Guest editorial: Towards practice-led research agendas for World Heritage properties

Introduction

The gap between the development of research and its application on the ground is well recognised, not only in the heritage field, but in other fields of practice (Barrett and Oborn, 2018; Han and Stenhouse, 2014; Duxbury *et al.*, 2021). As well, there is a growing interest to promote the co-production of knowledge, especially between researchers and ground-based actors (Iwama *et al.*, 2021), local communities and Indigenous Peoples, as well as incorporating Indigenous and local knowledge in scientific assessments and policy development (Nakashima *et al.*, 2012). In the World Heritage context, interest in research from diverse disciplines which address cultural and natural heritage issues is very high, from fundamental to applied research (Logan *et al.*, 2015; Zhang *et al.*, 2022; Fei *et al.*, 2023; amongst many others). This research may be focussed on the understanding of the heritage, its historical context, its contributions to the development of human societies, in the case of cultural heritage, or its ecological dynamics, the finding of new species, monitoring them as well as their habitats in the case of natural heritage. Increasingly the need to localise the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals has brought about more interest in case studies and the production of comparative studies. Research projects at all stages of academic careers are developed yearly on World Heritage sites, however, the results of these projects are not always as impactful as expected or wished for, on the conservation of these heritage places.

Even though research-practice collaboration and models of cooperation do exist in the context of the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, a gap between research results and recommendations and site management is still observed. The existing links need to be strengthened, especially for the benefit of the sites and not only academia, as frequently, researchers find it difficult to access sites, and tend to base their projects primarily on academic needs. Thus, site managers do not find the research findings useful for their daily work. They have either no access to the research findings or do not find these applicable within their management systems. For instance, scientific findings are sometimes not applicable to the specific legal and political contexts of the sites. Many times, research is developed by foreign researchers that gather data from communities but never report back their results to those communities and site managers that care for the sites. It is noted that a more fluid dialogue between managers and researchers could bring benefits to both research projects and site management planning and implementation. Therefore, a need to develop applied research that focusses on site management has become critical, ensuring also ethical research standards and knowledge exchange.

The World Heritage Leadership programme (WHL) led by ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) and IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) with the cooperation of ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites) and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), and funded by the Ministry of Climate and Environment of Norway, is addressing this gap through a new initiative called the Heritage Place Lab. The Heritage Place Lab (HPL) aims at strengthening the existing links and creating new ones in order to enable fluid exchange between researchers and managers. The HPL aims to provide a platform for co-creation of knowledge integrating the networks of international organisations such as UNESCO and the advisory bodies to the World Heritage Committee, ICCROM, IUCN and ICOMOS.

This Special Issue is dedicated to report the key findings of the Heritage Place Lab pilot phase process (2021–2022), showcasing case studies of World Heritage properties in four regions. With the HPL, the WHL acted as a knowledge broker to test new ideas and start an explorative process which consists of creating and activating World Heritage research-practice networks, promoting research on the effectiveness of integrated and people-centred approaches to the management of natural and cultural heritage, promoting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches and learning environments, promoting practice-led research and long-term and sustainable partnerships.

The heritage place lab

The HPL looked at exploring research-practice collaboration models, strategies and methods that are existing in the World Heritage context, and co-creating practice-led research agendas for World Heritage properties based on collaborative work between managers and researchers. The initiative also looked at devising processes for building common research proposals for World Heritage properties and a model useful for other World heritage places, that could be disseminated with the project outcomes.

This project addresses SDG 4 as a capacity building activity promoting life learning experiences for young and mid-career professionals as well as recognised experts and academics in the field of heritage. It also addresses SDG 11 as the goal that focusses on its target 4 to the protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage, and SDGs 14 and 15 which focus on supporting life on earth and below water, as the heritage places involved in the project correspond to landscapes and waterscapes. Finally, this activity also addresses SDG 13 as it calls for climate action at local level, especially promoting the inclusion of climate change as an important factor to be tackled by site management.

For developing this initiative the WHL opened a call for Research-Practice Teams to join the project in May 2021. Research-Practice Teams consist of a group of researchers (research group) based in one or more research institutions and a group of managers based in one or more managing institutions (practice group). The WHL suggested to the teams to be gender-balanced and to include young scholars, local community members, Indigenous peoples and other actors that are relevant in the management of their World Heritage places. The members of these teams have been selected and coordinated by each institution. After or during the activity, it was expected that team members would share the HPL experience with their colleagues back at their institutions, building capacities not only at individual but also at institutional level.

Eight Research-Practice Teams working on eight World Heritage properties were selected: Asante Traditional Buildings in Ghana composed by the University of Ghana and the Ghana Monuments and Museums Board; La Antigua Guatemala in Guatemala composed of the University of San Carlos and the Council for the Protection of La Antigua Guatemala; Great Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe composed of the Great Zimbabwe University and the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, Quebrada de Humahuaca in Argentina composed by the University of La Plata, the University of Buenos Aires, Quebrada de Humahuaca World Heritage Management Unit and the Provincial Government of Jujuy; Jaipur City, Rajasthan in India composed of Manipal University, the Wildlife Institute of India and the Jaipur Municipal Corporation and Town Planning; Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu in Peru composed by the Intercultural University of Quillabamba, the University of Genoa, the National Service for Natural Protected Areas and the Archaeological Park of Machu Picchu; Okavango Delta in Botswana composed by the University of Botswana and the Botswana National Museum; and Rjukan-Notodden Industrial Heritage site in Norway composed by the University of South-East Norway and the Tinn and Vestfold Municipalities, covering almost all UNESCO regions.

The priority themes that were established are cross-cutting and interrelated. The HPL looked at how diverse knowledge systems can influence the World Heritage system at policy level, as well as how climate change can be localised by recognising Indigenous and local worldviews and understandings of World Heritage places and accounting Indigenous and local knowledge into relevant research. The HPL explored how World Heritage places can benefit from diverse governance arrangements, how dialogue between formally-recognised systems with customary systems can be formulated and how this can support more effective management systems. All these themes were tackled considering the interconnectedness of natural and cultural systems. The WHL incubated a collaborative and participatory process based on thematic online workshops where Research-Practice Teams focussed on specific aspects based on these priority cross-cutting themes. The results and discussions of each workshop supported the building up of the research agenda for each World Heritage site, and helped each Team identify potential research themes for developing common proposals.

The methodology
The HPL methodology was based on the use of new resources under development by the WHL: the Knowledge Framework for Managing World Heritage, which underpins the structure of the new Managing World Heritage Manual (UNESCO *et al.*, forthcominga, b) and the Enhancing our Heritage (EOH) Toolkit 2.0 (UNESCO *et al.*, forthcominga, b) which provided a framework for developing research priorities for site management.

In particular, the EOH Toolkit 2.0 provided tools that were used during the HPL workshops to trigger the collaborative work between researchers and managers. The toolkit contains twelve tools designed to self-assess the management effectiveness of World Heritage properties. During the HPL, three of these tools were used to assess values,

attributes and management objectives, to assess governance arrangements and to assess factors affecting the properties. Each of these tools were the basis for an assignment that was presented during online workshops by the Research-Practice Teams. The tools supported the identification of challenges and opportunities, gaps and recommendations for improving management at these World Heritage properties. The use of the tools allowed to identify knowledge gaps regarding values, attributes, governance and factors affecting the heritage places. These gaps have directed the research needs for establishing the research agendas of each property.

Research agendas were therefore constructed based on issues found in the practice and specifically on management issues. The clarification of management issues permitted the understanding of which areas could be addressed and supported by research, and what kind of outputs and outcomes are expected from the development of research priorities, which could help site management decision-making processes providing multiple evidence.

Incubator online workshops were held between September 2021 and April 2022, under the following titles:

(1) *Workshop I* on Models of Research-Practice Collaboration (September 13–15, 2021)

(2) *Workshop II* on Knowledge Systems Dialogues (October 4, 6, 8, 2021)

(3) *Workshop III* on Building Collaborative Practice-led Research Agendas (October 25–27, 2021)

(4) *Workshop IV* on Partnering for Collaborative Research (November 15–17, 2021)

(5) *Workshop V* on Building Common Practice-Led Research Proposals and Projects (March 16–18, 2022)

(6) *Workshop VI* on Publications and Heritage Place Lab Follow-up (March 30-April 1, 2022)

More than 30 international experts, heritage researchers and practitioners participated in the six online workshops as guest speakers. A coordination team of four people were in charge of the design, implementation and communication of the activity; three facilitators supported the design and implementation of the online workshops; and three observers were invited to follow and feedback the process.

The outputs
After closing the online workshops, the Heritage Place Lab pilot phase continued with the development of the outputs that were incubated during the online workshops. Besides the publication of the research agendas of the participating Research-Practice Teams and reporting the results of the experimental collaborative model (Ishizawa and Jo, forthcoming), this Special Issue is focussed on discussing the HPL process by each Research-Practice Team, showcasing their lessons learnt.

As expressed in the articles presented in this volume, for some Teams producing the results of this work was more challenging than for others. The Research-Practice Teams of La Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala, Jaipur City, Rajasthan, India and Quebrada de Humahuaca, Argentina managed to overcome a pandemic environment holding regular online meetings, undergoing literature reviews and documentation to apply the EOH 2.0 tools to assess the management of their sites. For Rjukan-Nottoden Industrial Heritage site, Norway and Great Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe, challenges were stronger for the collaborative work and participation of team members, due to distance, occupation, the time investment required vs the lack of funding, and contextual circumstances that were not possible to control. For Okavango Delta,

Botswana and Machu Picchu, Peru, the involvement of some of the management authorities in the process proved to be more challenging, and in some cases, the collaboration with individuals representing institutions was affected by political instability and contextual factors not possible to be handled by team members.

For most of the Teams, the use of the EOH 2.0 Tools significantly contributed to the evolution of their analysis of the management issues of the sites they are working on. These helped clarify knowledge gaps that needed further research, as well as to understand with more depth management challenges and the weaknesses and strengths of management systems and governance arrangements.

The possibility to exchange between different Teams operating in very different contexts was recognised as enriching and supported the widening of cultural and disciplinary horizons.

The Special issue is closing with an article that presents the views of one of the observers that were invited to follow and feedback the HPL process. Buckley (2023) contextualises this process within the celebrations of the 50 years of the World Heritage Convention, highlighting the importance of such an initiative in a context where collaboration and networking for building communities of practice is more relevant than ever. She selects a number of keywords that she considers to represent the paths of discussion for the next 50 and relates them with the discussions held and results obtained by the Teams during the HPL process.

The outcomes

The HPL process allowed researchers to approach the world of site management, understand the language used and the issues to which managers are confronted on a daily basis, while managers were supported by researchers in formulating the research needs for strengthening evidence-based management systems.

The process is naturally far from being perfect. As a first attempt in a pilot phase, WHL proposed an experimental approach from which certain aspects need to be improved. For instance, some of the challenges for Teams has been funding directly connecting to availability for the collective work, stronger endorsement to team members by their institutions, adequate time and duration and the possibility of adaptation to different conditions.

Nevertheless, the findings of the Teams were telling of common trends in World Heritage sites. Almost all Teams found the need for a recognition of intangible aspects and local values of the World Heritage places, and for enhancing governance arrangements and coordination amongst management institutions, rights-holders and stakeholders. Important avenues for research that could support the site management of the specific sites were devised, and potential for further collaboration between the Teams could be exploited as next steps for this initiative. For instance, climate change was recognised as an incremental threat that neither site managers nor researchers are yet equipped to address. More work on this theme is expected to be explored by the HPL in its next delivery.

Furthermore, a model for research-practice collaboration was tested and its potential replication shared as a PANORAMA Nature-Culture solution (World Heritage Leadership, 2022) in the hope that other heritage places could implement similar initiatives at site, national or regional levels.

As found in the UNESCO World Heritage Centre report on the state of conservation of World Heritage properties (Veillon, 2014), three properties out of four are negatively impacted by a management or institutional factor, and these related factors are not limited to any specific region. Furthermore, the lack of Management Plan or System, the lack of implementation thereof but also the lack of boundaries or the need to clarify/revise them is

clearly increasing and was reported in over 70% of all reports in 2013. Lack of governance and of legal framework (or inadequate one) as well as inappropriate management activities are also on the increase but at a lower rate. These factors are again raised in the implementation of the third cycle of the Periodic Reporting conducted region by region. The results coming from the Arab States through the Periodic Reporting again confirm the priority needs for addressing lack of management, clarification on boundaries and legal frameworks (UNESCO, 2021a). From Africa, the most relevant factor affecting the properties cited was the management and institutional factor, alongside biological resource use/modification, social/cultural uses of heritage, local conditions affecting physical fabric and climate change and severe weather events. The top priority need for capacity-building in the Africa region has been identified as conservation and management of World Heritage sites (UNESCO, 2021b). These factors affecting properties have been yet again confirmed by the analysis developed by the HPL Research-Practice Teams. The WHL is currently developing tools that can increase the capacities of managers to address these factors, including manuals and toolkits. It is therefore recommended that practice driven research findings feed into policy development for World Heritage. The WHL aims to implement this vision by continuing fostering practice-research-policy dialogue and exchange through the Heritage Place Lab supporting the development of a guidance for elaborating practice-led research agendas for World Heritage properties. The WHL sincerely hopes that the documentation of both the process taken and the results produced from this activity are considered useful for site managers and researchers around the globe to assist in their work of conserving and managing World Heritage properties.

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