

UNESCO TOPIC SYNOPSIS:
Balancing Tourism with Local
Cultural Preservation



I. Topic Background

Since 1999, conversations have arisen about the effect of tourism on cultural preservation, mainly the debate on tourism's significant economic benefits and the negative cultural impacts that range from overcrowding, heritage site degradation, the weakening of community identity. As tourist culture is pushed to the host countries, the concern of whether sustainability could be ensured becomes an increasing problem. To combat the issue, the World Tourism Organization General Assembly adopted the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, which is made to set standards for sustainable traveling for tourists to respect foreign culture and environment.⁴ The implementation of measures ensure that natural heritage, preservation, and sustainability can be met to create a positive impact for both the traveler and the local communities.

The struggles that cultural preservation faces include funding shortages, climate change, lack of awareness, and overshadowing of dominant cultures that pressure into assimilation. Cultural heritage sites, which many consider to be the hearth of cultural or natural significance, are oftentimes lost in history from demolition, driven by religious conflict, conquest, economic motives, or political cleansing. A notable example was the war crimes committed by the terrorist group ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), where they led a campaign of "cultural cleansing" and purposely targeted mosques, temples, and preserved city ruins, destroying ancient Iraqi and Syrian heritage.⁶ Another instance that resulted in the UN taking action towards the issue was the destruction and neglect of sites during WWI. Thousands of sites from European countries that were caught in the chaos were either damaged or destroyed, forcing them to be neglected due to the lack of money for rebuilding the sites and monuments.⁷ The war also left countries with devastated economies, which meant that many places were struggling to find funding for issues like maintenance, staffing, and preservation at the sites. After the war, pilgrimage tourism to battlefields began to take place: veterans and families began visiting sites to honor those who sacrificed their lives, changing the original purpose of preserving sites from cultural resemblance to remembrance of those who lost their lives.⁷ Rather than focusing on conservation of the sites and memorials, governments chased for the fame of these locations by glorifying them as destination spots for tourists as a way to increase national revenue.

As a result, many historical and cultural sites became overcrowded due to overtourism, an inability to host a sudden influx of visitors.¹ Roads become grid-locked in traffic and systems designed to host smaller sizes become packed. The constant use of infrastructure and different cultural sites result in a gradual wear and tear on transportation systems, which without proper maintenance, may become nonfunctional.² Although tourism can bring economic benefits to the residents, it can also bring inconvenience and disruption to the lives of locals who reside in these bustling tourist areas. Tourists who may want to live or rent areas to stay near major cities can end up occupying affordable housing meant for the community, resulting in unreasonable prices—to the point that's inaccessible to residents.¹² In addition, the spike in visitors results in a

higher demand for natural resources such as energy and water, and as a result, the uptrend can lead to shortages.¹ Many resorts aimed at foreigners contain attractions that also require extra resources to maintain them—for example, with pools, golf courses, and landscaping. At times, periods of water scarcity can coincide with peak tourist seasons; unfortunately, in an effort to maintain tourism, more priority for resources may be directed to the attractions versus the locals. Furthermore, disrespectful behavior by tourists towards sacred places, local customs, and regular life increases the tensions and resentment surrounding tourists and foreigners.

External influences dilute the local traditions as well, in the form of fast food chains, clothing lines, and entertainment; as the native people try to adapt to this rapid establishing expectation from tourists, they end up neglecting or setting aside cultural practices.³ In the circumstances that local culture is integrated into tourism, oftentimes it goes through the process of commodification. Rather than being accurately interpreted, practices become packaged as products and modified for the sake of the “experience.”

From well-developed European countries such as France, Spain, and Italy to lesser-developed regions like the Pacific islands, countries that are heavily reliant on tourism slowly lose their cultural diversity. When tourism is a lifeline for the economy, countries grow less and less mindful about preserving cultural and historical origins. Nations’ mindset centers around profit, rather than diverse and sacred beliefs. Less developed countries have even less control and support for their cultural groups, making these areas much more vulnerable to overtourism, commodification, and loss of cultural identity.

Case Study 1: Thailand

Tourism has been a strong contributor towards Thailand’s economy, making up a significant amount of its GDP as well as creating jobs for thousands. Up until the pandemic, the country has welcomed around 40 million visitors.¹² Although tourism seems to provide endless opportunities, studies show an increase in strains upon the country.

Temples, crafts, and festivals attract both local and foreign visitors, which generate a sum of income for local communities and help disseminate traditional practices, but also bring about a lot of traffic congestion.¹² Major tourist attractions in Thailand are not just historical monuments but places still in active use. Different Buddhist temples such as Wat Aran and Wat Phra Kaew are used for daily practice by locals. Tourists’ behavior: dressing inappropriately to temples, photography during religious prayers, and unwanted noise, interfere with daily routine.¹² Buddhism is a large aspect of Thai locals’ life, and oftentimes, tourists violate these established boundaries by touching the monks or behaving improperly around sacred items.

Thailand is composed of different tribes that spread across the vast region of the nation. In cities like Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand, there are Hmong, Karen, and Akha villages that become this cultural backdrop for foreigners to come and take pictures. Their lives and cultural rites become shaped around tourists, and villagers are forced into this performative lifestyle where they have to wear traditional clothing for the sake of appearance.¹⁷ Annual festivals such

as Songkran and Loi Krathong attract many visitors, causing mass tourism during certain seasons that result in mass water shortages and waste.

For the sake of tourism, Thailand has curated this image of the “Thai experience,” full of smiles and hospitality. This idea, meant to appeal to tourists and encourage travel, risks oversimplification of its diverse culture and sets unrealistic expectations and ignorance upon the residents that have to uphold that vision.¹⁵ The state-crafted narrative of Thailand puts unnecessary pressure on communities to perform and presents themselves inauthentically.

Pre-pandemic, Thailand’s tourism policies were focused primarily on maintaining visitors and expanding existing infrastructure. Post-pandemic and recently, there has been an observed shift towards resident well-being and culture sustainability—diversifying the tourist culture in order to expand beyond overcrowded hotspots.¹² Thailand has adopted Global Sustainable Criteria (GSC) to help create a framework on sustainable tourism and the protection of heritage assets. The community is becoming involved with the issue of overtourism through education; youth tourist guide training is being established as part of new educational models to encourage healthy cultural tourism. Specific cultural or sacred sites have begun to set limited visitor policies to reduce the congestion in the area, and keep religious areas open for the locals. Thailand’s Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA) works with UNESCO and the Tourism Authority of Thailand to set new goals and restraints when it comes to important natural and heritage sites. The collaboration led to a launch of a UNESCO-DASTA project, funded by the ASEAN-Türkiye Cooperation, named “Achieving Sustainable Tourism with Intangible Cultural Heritage and Creative Cities Network in Waterway Cities of ASEAN.” The project remains a method to support community-based tourism through leveraging the country’s unique cultural aspects.¹³

Despite these efforts to approach tourism in a culture-conscious manner, there are still gaps present in Thailand’s tourism. For many World Heritage sites, limited decision-making on the community’s hand affects the balance between culture and tourism. Even with guidelines, Thailand still faces the risk of overcommercialization, unintentionally transforming culture into spectacles. Despite existing policies concerning the relationship between culture and tourism, the implementation of the policies vary in regions; some will have advanced and successful sustainable approaches to the overtourism conflicts, while others may still struggle with overcrowdedness and strains in resources. Discussions are still ongoing on the country’s authenticity and local representation.

Case Study 2: Mexico

A significant aspect of Mexico’s economy is tourism as it boosts the overall GDP contribution, creating millions of jobs in the country. However, tourism has created obstacles to environmental sustainability and preservation of unique local cultures close to tourism sites.

Xochimilco is a city in Mexico City that is both a vital ecosystem to the capital and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The city’s famous ancient canals and floating gardens called chinampas are part of the vibrant cultural experience that draw tourists to visit, yet are

endangered by the water contamination, loss of biodiversity, and land degradation as a result from constant urbanization. A UN protected natural area, Xochimilco is home to 2% of the world's biodiversity.¹⁹ More than 250 of the species that take refuge in the network of canals around the chinampas are endemic, with around 2200 types of species living around the area.¹⁹ The species are not only put in harms' way, but they are also endangered because of the water contamination in the canals coming from agrochemical runoff in the unregulated tourism industry. The contamination kills off many species susceptible to toxins from the polluted water which is especially detrimental for the 55% that are considered to be under conservation. Many of the animals and plants, such as the axolotl salamander (*Ambystoma mexicanum*) and the Chapultepec splitfin (*Girardinichthys viviparus*), in the ecosystem have been put there by the government, and unfortunately, they are under threat of extinction.¹⁹ The focus on tourism towards the waterways have also negatively affected the water supply, even though it significantly boosts the source of income for locals as new job opportunities. Brightly coloured boats called trajineras are a symbol of Xochimilco's cultural landscape and are a key staple to a tourist's travel destination when in Mexico City, yet the trajineras put strain on the water quality through plaguing the water with fossil fuel and fertilizers, waste disposal, and tourist activities. Both the highly sensitive species that live in these areas and the ancient floating gardens can be disrupted by the tourist traffic of boats.

However, initiatives are being taken to combat this issue of degrading and disappearing local cultures. Mexico's Pueblos Mágicos program, promoted by Mexico's Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR), focuses on five objectives to create a new model of tourism that benefits both the community and development.²¹ These five objectives include: sustainable tourism planning and development; investment, infrastructure, and equipment; training, professionalization, and continuous improvement; integrated promotion and advertising; and commercialization and digitalization. These allow history and traditions to prosper and grow as they are being safely preserved from the negative harms tourism may present.

Travel companies have also found another alternative for travelers called ecotourism, a form of sustainable tourism that focuses on preserving the environment in Mexico and the well-being of local communities that may be affected by tourism. Visitors can engage in fun, low-impact tours of wildlife that both promotes conservation and provides income to protect local ecosystems. Exploitation of the beautiful land Mexico has to offer can also be prevented with ecotourism as it provides an unforgettable experience and gives back to the land that helps make the trip so memorable.

II. Past UN Involvement

- After World War I, the concern for protecting heritage surfaced, and ideas began circulating to create an international movement to help preservation. The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention adopted a treaty from nations all around the world,

addressing that cultural and natural preservation must be kept in balance by observing the way people interact with nature.

- They created the World Heritage Site to protect sites deemed of “Outstanding Universal Value” for future generations, establishing that the preservation of these sites is a global responsibility through cooperation.
 - On the 30th anniversary of the convention, the committee established four key strategies known as the “5 Cs” to support the heritage site conservation: credibility, conservation, capacity-building, communication, and communities.
- To assist the State Parties in identifying, preserving, and promoting World Heritage sites, the World Heritage Fund was established in 1975.
 - The List of World Heritage in Danger was also created to spotlight properties that were in critical condition and required careful, priority consideration.
 - In 2001, UNESCO released a declaration, Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, to preserve cultural diversity across the world and established it as an UN value.
 - UNESCO later created the Sustainable Tourism Programme to cultivate cooperation between tourism and heritage management:
 - Hopes to generate responsibility to preserve the heritage of Outstanding Universal Value through proper management.
 - The programme focuses on planning heritage destinations with stakeholders properly so tourism supports local culture, rather than destroying it.
 - The UNESCO Hangzhou Declaration 2013, titled “Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies:”
 - The first document to position culture as a key factor of sustainable development, calling for culture integration for all policies to minimize poverty, social inclusion, sustainability, and building peace.
 - On February 26, 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution that proclaimed that 2027 would be the “International Year of Sustainable and Resilient Tourism.”
 - Led by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), it would foster a more eco-friendly and community-based tourism to become resilient under disasters such as pandemics.
 - Most recently in 2025, UNESCO, UN Tourism, and UN-Habitat launched a series of Urban Solutions on Culture-Driven Sustainable Urban Tourism in Wuhan, China.

- The proposed solutions places culture as an important priority in urban tourism development and recommends ways to preserve heritage and integrate culture within the modern-day landscape.

III. Bloc Positions

Southeast Asia

Countries like Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam struggle with the issue of overcrowding and strain on resources that comes with tourism. The development of tourism in the region has shifted mass tourism towards high-quality, sustainable models that enhance the features of a visitor experience. The sustainable alternative benefits local communities and provides a source of income for them to restore the former glory of their unique cultural sites. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, otherwise known as ASEAN, implemented an IP-driven tourism microsite to focus on the vibrant, cultural industries across the region.²³ This marked a significant milestone in cross-sectoral collaboration with ASEAN, showing how IP and tourism can work together to create solutions that can help with the tourism issue, highlighting the region's remarkable, cultural benefits. The ASEAN Ecotourism Standard (AECOS) aims to elevate ecotourism practices through initiatives that utilize both small business and large companies to deliver unique experiences for tourists. The three core areas this plan includes are ecotourism activities, such as guided wildlife tours, educational and cultural programs, and eco-friendly activities; ecotourism facilities, which are physical spaces that can accommodate tourists such as nature trails or campsites; and ecotourism services, provided by tour companies or local communities that target low-impact activities and educational roles.²³

The Caribbean

The Caribbean Islands wanted to shift from the stereotypical sandy-beach-getaway tourist view to the integration of cultural awareness into tourism. Tourists often flock towards the more popular "touristy" islands like Jamaica, Aruba, and the Bahamas, leaving behind a strained resource shortage and environmental problems that other islands may not have. Every island in the Caribbean is equally important, and each has something special to offer that cannot be found in any other part of the world. In order to even out the tourist population in some areas of the Caribbean to other islands, the government utilizes creative tourism approaches such as holding culinary trails like Martinique, and music festivals like Jamaica's Reggae Sumfest, Trinidad's Carnival, and Cuba's Salsa scene. Their culinary trails spotlight the agricultural crops special to the region, including local rum, coffee, cacao, and spice farms. The UNESCO Transcultural Program, funded by the European Union, is a popular initiative dedicated to helping tourism by integrating Cuba, the Caribbean, and the EU through culture and creativity.²⁷ This particular program is aimed to build skills for young people such as leadership, entrepreneurship,

professionalism, and a deeper sense of culture. By targeting the initiative to younger people, the future generation of leaders are able to foster a safe, inclusive experience for visitors years to come.

European Union (EU)

Countries in the EU are often victims of the negative effects of tourism, ranging from degradation of heritage sites, the disappearance of cultural authenticity, and environmental strain. To build sustainable tourism, the EU has implemented policies that protect the well-being of local people and the cultural heritage they carry. Through Regulation (EU) 2019/880, illegally exported cultural goods were fully banned, and required licenses for entry of high-risk items, such as archeological objects that are more than 250 years old. This prevented the fear of illicit trade between classical, priceless items of the past and terrorism financing. The union has also created frameworks to protect cultural rights with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, and justice rights were able to strengthen democracy and avoid abuse of power towards individuals. The EU has also created a project called the EU Data Space for Tourism, where it creates a secure, shared data ecosystem for all European states' tourism sector.²⁵ The initiative grants the ability to align offers meeting up to tourist expectations while maintaining sustainability, adapting service proposals to new tourist groups, and predicting the surge of tourists in certain areas. Through the project, EU states are able to plan for resources more efficiently depending on the data shown by the data ecosystem, and create new business opportunities for ones relating to tourism.

IV. Possible Solutions

The committee of UNESCO hopes to see delegates take into consideration their country policies while discovering different approaches to balancing tourism with preservation of culture. Many countries are in different situations—some are tourism-dependent economies while others are industrial-based economies. Distinct sets of circumstances require particular solutions to approach this conflict.

Delegates should bear in mind the effects of implementing solutions towards all parties when there is changing, adding, or modeling of structures to balance tourism profit with cultural preservation. While enforcing regulations to protect cultures along with educating tourists is a great way for delegates to get started with planning solutions, we hope to see elements of international cooperation, which may be required to tackle this issue, weave into potential solutions that will be discussed during the conference.

Long-term strategies may also be key to targeting this issue. While short-term solutions may benefit all groups for a period of time, countries should focus on engaging the local populations for their decisions on their culture and quality of life. By teaming up with cultural preservationists internationally, nations are able to tackle this global conflict.

V. Questions to Consider

1. How does technology play a role in simultaneously boosting and harming cultural practices in tourist countries?
2. What qualities make a “hot spot” in a tourist country? Consider how countries could redirect or amplify tourist traffic towards these hot spots.
3. How would governments reinforce new policies and initiatives surrounding sustainable tourism and should they have the jurisdiction to punish tourists for their actions?
4. What’s the capacity in which indigenous and religious communities are able to veto decisions about tourism development on their lands?
5. How can member states ensure that the proceeds from cultural tourism go to the local communities rather than the large-scale businesses and chains?
6. Many heritage sites are simultaneously ecological locations. How would cultural preservation policies potentially work in-hand with climate and environmental approaches?
7. How could UNESCO create an international framework involving the ethics of tourism while not impeding on each country’s sovereignty?
8. Amidst times of economic hardship, how would countries’ be able to maintain their economic growth without sacrificing the authentic elements of tourism?

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