grand Site de France ; and the Grand Site du Puy Mary – Volcan du Cantal (biggest extinct volcano in Europe). Some of these present good practices and some used to fit in the "bad" category and evolved among the good examples – proof that a good and sustainable use of heritage sites is possible.

## **The challenge: Finding and maintaining a balance**

This article is based solely on the experience of the Grands Sites de France Network in the field of sustainable (economic) development of regions via a sustainable management of heritage sites.

Answering the question of balance is not easy in France, a country that is the world's leading tourist destination (with 82 million international visitors annually), and which has strong domestic tourism (growing with the economic crisis we experienced during the past three years). The concentration of natural and cultural heritage sites is very strong in France. They form the basis of the tourism economy, accounting for 6.2% of GDP.

Local authorities and public bodies managing the Grands Sites wanted to join in a network to share their experience and good practices, overcome their difficulties, move forward together and construct joint projects.

Therefore, our association was created through a bottom-up initiative and not a "top-down" decision; managerial bodies join us on a voluntary basis. We have no authority over those local bodies, members of the association, as our role is to facilitate their moving forward together, learning new skills, exchanging on good practices etc. We are recognized and supported in this by the state, especially by the Ministry of the environment. We work closely with other heritage networks, such as national parks, natural reserves, various associations of historic towns etc.

The 37 Grands Sites in our network have the following in common:

- they are natural and cultural sites, protected for their landscape value by a long-standing and powerful law dating from 1930. This law allows protection of sites covering very large areas, often including important monuments which are themselves protected as historical monuments. The Grands Sites often include areas of recognized ecological importance as well. These are subject to national and/or European laws on the protection of biodiversity such as Natura 2000.

- they are very popular and well known in France, and in some cases worldwide. They form the bedrock of tourism in France and you will no doubt be familiar with many of them, such as the Mont Saint Michel and its Bay in Normandy or Mont Sainte Victoire in Provence, made famous by the paintings of Paul Cézanne.

- they all attract large numbers of visitors: the 37 sites in our network attract 27 million visitors annually, whether local, regional, national or international.

Some of them are also included on the UNESCO World Heritage List, like Mont St Michel and its Bay, the Roman aqueduct of Pont du Gard, the fortified City of Carcassonne, and so on. In every case, the values and key concepts of the World Heritage Convention inspire our actions, independently on the status of the sites.

What are the problems the sites face(d)? The majority of these sites have been protected since the 1950s, sometimes with poorly integrated infrastructures, with insufficient regard for the environment and with no managing bodies for many of them. It has been recognized for some time now that we must change the way these sites are managed. That is the role of the network – to help managers in the adaptation of their practices to find the balance between protection and opening to the public. What other problems are the sites facing today and what measures are being undertaken to improve things? We face invasion of cars and coaches, undesirable levels of crowding disrupting site's atmosphere (genius loci), obtrusive shopping

outlets which are becoming the same wherever you go, souvenir shops with products that are anything but locally produced, local residents depending solely on tourism or, on the contrary, residents who object to the influx of tourists and develop hostile attitudes, regular visitors who no longer want to come to sites that have become "tourist traps". In short, many heritage sites are victims of their own success – a success that is not sustainable.

## **What changes in the Grands Sites visitor's expectations?**

Studies carried out with our public show that nowadays, visitors do not appreciate being drowned in a crowd any more, preferring to be treated in a more personalized manner. Our visitors want human contact, they want to meet the residents and workers of the places they visit or stay at, they want to eat local food and buy local products (food, pottery, carved wood, local stories etc.)

In a Grand Site, they are looking for a new, interesting and enriching experience, something unfamiliar and in a way overpowering by its magnitude, beauty and identity, but also relaxing and shareable with friends and family, especially their children. Heritage sites are important places for inter-generational relationships and for value transmission from parents or grandparents to younger generations. Therefore, information about the site, its values and its inhabitants must be accessible and adapted to visitors with a wide range of cultural expectations and backgrounds, and programs for young visitors are to be developed. One expression comes up often in surveys carried out with the French public: "Don't over-develop these sites!" Culturally, public is attached to the notion of heritage as a common asset with a local anchorage which should not be turned into business.

## **Sustainable management to protect sites and create local economic development**

Local authorities, in agreement with State administration, have decided to react to this un-sustainable development. They have all worked to change site management methods in order to adopt a strategy of sustainable development, to manage sites with respect for its cultural and/or natural values, the "spirit" (atmosphere) of the place, to work in respect of and in coordination with local populations and to promote local economic development. Many tourists want to have an intimate experience with the place they are visiting and they are more and more numerous to care about the impact their visit may have on the site – positive in terms of local economy and negative on the protected site itself.

The State administration supports local authorities and has recently created a label to distinguish the sites that have achieved a level of excellence in sustainable management (socially, economically and environmentally); a national label "Grand Site de France". This label is given for 6 years, and its renewal is possible only after an evaluation.

Grands Sites' experience shows that protection laws, however powerful they are (and the legal arsenal regarding these sites is very powerful in France), are essential but not enough to protect this emblematic heritage. It's not a case of "tourism versus protection" or "visitors versus locals". On the contrary, the healthy management of heritage tourism is central for the Grands Sites' protection. We cannot protect these sites if we are not acting according to principles of integrated sustainable development and we cannot offer a "real" experience to tourists if we cut them from local populations and vice-versa. The appreciation of the other comes with knowledge.

Local authorities have wide-ranging powers and have responsibility for policy coordination across their territory (town planning, economic development, environmental policy, local transport, etc.), which allows them to have a global vision and to act globally on both the site AND its environment, and not only on the protected zone. This broad vision allows the managing bodies to act towards local economic development via heritage sites.

It is important to state that tourism may play an important role in local economic development but it cannot be the unique way to take. It is the managing bodies that draw up the strategy of presentation and

transmission, including congestion management, and the site management plan, while respecting rules of protection and in close cooperation with the culture and environment state bodies at the national or regional levels and local inhabitants and workers. Local authorities are also in charge of day-to-day running of the Grands Sites and the reception of visitors: Information, guidance, services, facilities, ticketing, designing maps and interpretation tools, programming cultural events, public relations and site promotion, carrying out necessary work, and so on.

But as we already stated, the Grand Sites are more than places of outstanding beauty and immense value, they are more than just the monument or protected area in their centre, they are territories where people live and work, they comprise fields, pastures etc. and site managers integrate this reality into their management. Heritage Sites cannot be apprehended only as sites for tourists, but also as living spaces and the fact that populations are taking part in the Grands Sites' actions is essential for it helps local economic development, it brings better understanding and pride to the inhabitants. We always need to think of a site in its environment. Preservation, management and tourism promotion should be in balance and harmony between visitors and 'locals' is a basic need for local economic development.

Another significant point is that heritage sites' impacts on local economy are important but indirect. This is often a difficult point to explain to partners, investors or public state authorities that think in terms of economic profitability and direct economic impact. The impact is indirect and will be attained only through management in a framework of sustainable development. If a site is well managed, all funds being invested in it contribute to the economic development of the area.

### **Three examples of local economic development**

These three examples show different strategies of local economic development through heritage sites. We choose the following sites: Grand Site du Marais poitevin (Poitevin marsh in Western France), Grand Site du Puy Mary – Volcan du Cantal (biggest extinct volcano in Europe) and Grand Site Sainte-Victoire.

Grand Site du Marais poitevin is a cultural landscape of canals, fields, pastures and villages in Western France. It used to suffer from short-term tourism (1.5 days in average) concentrated in the heart of the area. The only attraction used to be visits of the canals in small boats. Agriculture was being abandoned since extensive agriculture – the only possible in the area, was not profitable any more. This meant that the landscape started to close itself and the visitor could not live the experience he came for, this feeling being emphasized by the over-concentration of tourists. The managing authority did an important work with local populations and local economic actors (mostly farmers and boatmen). Nowadays, the landscape got back its beauty thanks to the participation of farmers. The boatmen follow a quality chart, which guarantees a quality experience for the visitor. This work on quality and on diversification of tourism (400km of cycling paths were built for example) paid off. In 2011, the average length of stay was of 7 days – visitors stay longer, spend more money in the region and the tourism flow is dispatched in the entire site. Both the tourist's experience AND local economy have improved. For its exemplary sustainable management, the site got the "Grand Site de France" label in 2010.

Grand Site du Puy Mary – Volcan du Cantal is part of the largest extinct volcano in Europe. Its location in a very rural and remote area played an important part in the economic decline of the region in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By the 1990s, population density dropped to 4 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> and there were very few young people left in the villages around Puy Mary. For almost fifteen years now, Grand Site's du Puy Mary managing body has been working with local mayors and local populations to create a new project for the region. Nowadays, local actors and populations are strongly engaged in the project. Several new small scale tourism amenities opened around Puy Mary in the last few years – mostly restaurants and accommodations. By playing the card of authenticity and cosiness, use of local products and a "back to basics" approach, they managed to attract large numbers of visitors throughout the year. Visitors sensitive to authenticity are mostly sensitive to the environmental and landscape values of the site, which is a real plus. The managing body accompanies the local businesses in their implementation and boosts the project with interpretation centres that are for visitors and locals alike. Local economy got a new start.

Grand Site Sainte-Victoire, a site located in the direct vicinity of Aix-en-Provence, is best known for the numerous paintings Paul Cézanne did of it. But it is also an inhabited territory with a common goal – to preserve, manage and promote the site in a framework of sustainable development. Local populations take part in the project. The managing body recently commanded a study of the site's impact on local economy. Since there is no entrance fee, all benefits are indirect. The attraction of Sainte-Victoire brings tourists to the region (not only to the site itself). 60 million euros are spent annually by the visitors. They also generate 700 jobs and 9 million on local taxes. Sainte-Victoire's name also generates impacts in terms of brand value and in terms of real estate value. Even though the impact of a heritage site on local economy is very difficult to measure, it is always positive, there can be no doubt.

It should be underlined that a heritage site's public management structure is usually financed by admission fees to the site (if there are such) and the profit from related services and merchandise (for example parking, guides, souvenirs sales, etc.), as well as from public funds. The site has a duty to function efficiently as a public service, but it has no obligation to be profitable. For example, in the case of the Pont du Gard, spending by the 1.1 million visitors annually accounts for half the cost of preservation and running the site, the other half coming from public coffers. It seems reasonable for local authorities to make an annual financial contribution of 3 million euros, especially given that a study has shown that the indirect economic influx generated by the Pont du Gard site was 135 million euros and that this produced significant local taxes, worth some 22 million euros. One of the demands we have is that all receipts coming from tourism go back to the site for its long term preservation and not towards financing activities which have nothing to do with its preservation. Public pays attention to this point and wants to see fairness.

## In conclusion

Based on our experience, management of heritage sites needs to be regulated by a local authority representing the public interest, in co-operation with state administration, local populations and scientists. These sites are of course very attractive for tourists, but we are convinced that there is a major risk in running them along the usual criteria of economic profitability.

The challenge is to combine good public policies with private involvement with an important share of local involvement and investment, on the ground of shared values.

Heritage site's managers and states shall always bear in mind that preservation, management and tourism promotion should be in balance and that there is a need to work towards a harmony between visitors and 'locals'. Without fulfilling this basic need, there can be no real local economic development. In today's world of crisis and insecurity, partnerships are even more key than before.

It is necessary to bear in mind that heritage sites are not attraction parks hence short term economic profitability should never be a site manager's first aim. Heritage sites are also to be taken and treated as a whole with territories/regions that surround them and tourism is not the only means for local development.

Even though it is sometimes difficult to understand, heritage sites' impacts on local economy are important but indirect and will be attained only through management in a framework of sustainable development and if a site is well managed, all funds being invested in it contribute to the economic development of the area.

For more information, do not hesitate to visit our website [www.grandsitedefrance.com](http://www.grandsitedefrance.com)

## NB: A new project since 2010

Since 2010, the Grand Site de France Network has been opening to international perspective. The International Francophone Centre for exchange and training of heritage site managers was created in 2010 in the framework of a wider partnership: In 2010, the Monitoring Committee comprised the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO, the Association of French World Heritage Properties, 3 French Ministries (Foreign Affairs, Culture and Environment), the Regional Council of Burgundy, the University of Burgundy,

the Ecole Arts et Métiers ParisTech of Cluny, the Centre des Monuments nationaux and the European Centre of Archaeology in Bibracte, France. In 2011 ICOMOS France joined this committee.

It is intended for French-speaking site managers worldwide, whether they come from French-speaking countries or not, who wish to manage their sites in a sustainable manner, confront their views and share their practices with peers who face similar issues.

Three major themes are in the competences of the Centre: 1) international network and information resources platform, 2) place for training and 3) twinning creation. The first intensive training took place in December 2011 under the auspices of the French National Commission for UNESCO.

For more information: <http://www.polepatrimoine.org>