



Andrews, C. (2006) “World Heritage: Global Challenges, Local Solutions’, Ironbridge, UK, 4-7 May 2006”. *Rosetta* **1**: 51-53 [http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_01/Andrews.htm](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_01/Andrews.htm)

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**‘World Heritage: Global Challenges, Local Solutions’  
Ironbridge, UK, 4-7 May 2006**

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Issues of best practice, sustainability and inclusion relating to World Heritage management were explored this spring at Ironbridge, one of 812 sites of ‘outstanding universal value’ currently designated under the 1972 UNESCO Convention. The Ironbridge Institute and Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, with the support of English Heritage and ICOMOS UK, coordinated four days of presentation, discussion and excursion for an international delegation of heritage scholars and professionals. Despite ranging perspectives, we delegates emerged from the Gorge’s deceptively natural-looking industrial landscape no doubt stimulated to further consider the conference’s explicit and underlying themes. The issues indeed proved to have broader bearing on heritage research and praxis than the conference title suggested.

The impulse to identify management models offering stable and shared structure, values and leadership was obvious in the proceedings. This is an understandable reaction to the often difficult and imprecise management of complex World Heritage sites, such as Budapest presented by Erzsébet Kovács, or the case of Ironbridge itself relayed in turn by Philip Davis, English Heritage Chair and Ironbridge Lecture speaker Sir Neil Cossons, and local MP David Wright. This urge for best practice also emphasises the economic and political importance of securing nominations for communities and states. Accordingly, Chris Blanford and Christopher Young respectively underscored the value of management plans and regular reporting as ‘encouraged’ by UNESCO, while Christopher Pound proposed his method to assess and compare management values over time and at different sites as an operational aid. Delegates’ pronounced attention to UNESCO’s decision-making processes and criteria, and the growing reliance on ‘objective’ professional consultants (who were well represented at Ironbridge) underlined the desire for prescribed and integrated management strategies. Speakers did issue ‘get real’ cautions of the limitations of standardised approaches to come to the rescue of local and state parties challenged by shifting site-specific responsibilities. Nonetheless, participants’ disproportionate attention and acquiescent attitude towards the World Heritage framework, and somewhat uncritical subscription to universalist and nationalist discourses, reflected the influence of a bureaucratic and politicised global awards scheme on professional and public psyches.

The tendency to institutionalise or alienate site management under the shadow of UNESCO was further revealed and problematised by papers addressing the World Heritage ‘brand’ from different angles. John Rodger showed how the Welsh site of Blaenavon has used branding to the advantage of local regeneration, but with subtle concession to alien marketing values. David Breeze stimulated debate over the potential and transformative nature of international partnership and globalised heritage with his talk on the multinational site ‘Frontiers of the Roman Empire’, which is pushing collaborative and management demands to new levels. Brijesh Thapa highlighted the poor ‘symbiotic balance’ between official mandates and development pressures in Nepal, which currently has sites on the World Heritage in Danger

List. Katie Lamberto's study of Slovenia's Skocjan Caves illustrated how interpretation conceived through assumed or unconventional lenses can alternatively block or facilitate a site's ability to effectively communicate its significance. Research by Angela McClanahan into grassroots perceptions of British Neolithic sites attempted a more 'holistic view' of the way heritage functions as a counter to 'top-down' forces that define sites and influence their operations.

Chiara Bortolotto's analysis of distinct tangible and intangible heritage categories disclosed the artifice and contradiction inherent in their dichotomous construction and reification in heritage theory and practice.

Likewise and referencing the disadvantaged context of Cape Verde, Marie Louise Stig Sørensen questioned the meanings behind the heritage sector's unexamined and indiscriminate use of language such as 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development', pointing to an impoverished theoretical framework that regularly takes the intervention of heritage management and unequal community resources and agency for granted. Other papers falling under the session banner of 'sustainability' also demonstrated that the core meaning of the term lies in relationships between heritage management and issues seemingly beyond its borders. Rob Woodside's surprisingly poignant consideration of the link of heritage to climate change imagined how overlapping values might help us to adapt and cope with the large scale impact and high rate of change facing both tangible and intangible aspects of World Heritage. Similarly, Anastasia Telesetsky proposed the symmetry between World Heritage protection and poverty reduction strategies, suggesting we think outside the cure-all box of cultural tourism. Tracey L-D Lu's presentation of Chinese sites in Anhui Province illustrated tourism's destructive effects on local communities and traditional lifeways, while Hilary Du Cros and Kong Weng Hang's study of tourist congestion in Macao suggested that identifying causal factors now is key to effective short and long-term site management. The papers and discussion acknowledged that the dynamism of culture and trials of site management demand multi-disciplinary approaches and moving our thinking beyond simplistic interpretations, such as treating cultural tourism as an isolated scapegoat or always viewing globalisation as a threat to authentic local culture.

Predictably but deservedly, talks and discussion were specifically devoted to relationships with the multiple communities associated with World Heritage sites, examining the challenges, benefits and responsibilities of collaboration and outreach, and the extent to which these efforts support 'sustainability'. Paul Belford reported on research-driven community archaeology projects at the World Heritage sites of Ironbridge and St. George's, Bermuda, which aim to break down barriers between local people and their heritage by incorporating community perspectives and encouraging a broader range of interpretations of the past. An account by Dennis Rodwell of the tentative Romanian site of Sibiu also underscored the importance of community-based research by highlighting the extensive involvement and study of local residents in shaping that site's restoration programmes. Melanie Pomeroy-Kellinger told of the ongoing negotiation of heritage values among the multiple communities at Avebury to accentuate the distinction and considerable gap between a sense of ownership and a sense of responsibility for designated World Heritage. Reflecting upon the Levi Jordon Plantation community archaeology project in Texas, Carol McDavid stressed the delicacy of consultation and collaboration and the sensitivity required—especially regarding forms of communication—if non-mandated public initiatives are to effectively empower communities to sustainably manage their heritage. Jennie Morgan's study of the Auckland Museum's relationship and Pacific Islands communities also underlined the need for clear communication in the difficult process of building and maintaining productive relationships

among those with ‘conflicting imaginings of community’. In another example of public needs or aspirations clashing with heritage ideals, Robert Ogilvie responded to the problem of public collecting at Nova Scotia’s Joggins Fossil Cliffs with some creative but risky solutions.

Throughout the two dozen spoken papers, discussions and local site and museum visits, delegates expressed a desire for greater equilibrium in World Heritage management. A lively closing discussion led by Susan Denyer of ICOMOS-UK and John Carman especially emphasised the need for a more comfortable middle-ground between the extremes of prescribed and organic practice, between macro and micro agendas, between theoretical and practical interpretations. Amidst animated debate, consensus formed around the idea that navigating these gaps entails alert scrutiny of approaches and discourses, and their impacts on different temporal and geographic scales. Special consideration was given to the language of heritage and its tremendous potency. Notwithstanding the widening of UNESCO criteria (attendant to the expanding concept of heritage generally) talks brought into relief the continuing narrow conceptualisation and validation of heritage within the World Heritage rubric. Certain types of heritage—particularly the iconic, articulate and politically correct—direct local and global culture along the lines of dominant values, as opposed to greater cultural diversity. Expectations for World Heritage designation and branding must also better balance with its real added-value and costs as a transformative agenda intervening in social circumstances that are only partially concerned with heritage values. Discussants called for greater critical reflection of our treatment of World Heritage itself and the excessive power we grant to this concept and category. Appeals for greater reciprocity between management and research discourses included a strong case for greater investment in theoretical research as a means to examine the underlying elements of contextualised praxis. The tendency for researchers to stand separate from operational and local issues was also challenged with appeals for more grounded methods and attitudes. The papers demonstrated the complexities of building relationships in practice and stressed that there can be no prescribed models when site ‘stakeholders’ rarely share the same knowledge and perceptions with one another. Deciding whom we have particular responsibilities to and conceiving mutual expectations for multiple World Heritage communities can only rely on thoughtful reciprocity. In my view, the experiences and exchanges at ‘World Heritage: Global Challenges, Local Solutions’ gave a firm push towards such enhanced understandings and processes.