



MAY 2021

World Heritage

in the face of COVID-19

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY	5
INTRODUCTION	7
SURVEY METHODOLOGY	10
IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTIES	12
CONSERVATION CHALLENGES	16
EMPLOYMENT IN AND AROUND WORLD HERITAGE SITES	18
REVENUES AND SUBSIDIES AT WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTIES	21
THREATS TO WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTIES	25
SITE ACCESS AND TOURISM AT WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTIES	28
COMMUNITIES LIVING IN AND AROUND WORLD HERITAGE	32
CONCLUSIONS	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY	38
ANNEX: QUESTIONNAIRE SENT TO WORLD HERITAGE SITES	39



KEY TRENDS

World Heritage sites have been severely impacted by the pandemic:

71%

of sites were forced to close by movement restrictions

157 days

of average closure recorded at World Heritage sites in 2020

52%

average drop in entry fees recorded at sites where fees are charged

78%

reported that COVID-19 has negatively impacted communities living in and around World Heritage sites

SUMMARY

COVID-19 has impacted all sectors and all regions, and the world's over 1,000 UNESCO World Heritage properties are no exception. To understand the impact of COVID-19 on World Heritage one year after the start of the pandemic, UNESCO launched a far-reaching survey of World Heritage site managers and national authorities.

The survey found that many respondents expect the effects of the crisis on World Heritage properties to continue in the months, if not years, to come. At the height of the crisis, it was reported that 90% of countries with World Heritage properties had closed or partially closed them and respondents to this survey still reported an average figure of 71% closure of sites in February 2021. Visitors to World Heritage sites dropped by 66% in 2020 according to respondents and at sites where staff redundancies were reported (13% of sites in the survey), an average of 40% of permanent staff and 53% of temporary staff were made redundant at those sites. In the medium-term, the anticipated lower levels of international and domestic tourism to many destinations, and potential reductions in public and private funding for World Heritage properties, especially at the local level, could amplify this negative trend even further. Respondents reported that revenues dropped by 52% from entry fees at 39% of sites, whereas subsidies increased in only 14% of the 51% of sites that receive them. Furthermore, approximately 30% of sites that receive subsidies reported significant decreases. Respondents overwhelmingly reported large impacts on local communities, especially from the loss of revenue due to huge reductions in visitors to World Heritage sites and grave concerns about the future. Some World Heritage properties also reported cases of illegal logging and mining, poaching and vandalism due to the reduction of monitoring and a decrease in managed visitation. Moreover, some respondents reported that COVID-19 has put many intangible cultural heritage practices in communities associated with World Heritage sites, including rituals, rites and ceremonies on hold, with important consequences for the social and cultural life of communities. Some respondents recommended a recovery process that includes measures to support the tourism sector and communities and to safeguard livelihoods in the transition towards more versatile and resilient World Heritage site management. The uncertainty surrounding the current crisis has suggested a policy of re-alignment of properties towards domestic tourism for many stakeholders in the short-term, providing, however, the equally important opportunity to "Build Back Better".



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the cultural sector's close interlinkages with the global economy, while also further revealing the pre-existing vulnerability of the sector. The global crisis is affecting the entire creative value chain and considerably weakening the professional, social and economic status of culture professionals. Cultural institutions and World Heritage sites have been drastically affected by lockdowns and travel restrictions, impacting communities who look to such places as part of the cultural life of their communities and often who rely on these places for their livelihoods. Many intangible cultural heritage practices connected to World Heritage spaces have also been brought to a halt, with important consequences for the social, economic and cultural life of communities around the world.

At the height of the pandemic, regular tracking by UNESCO suggested that nearly 90% of countries with World Heritage properties had totally or partially closed them, with overt social and economic consequences for the surrounding communities becoming steadily apparent. Natural heritage was affected with reported cases of illegal logging and mining, poaching and vandalism due to a reduction of monitoring and a decrease in managed visitation. More than half of the world's properties continue to be totally or partially closed today.

As this report will demonstrate, visitors to World Heritage properties significantly dropped in 2020 and a significant number of permanent, seasonal and temporary staff who work in and around particular properties were made redundant at sites throughout the world. In the medium term, the generally anticipated decrease in international and domestic tourism, and potential for reductions of public and private funding, especially at the local level, could amplify this negative trend even further, with consequences for the safeguarding and conservation of these sites.

Yet, despite these challenges, some positive trends have emerged in the midst of the crisis. In order to cope with growing restrictions, some site managers shifted towards the use of digital technologies, such as virtual tours, which allowed people with internet access to remain connected to their heritage. In addition, despite the decline in global tourism, archaeological and historic sites, often within or close to urban areas, have seen an increase in local visitors in some cases, while natural sites, which often also hold cultural and spiritual value for local communities, have remained a key source of well-being for many during this difficult time. The abrupt halt in visitors and traffic at particular sites has also meant a respite for a number of natural and cultural areas, and at some cultural sites, rehabilitation or restoration works otherwise difficult, were made possible.¹

The fundamental role that heritage – and World Heritage in particular – plays in communities and countries across the world as drivers of employment, knowledge dissemination, scientific research and cultural life is being brought to light. Indeed, a myriad of sectors and sub-sectors within local economies are dependent upon visitation and conservation of World Heritage properties, and as the crisis enters its second year in many parts of the world, it is a timely reminder of the need to evaluate the current status and to re-double efforts to safeguard World Heritage for future generations.

For these reasons, UNESCO has mobilized its global network to develop a better understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on World Heritage in the short, medium- and longer-term, with a view to laying the groundwork for a roadmap to recovery that will help enhance the future resilience of cultural and natural heritage and the cultural ecosystem as a whole.

Therefore, the current situation is providing the international community with an opportunity to undertake appropriate research and planning for recovery, while addressing existing challenges and exploring new opportunities for World Heritage. The conclusions of this publication will aim to support local authorities and site managers in maximizing the benefits of the imposed changes at particular

¹ cf. Rössler, M. and L. Eloundou, *World Heritage: Interpretation and COVID-19*, UNESCO, 2020

sites and to “Build Back Better” through site management that puts the needs of communities at the centre of the recovery process.

Any measures and recommendations for policy that may emerge from the analysis will necessarily fall to governments for implementation and will need to reinforce strategies that are under development or already in place in order to be truly effective. In this regard, exceptional measures have been taken by many governments to help artists, creators, cultural bodies, businesses and institutions weather the crisis. At UNESCO’s Online Meeting of Ministers of Culture in April 2020, ministers reiterated the importance of a massive, rapid and proactive response from the state in support of the cultural sector. Reflecting this, in both developing and developed countries, advocates for culture have sought to maintain budgets in the culture sector or to even increase them in response to the pandemic. Some World Heritage properties, and personnel depending on them for their livelihoods, have also seen marginal increases in subsidies and support during the crisis.

As the crisis has drawn on, government responses have attempted to introduce extraordinary measures to fulfil urgent needs, together with the enhancement of more usual approaches. Notably, with most countries having shut down cultural sites and events, many states have committed to ensuring access to culture online. Various countries have also undertaken impact studies to define and measure the economic and social repercussions of the health crisis on the cultural sector to aid with devising longer-term measures.

At the outset, it is clear that the impact of COVID-19 on all facets of socio-economic and cultural life is continuing and that many of its implications and much of its impact may not be well understood for many years to come, certainly not until a true global recovery is well underway. What is clear is that newly imposed restrictions, border closures, domestic curfews and other regulatory measures in some countries will mean that recovery will be predictably unstable and non-linear. The policy implications for the culture sector will likely promote a “reset”, rather than a simple “bounce-back” or return to pre-COVID-19 aspirations for many parts of the culture sector, including World Heritage. This is especially true when it comes to visitation and tourism connected to World Heritage where COVID-19 has been both an agent of decline in visitation of World Heritage sites and their maintenance, while also becoming an agent of mitigation for over-tourism at many sites and in many communities. In addition, necessary work for visitor infrastructure, rehabilitation and restoration have been able to take place during the closure in some cases. It is up to all stakeholders, private and public organizations and institutions, to take advantage of the ‘reset mentality’ and to “Build Back Better” within any sector-specific recovery strategy and within national recovery plans where “culture” *per se* should necessarily be an important component.



SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey was developed by UNESCO and released to all World Heritage site managers and national focal points on 5 February 2021, closing on 28 February 2021. A total of 388 completed surveys were received, representing a 35% response rate.

The survey elicited responses for a range of questions concerning the access to sites by visitors during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 as compared to 2019 and information on impacts resulting from or exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. Information was also sought on whether staff members were still able to conduct conservation activities at properties during these trying times. Regarding staff members at sites and World Heritage site management authorities, the survey inquired as to whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had any effect on staffing and whether any permanent or temporary (and seasonal) staff members were made redundant as a result (and if so, in which proportion). The question of entry fees and loss of revenues for the World Heritage properties between 2019 and 2020, either through loss of visitor-related revenues or of local/regional/national subsidies, was also raised.

In the last section, the survey looked into the potential increase in specific threats to properties due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact on communities living in or around the property. Throughout the survey, respondents had the opportunity to provide additional comments, which brought extremely useful insights into their daily work during the COVID-19 crisis, the new and unexpected challenges they were facing during this period and how they adapted to these extraordinary working conditions. Answers were also supplemented by direct interviews and correspondence with some site managers, equally providing insights into both global and local challenges and various adaptive measures undertaken or recommended at different sites. The findings of these interviews and consultations are presented throughout this report in summary or aggregate form.

It should also be qualified that the survey only provides a limited snapshot of the current situation itself, both the challenges and opportunities that have emerged and will arise, and that continuous follow-up and further research into the impact of the crisis as it continues to evolve are part of a necessary process. It is a situation requiring the ongoing refinement of recommendations and interventions within the context of dynamic changes in public movement restrictions, policy, revenue and subsidies, with updated information, interviews and assessments, and deepening understanding of the long-term impact of the global economic recession on culture and heritage.

Figure 1: Survey response regional breakdown

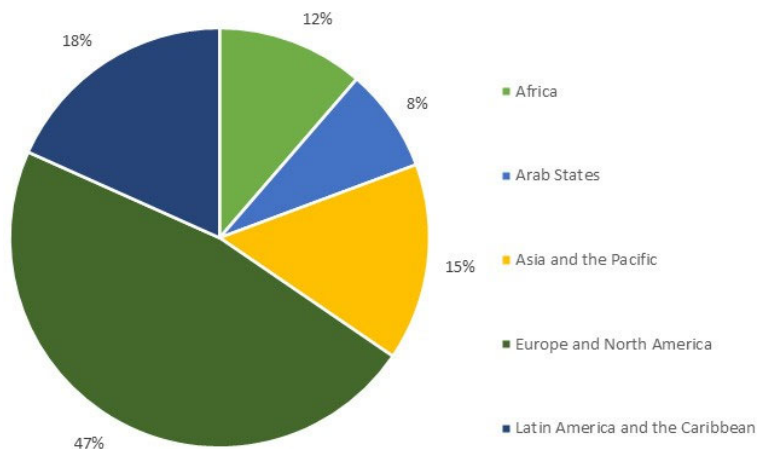


Figure 2: Response rate to the survey

Region	Submission	Total number of WH properties	Percentage of response
Africa	44	96	46%
Arab States	31	86	36%
Asia and the Pacific	59	268	22%
Europe and North America	183	529	35%
Latin America and the Caribbean	71	142	50%
Total	388	1121	35%

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTIES

UNESCO has been working closely with State Parties to the Convention and site managers throughout the period of the crisis, assisting with mitigation measures, promoting the expansion of digital access to sites, implementing conservation activities through the network of UNESCO field offices, advising on policy and advocating for sustainable recovery plans for World Heritage properties. The impact of the crisis on World Heritage has been seen across all regions. However, properties have been impacted differently; some experiencing new threats while others have had a chance to recover from over-tourism and ‘perpetual growth’ visitor models, which have been a serious issue for some urban and site-specific rural communities for many years.

Therefore, we have seen both negative and positive effects of the crisis in relation to World Heritage properties of different kinds. The abrupt halt in travel and tourism cut off the stream of visitors and the revenue they often bring, which for some sites represents the main source of income to cover conservation, maintenance and salaries. Surrounding communities have been affected adversely as well, with many people losing employment and income. On the other hand, rehabilitation and restoration works could take place more effectively in some cases and human-made pressures were somewhat minimized in many natural areas. This dichotomy and wide and varied experience within World Heritage caused by the crisis also creates the opportunity to maximize the benefits of the easing of specific pressures on particular sites, while undertaking appropriate research and planning for recovery in order to minimize any weaknesses in World Heritage management systems at specific sites that have become apparent as a result of the crisis.

This report summarizes the results of the UNESCO survey of site managers and attempts to draw conclusions on what is known and being reported up to this point, a year since the beginning of the crisis, and at a time when vaccinations have begun with varying degrees of penetration and success in countries across the world. The situation remains dynamic as strains of the virus continue to appear and reappear in parts of the world. Moreover, the results of the vaccination campaigns remain uncertain in many countries and lockdowns and restrictions continue in place for a large number, or are introduced intermittently in others with some countries changing the restrictions on a weekly and *ad hoc* basis.

The general results of the survey and consultation with local authorities confirm that the full or partial closure of World Heritage properties has resulted in socio-economic impacts (including disruption of community life in and around properties, loss of livelihoods and the deepening of poverty), in reduced maintenance and conservation, lack of protection and management and increased threats, including from poaching and illicit trafficking.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis has made existing challenges more acute in some cases and created additional ones in others. While it is noted that the reduction of human activities as a result of the pandemic provided space for relief and recovery at some natural sites, the need to “reset” the status quo considering pre-COVID-19 aspirations and to “Build Back Better” is apparent for maintaining appropriate management and conservation approaches to natural sites. A case in point concerns protected areas which are home for Great Ape species and which are likely to be vulnerable to COVID-19 and other zoonotic diseases. Even if travel recovers, critical sites for these species may have to remain closed or restricted for tourism due to the potential for transmission. The potential for zoonosis originating from wild animal populations should also be considered in protected area management. The need to adopt and enhance biosecurity measures, sustainable agriculture, appropriate forest and protected areas management, the handling of livestock in relation to protected areas are but a few of the implications that the pandemic has brought to light in relation to natural sites.²

² Cf. Rodríguez, C., 2021, pp. 13ff., “Nature and Humanity”, in *PARKS. The International Journal of Protected Areas and Conservation*, Volume 27 (Special Issue), Gland, Switzerland: IUCN

Therefore, not only is it important to emphasize the wide diversity of present and future challenges facing many sites, but also the wide range of experiences at specific sites. For example, while only 13% of sites reported job losses for permanent staff, job losses were reported by some managers as exceeding 90 percent at specific sites, which places them at extreme risk from a range of negative impacts. Therefore, measures and policies that arise from statistical averages and standardized approaches to problems, will not necessarily assist those sites at particular risk and site-specific planning and mitigation measures should also take account of case-by-case challenges to safeguard World Heritage sites.

Figure 3: Percentage of sites open, closed, or partially closed

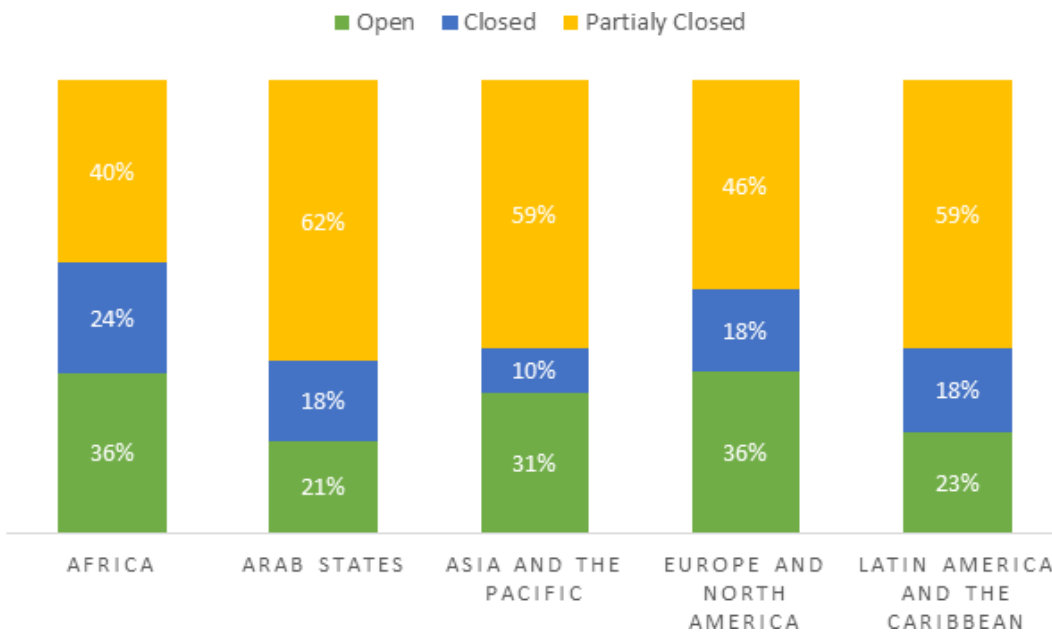
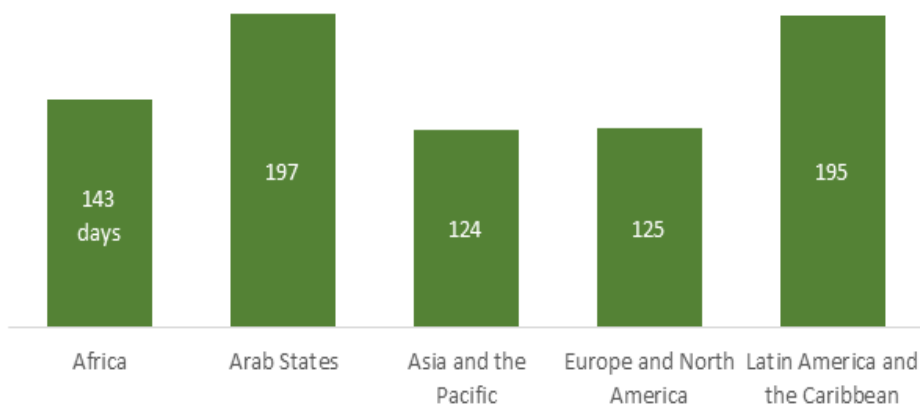


Figure 4: Average number of days of closure by region



The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Since then, World Heritage sites across the globe have experienced total or partial closures. Globally, of the 388 sites that responded to the survey, 71% of the sites were forced to close by restrictions placed on movement due to the pandemic. 53% of respondents reported that the closure was only partial and 29% of the sites remained fully open. 18% of the sites were fully (continuously) closed. The average number of days of closure reported for World Heritage sites in 2020 was 157 days, with the Arab States experiencing the highest number of days of closure (197 days) and the Asia and Pacific region the lowest (124 days).



CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

The primary objective of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention is the protection and conservation of cultural and natural heritage.³ This requires the maintenance of the property's authenticity and integrity, the attributes and values which contribute to and demonstrate the criteria under which the property has been inscribed on the World Heritage List and which constitute the benchmark of its Outstanding Universal Value.⁴ The COVID-19 crisis has thrown up many challenges in respect to the protection and maintenance of all categories of sites on the World Heritage List, including those on the List of World Heritage in Danger, already facing serious threats.

87% of respondents reported that conservation activities were able to continue during the crisis. This is reassuring in general and, perhaps, could be expected one year into the crisis, where subsidies and measures across the board may have assisted in the retention of jobs and existing conservation programmes to a certain extent. Many such programmes will have been funded in the years preceding 2020, thus, before the crisis emerged. Many government policies also allowed dispensations for conservation professionals to gain access to sites during the crisis to enable this important work to continue.

Future conservation efforts, measures, plans and strategies will be dependent on the availability of future funding. While the global recession continues to impact country specific and local (site-specific) economies, it is also reasonable to expect that conservation programmes will be in competition with increased demands on public spending and where other sectors of the economy are in equally high demand for support. This will be a concern during 2021 and onward.

Some site managers in urban areas reported concerns that the economic recession being faced by their communities would affect conservation in the long-term, where privately held buildings in World Heritage sites would see a continuing decline in maintenance and conservation due to the lack of funds of households in the community. It was noted that increases in government subsidies, whether in the form of taxation or grants, may address part of this problem, but cannot address the basic problem of households losing the economic wherewithal (and confidence) to undertake the appropriate conservation interventions in private buildings. For natural sites, similar concerns were raised of a lack of maintenance, with new threats and pressures on surrounding communities steadily affecting the conservation of properties. These new threats are discussed in more detail below.

Another issue impacting both the short and the longer term in relation to conservation is staffing and employment, subsidies and general site revenues. These are discussed in the relevant sections below, but suffice it to say that the trends towards fewer staff may well compound existing conservation problems, maintenance, monitoring and site management in general. These issues will have the tendency to compound over time, with the effects becoming increasingly apparent as we move forward.

Therefore, it may not be for many years that the true impact of the crisis is seen in World Heritage properties, especially for sites already in a more precarious state of conservation.

³ Complete text available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>

⁴ UNESCO, rev. July 2019, *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, Paris, France.



EMPLOYMENT IN AND AROUND WORLD HERITAGE SITES

World Heritage properties are powerful drivers of job creation across the globe. World Heritage properties help to provide diverse employment opportunities for a range of permanent and temporary workers, skilled and semi-skilled, professionals and volunteers, not only in major cities, but also in remote and rural areas, as well as other often economically marginal locations where alternative opportunities can be more limited. With the impact of the crisis continuing and reduced capacity of the many and varied branches within the culture sector, many of these jobs have been and will be directly affected. This can have serious implications for the effective implementation of the Convention.

Staffing numbers are dependent upon the interaction of various factors and it has not always been the case that the pre-COVID-19 staffing levels at particular sites were adequate to manage, maintain, conserve and protect the site from natural or human-made problems. In this regard, sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger may be placed at particular risk from any reduction in staff numbers as many of them already face significant challenges in conservation, maintenance and management. Furthermore, if domestic visitors increase at many sites as some predict for the short-term, staff reductions will place increasing pressure on the conservation and maintenance of sites and place them at increased risk from existing threats.

Government support in the form of subsidies for management of the property, visitors and revenues, conservation needs and the overall demand placed on the site by conservation, maintenance and monitoring all play a part in the potential employment requirements at any given site and the need to effectively protect World Heritage properties. Sudden shocks to the system that result in the reduction of staff skilled in conservation and monitoring (and other specialties) whom cannot be easily replaced if and when visitor numbers suddenly increase can have a lingering effect on World Heritage. Reductions in staff will also have a negative impact on the long-term sustainability of World Heritage sites.

Many respondents reported the closure of a range of site facilities, including in the area of information, awareness raising and public education. The capacity of sites to adequately address another pillar of the implementation of the World Heritage Convention – education and awareness raising through interpretation centres and site museums etc.- is one that will be directly affected by any further reductions in staff numbers into the future and one that will necessarily impact knowledge about World Heritage.

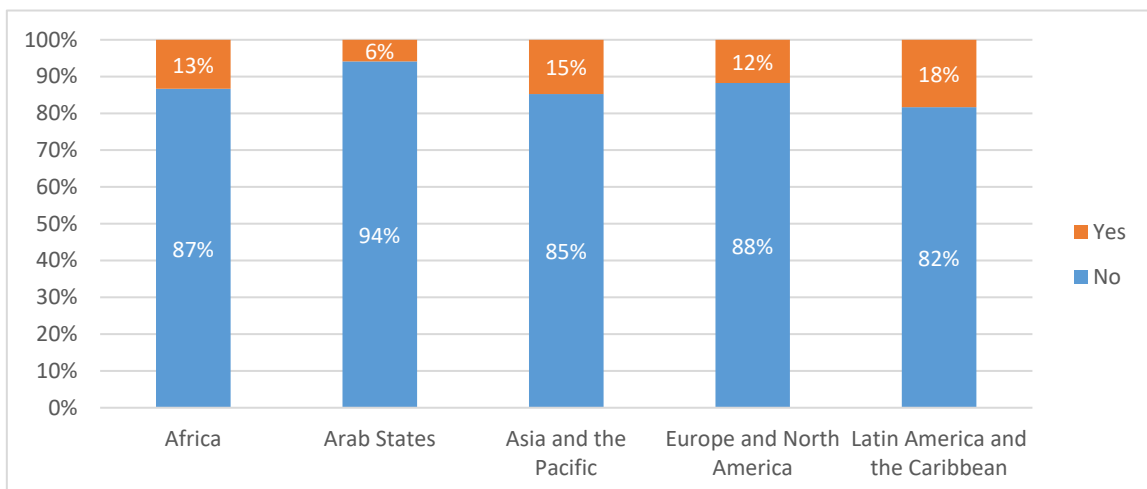


Figure 5: Percentage of sites reporting permanent staff made redundant by region

UNESCO found that on average 13% of sites reported that some permanent staff had been made redundant during 2020, compared to 27% of sites in regard to temporary staff. The highest number of sites where permanent staff were made redundant are from Latin America and the Caribbean with 18% and the lowest number came from the Arab States reporting 6%. However, the weighted numbers for actual reductions of both temporary and permanent staff at sites reporting redundancies were 40% for permanent staff and 53% for temporary staff. Some sites reported figures in excess of 50% and as high as 90%, while others report that female workers at particular World Heritage sites had been greatly affected. This highlights the case that some sites are at a particular risk from COVID-19 responses, restrictions and economic recession and again, that all sites have to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

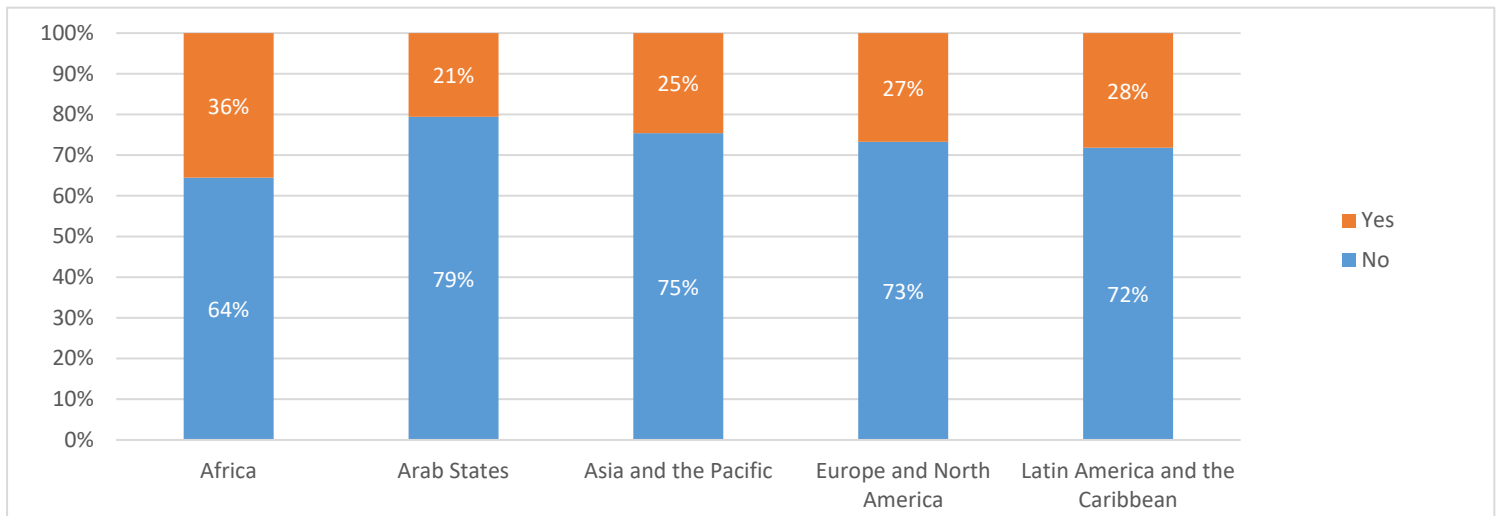


Figure 6: Percentage of sites reporting temporary staff made redundant by region



REVENUES & SUBSIDIES AT WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTIES

Great reductions in revenue at World Heritage properties are having an impact on a range of issues such as conservation and maintenance, employment and livelihoods and the general socio-economic situation in surrounding communities. Governments around the world have provided subsidies for workers in a range of industries, including the culture sector, to help mitigate the crisis. However, this has not necessarily been reflected at World Heritage properties during 2020 (see below) and there is concern that as subsidies are steadily withdrawn – as they currently are in many countries – protection of World Heritage will continue to erode in the wake of decreases in revenue and limited reinvestment in conservation and maintenance. It has not always been the case that pre-COVID-19 revenues generated by World Heritage sites were proportionately reinvested in the maintenance of those sites and for many properties, the existing crisis is exacerbating ongoing revenue issues. Moreover, given that revenue from visitors has not always equated to adequate protection or enhanced conservation at sites suffering from over-burden, this issue is another that demands a rethink of pre-COVID-19 visitor models and of sustainability at World Heritage sites.

Revenues from entry fees alone dropped by an average of 52% at sites where they are charged (39%) as a result of COVID-19. It should also be noted here that entry fees are not the only source of revenue for World Heritage properties and that not all sites were necessarily able to quantify the total decreases in revenue at the time of the survey. UNESCO's survey, therefore, could not account for all potential sources of income for properties, which range from site museums, community and interpretation centres, and other formal exhibition and information points, to souvenir shops, cultural industries, hospitality outlets and a range of services that could include transport, guided tours, etc. etc.. Arguably, for many sites, income from these sources would significantly exceed entry fees alone, and for those sites where entry fees are not charged, they are likely to be the main sources of revenue in addition to government subsidies where they are applicable.

Furthermore, there are revenues generated by the property within local economies, including hotel and more informal accommodation, related services, including hospitality and transport provided by the private sector and many others. All these sources will have been greatly affected in relation to specific sites and have a compounding effect on particular sites and communities moving forward. Such estimates – inclusive of all sources of revenue and site-specific private sector data – would represent a more accurate representation of the total loss of direct and projected income for and generated by World Heritage properties.

Within this context, the figure of 52% loss of direct revenue from entry fees at 39% of sites as reported by respondents is likely to be only a conservative estimate. Nonetheless, in itself, the decrease is significant and will have serious affects, particularly when considered alongside other revenue sources not captured or reported in the survey. Certainly, it presents a great challenge at sites attempting to devise and implement recovery plans.

For many World Heritage sites, public subsidies are a key source of funds to supplement revenue for conservation and management activities. 51% of respondents reported that their properties receive local/regional or national subsidies, while 49% report no subsidy. In some cases, COVID-19 has had an impact on the subsidies being made available to World Heritage sites. While 56% of respondents noted that these subsidies remained the same in the wake of COVID-19, only 14% reported that the subsidies increased during this period. Importantly, 30% of the sites receiving governmental subsidies reported decreases. The rate of decreases reported for different sites vary incredibly from only a few percent to as high as 90%. Significantly, 56% of these sites reported reductions between 50% and over 90%. This emphasizes the point on the range of experience and compounding difficulties being faced by site managers at specific sites and the need to consider site-by-site solutions.

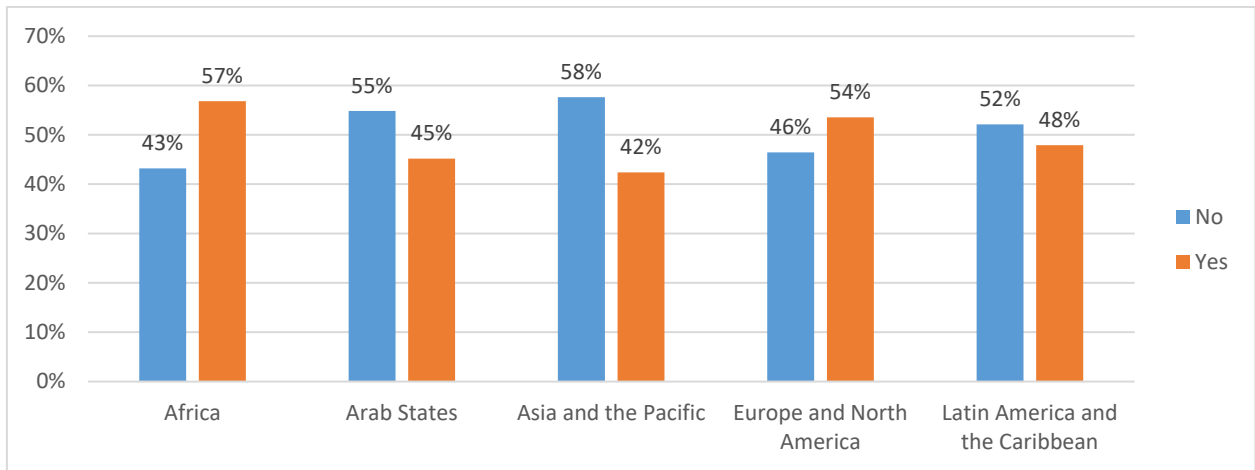


Figure 7: World Heritage properties that benefit from subsidies

It is clear that different regions are more reliant on public subsidies than others. In Africa, respondents reported that for the 44% of properties receiving subsidies, these subsidies cover 90% or more of the total expenditures incurred by the management, staffing, conservation and maintenance of the property. For properties receiving subsidies in the Asia and the Pacific, 40% of expenditure is covered by subsidies and for Latin America and the Caribbean it was 47%. For Europe and North America and the Arab States it was reported as 22% and 21% respectively. Globally, the average dependence on subsidies was 32%, though it is the regional and site-specific reliance on subsidies which is the more salient point.

The different figures clearly represent a high dependency by World Heritage properties on government subsidies for around half the sites on the World Heritage List, across all regions, which depend on these subsidies to meet their recurrent costs. It therefore represents a high risk to properties if there is an emergent trend to decrease subsidies. Furthermore, an equally large percentage of sites report no subsidies at all, which may affect them particularly harshly if the recovery period for revenue regeneration is prolonged and slow, or not reinvested appropriately in the sustainability of the property as has often been the case.

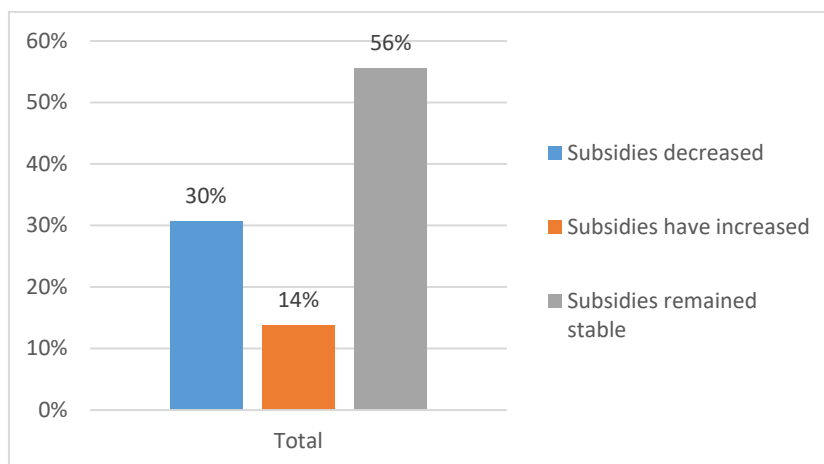


Figure 8: Impact of COVID-19 on subsidies

We can see from the table below that there were very significant decreases in subsidies across the board for sites that receive and depend on them, especially alarming for the Arab States and Latin America and the Caribbean. We should also note concerning subsidies that the period from March 2020 to January 2021 may also be distorted in regards to the measures and immediate interventions introduced by governments, and that these will be subject to further change and, perhaps, further reductions as the crisis and attempted recovery continues. Indeed, should the pandemic continue to take its toll on the global economy, World Heritage properties might suffer from further reductions in subsidies, as heritage in general begins to compete for subsidies with other sectors, such as health, education, and the myriad of sectors suffering from increased unemployment and severe reductions in revenue. Advocacy efforts may need to be exponentially increased if this is the case to have World Heritage treated adequately (and perhaps, exceptionally) within national recovery plans.

Figure 9: Subsidies increase and decrease per region

Region	Increased	Decreased	Remained stable
Africa	8%	44%	48%
Arab States	0%	79%	21%
Asia and the Pacific	16%	24%	60%
Europe and North America	21%	9%	69%
Latin America and the Caribbean	0%	68%	32%
Global average	14%	30%	56%



THREATS TO WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTIES

Many World Heritage properties reported that new threats directly impacting the conservation of sites have emerged from the pandemic or that very serious or existing concerns and issues had been exacerbated. 29% of respondents reported new or worsening threats to their sites. Issues identified include challenges in carrying out monitoring, management and institutional factors, conservation and maintenance, changing social/cultural uses of heritage, biological resource use/modification, absence and then intensification of visitors in condensed time periods, amongst others.

For example, several sites reported an increase in deforestation due to the growing use of park resources and lapses in monitoring. The reduction in monitoring and the absence of tourists was indicated as reasons for an increase in illegal use of biological resources and other interventions such as small-scale mining, which were not normally allowed. Some sites also suffered an increase in poaching, illegal logging and others reported vandalism and illegal excavations at archaeological sites, all connected to a reduction in patrolling and regular monitoring.

Figure 10: Threats to World Heritage properties have increased due to COVID-19

Region	Yes	No
Africa	52%	48%
Arab States	23%	77%
Asia and the Pacific	34%	66%
Europe and North America	15%	85%
Latin America and the Caribbean	51%	49%
Global average	29%	71%

In some urban areas, sites reported problems connected to the dramatic drop in visitors during periods of confinement and then sudden influxes in large numbers of visitors increasing management challenges and creating notable disruptions between visitor activities and usual community use of urban sites. This can be connected to a sudden increase in domestic tourism experienced by many sites. In some cases, local vendors have also begun to encroach on public spaces normally barred to them. Some World Heritage cities also expect to see a medium to long-term reduction in appropriate conservation of private buildings and houses due to economic hardship caused by the crisis, impacting the state of conservation of properties in the longer-term. This will come to the fore if the recovery period is delayed or prolonged and urban areas decline as a result.

In summary, various respondents made note of the following threats, including;

- **A surge in unauthorized construction works during the lockdown as residents carried out additions and demolitions in certain areas;**
- **Inability of staff to monitor the site;**
- **Worsening state of conservation during lockdown periods as vegetation grew wildly in archaeological sites;**
- **Sharp decline in commercial activity as souks, squares, and commercial streets became deserted;**

- **Vandalism, as concerned authorities were unable to keep the same degree of control during this period;**
- **Celebrations linked to religious festivals, intangible cultural heritage and cultural activities that did not occur;**
- **Increases in illegal excavations, poaching and illegal exploitation of biological and geological resources;**

Alternatively, some respondents reported that the lack of tourists and people in general provided a valuable opportunity for completing documentation and inventorying.



SITE ACCESS & TOURISM AT WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTIES

Visitation numbers for the 388 properties represented in the survey dropped from approximately 180 million visitors per year to around 60 million, which represents a 66% percent reduction from the number of visitors in 2019. A range of iconic sites in global terms across all regions saw massive declines in tourism numbers and corresponding declines in revenues.

It is interesting to note that Africa, despite the fact that it remained more accessible and open to visitors according to the respondents (36% of sites), it also reported one of the biggest drops in visitation, experiencing a 71% drop in visitors compared to 2019. Africa was closely followed by Latin America and the Caribbean, which reported a 67% drop in visitors.

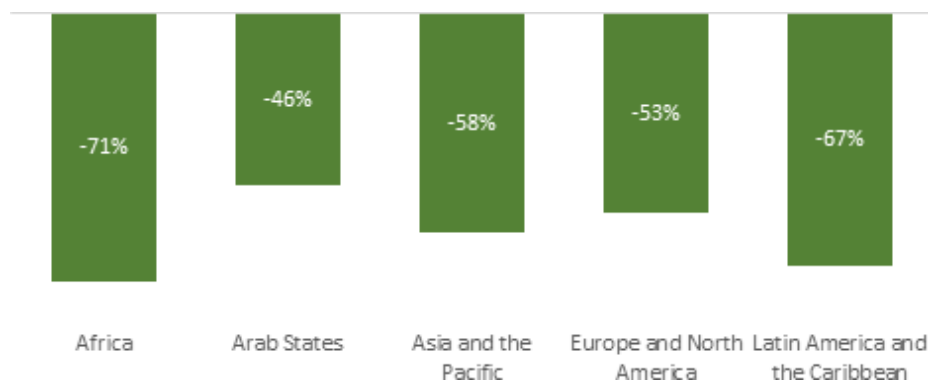


Figure 11: Visitor decrease percentage compared to 2019 by region

To put these visitation trends into the global context, international tourist arrivals dropped by 74% in 2020 according to data from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and destinations worldwide welcomed 1 billion fewer international arrivals in 2020 than in the previous year due to the unprecedented drop in demand and widespread travel restrictions. The collapse in international travel represents an estimated loss of USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues - more than 11 times the loss recorded during the 2009 global economic crisis.⁵

According to UNWTO, the Asia-Pacific region recorded the largest decrease in arrivals in 2020, with a drop of 84%, or 300 million fewer arrivals compared to 2019. UNWTO also reported that the Middle East and Africa both recorded a 75% decline and Europe recorded a 70% decrease in arrivals. Europe recorded the largest drop in absolute terms, with over 500 million fewer international tourists in 2020 and Latin America and the Caribbean saw a 69% decrease in international arrivals.⁶

The current situation highlights the imminent need to address and rethink travel and World Heritage destinations, especially at sites that have become overly dependent on visitor generated revenues for their maintenance. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the health and livelihoods of billions of people and has globally affected World Heritage visitation and indeed the tourism sector across the board. However, the pandemic has also provided a pause in visitation that has allowed many to rethink existing visitation and tourism models for over-burdened sites. These new approaches emphasize steering post-COVID-19 efforts towards tourism that “builds back better”, in line with UNESCO’s values, and encourages a balanced approach that enhances resilience and is beneficial to both heritage and communities.

⁵ UNWTO, ‘2020: Worst year in tourism history with 1 billion fewer international arrivals’ available at <https://www.unwto.org/news/2020-worst-year-in-tourism-history-with-1-billion-fewer-international-arrivals>

⁶ *Ibid.*

Within this context, UNESCO's goal is to help its Member States revive visitation and their tourism industries through their natural and cultural World Heritage and broad cultural assets, whilst safeguarding heritage, promoting creativity and cultural diversity, and supporting the recovery of the communities whose livelihoods depend on this cultural capital.⁷

In 2019, global tourism was a major source of growth, employment and income, with over 1.5 billion people crossing international borders and often visiting heritage places. There are currently 1121 cultural, natural and mixed World Heritage sites located across 167 countries. Many of these sites and associated communities have come to depend upon tourism as a pillar of their current economic, environmental, social and cultural well-being. In recent decades, many World Heritage sites have also had the unique role of becoming (or reinvigorating) their position as focal points of local and national cultural identities, as well as being central pillars of local tourism and related industries.

Tourism underpins how many of these sites respond to the notion contained in Article 5 of the Convention, of adopting a general policy which aims to give cultural and natural heritage a “function in the life of the community”. Before the COVID-19 crisis, the popularity of World Heritage sites as tourist destinations was growing at a significant rate. The exponential growth, however, came at an increasingly high price for both local communities and their cultural and natural heritage, which were straining under the added pressures of growth in visitor numbers, often concentrated in particular, sometimes fragile, parts of these sites.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has since seen tourism rapidly decline in most countries, affecting the ability of cultural and natural World Heritage sites to function as they have been for the foreseeable future. The situation remains dynamic with different countries and regions experiencing different scenarios based on the COVID-19 situation.

New measures and approaches are being tested to restart tourism and trends are emerging. Knowledge sharing and learning will be needed to allow for more resilient responses from local communities to both recover from the current crisis and withstand and adapt to the next global or regional challenge (be it pandemic, climate change, natural disaster, potential conflict, etc.). New community-based economic models and improved standards of health, safety and social interactions will also be required. Paradoxically, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity, not to return to business as usual, but to create more resilient models, an increasingly beneficial and complementary relationship between natural and cultural sites, visitors and local communities.

One response to the impact on access to World Heritage and to culture in general by UNESCO in 2020 was to establish a Task Force on Culture and Resilient Tourism with the Advisory Bodies to the World Heritage Convention (ICOMOS, IUCN, ICCROM). The Task Force is contributing to a global dialogue addressing key issues relating to tourism and heritage management during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis. The process will result in a roadmap that outlines a strategic approach for tourism that harnesses heritage values to rejuvenate communities, protect nature and contribute to sustainable development futures.

Some respondents to the World Heritage survey reported increases in domestic tourism as a result of COVID-19. Globally, domestic tourism is expected by many stakeholders (both public and private sector) to play an important role in the initial recovery phase within the culture sector. The reasoning is, of course, based on the obvious uncertainty surrounding international travel and a general lack in confidence among international travellers. Research shows that global travel preferences are now leaning towards nature and outdoor activities, as opposed to city breaks and urban areas.⁸ More

⁷ For more information see the UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/tourism/>)

⁸ 'Effects of COVID-19 on European tourism' presentation available at http://www.itzg.hr/files/file/RAZNO/Croatia-Travel-2021_Caroline-Bremner.pdf

remote and rural destinations and natural areas are likely to be more attractive to domestic visitors (and foreign visitors if and when international travel recovers), at least in the short-term, and could be important focuses of recovery. Overall, the situation underscores the strong case for all stakeholders to refocus on well managed domestic tourism and domestic visitation, with associated businesses and services which are not only depending on international visitors, but are strongly attractive to local communities in and around World Heritage properties. This may help mitigate the current crisis and to move towards long-term sustainability for World Heritage properties.

However, we should note that without proper visitor management geared towards conservation and sustainability, significant increases in domestic tourism may simply replicate many of the problems that we have seen from over-tourism in general. Several respondents noted such increases in domestic visitors during 2020 and made note of negative impacts and a lack of capacity of the site to accommodate “new types of domestic tourists,” such as in terms of waste management, more vehicles, the types of activities undertaken and the impact on the environment.

Properties where domestic tourism already represents a significant share of the tourism economy are thus more likely to see recovery in the sector more quickly than properties that are heavily dependent on international tourism flows, at least in the short- to medium-term where local travel restrictions have eased. Many sites, and the tourism sector, are moving to promote domestic travel and cater to visitors from their own countries, but where heavy dependence on international tourism dominates local markets, re-orientation and recovery will be predictably slow and is more susceptible to future, similar crises. Such crises, in relation to the economic sustainability of World Heritage properties, must necessarily be taken seriously and planned for appropriately with conservation and the impact of increasing domestic visitors given equal consideration as well, especially as COVID-19 continues in many parts of the world, more than a year since the declaration of the pandemic.



COMMUNITIES LIVING IN & AROUND WORLD HERITAGE

Across all regions, the communities living in and around World Heritage sites have suffered from the effects of the pandemic. 78% of respondents reported adverse impacts on local communities, the highest being in Africa at 89% and the lowest in the Arab States at 55%. Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America, were at 83%, 80% and 76%, respectively.

The main impact of COVID-19 on communities living in and around World Heritage is overwhelmingly reported by respondents as a loss of income and livelihoods connected to the sites. Much of this employment is connected to the various levels of the tourism value chain. Hotel closures, hospitality, transport, living performances, artisanal activities that all generate income for local communities have been impacted severely by the various lockdowns and confinement measures. Increases in poverty associated with the loss of income were common responses, especially for people associated with service industries in the tourism sector. As significant proportions of many communities living in and around World Heritage have become dependent on tourism and related services for employment, the overall reduction in visitors has had devastating consequences.

Globally, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), nearly 62 million tourism and travel jobs were lost in 2020. These jobs losses were felt across the entire ecosystem of the sector, with small to medium enterprises (SMEs), which make up 80% of all businesses in the sector, particularly affected. Furthermore, the impact on women, youth and minorities was significant.

Indeed, the economic viability of some local communities that are dependent on visits to World Heritage properties, of which there are many on the World Heritage List, may be brought into serious doubt if the pandemic continues and if recovery is particularly slow. In such cases, it may be that intensifying efforts to compensate through domestic tourism is a sustainable solution for both maintenance of the properties and the viability of the communities associated with them. However, as we have noted above, a sudden surge in domestic tourism can bring a range of new problems to the sites, if adequate management systems are not in place.

Figure 12: COVID-19 has affected the surrounding communities

Region	Yes	No
Africa	89%	11%
Arab States	55%	45%
Asia and the Pacific	80%	20%
Europe and North America	76%	24%
Latin America and the Caribbean	83%	17%
Global average	78%	22%

In other sites, it may not be the case that domestic tourism is a viable alternative and competing interests for land use, especially in urban areas where constant pressures of encroachment and redevelopment are common, different stakeholders may seek to take advantage of the loss of revenue from tourism at particular sites.

Advocacy efforts from UNESCO could again reiterate the importance of local ownership and narratives that ground sites in local and national identities to further enhance the resonance of particular sites at the national and community level to improve prospects for sustainability in the wake of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis. Simultaneously, and necessarily, also advocating for the development and implementation of management systems that take account of any changes to existing pressures on sites or new ones that emerge from changes in the activities and use of particular sites.



CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the effects of the crisis on World Heritage properties are only beginning. The report has highlighted a few of the trends and attempted to situate the survey and the views of respondents within the broad context and issues that have faced World Heritage in the past and that have emerged or been exacerbated by the present situation.

Recently introduced measures, such as social distancing, which is likely to continue to be a requirement at World Heritage properties, will continue to effect sites in a myriad of ways; the manner in which sites are experienced and visited, numbers of people able to be admitted at any one time, the way training and educational activities connected to sites are conducted, as well as scientific research, general maintenance, infrastructure, conservation and sustainable development.

While 87% of respondents mentioned that conservation activities could continue during the crisis, this will likely change for the worse in the coming months, after the wave of massive emergency and recovery funds – funds and subsidies from which World Heritage sites, in some parts of the world, have benefited – are reduced at the local level. Conservation work funded prior to the crisis can also be expected to peter out in 2021, dependent on the new economic environment for future funding. 30% of sites receiving subsidies reported a decrease in those subsidies and public funding for these sites may experience significantly more budget pressures in the medium-term, which could negatively impact the current and future conservation and maintenance of sites.

Furthermore, over the medium- term, the anticipated lower levels of international and domestic tourism in general, and reductions of public and private funding for World Heritage properties, especially at the local level, could amplify this negative trend even further.

While revenues dropped by 52% and visitors dropped by 66% according to respondents, subsidies increased in only in 14% of the sites. Where there is an absence of responsive public support and recovery strategies, the negative effect on World Heritage sites will have a compounding negative impact on communities living in and around World Heritage in terms of jobs, revenues and general well-being. Precarious situations could also be prolonged for female and young workers. This is also likely to place increasing pressure on the World Heritage properties themselves, especially where there are competing interest groups and stakeholders advocating for specific or ‘alternative’ uses of parts or all of the sites concerned in some cases.

National and local governments across the globe have introduced multiple measures that support workers in light of COVID-19. However, many of those measures are not well suited and adaptable for non-standard forms of employment related to World Heritage sites (such as, project based conservation works, freelance, *ad hoc* or intermittent cultural activities and events connected with demand in tourism), that tend to be more precarious and in general are common in the culture sector. This will continue to be an issue in light of staff reductions reported here and that are more likely to occur the longer the pandemic continues.

In the next few years, as both recovery measures begin to take hold, as well as the extent of impacts become more visible and measurable, different patterns may emerge in the ability of different categories of properties to recover more quickly than others. For example, with the shut- down of urban properties (and indeed cities globally), as well as associated visitor activities, museums and infrastructure, urban properties become less and less attractive, whereas remote rural World Heritage properties, both natural and cultural, may retain similar pre-COVID-19 incentives (values) to visitors (indeed, possibly even becoming more attractive due to less visitor traffic). The question remains for these sites as to whether domestic visitor numbers can translate into revenues that mitigate the effects of the overall loss of international visitors and funds to local communities and economies where they were dependent on such revenues. Pilot projects in some areas of the world could shed light on the successful trials of building a more resilient model, compared with previous models of

heavily depending on international tourism. Moreover, the question of the appropriate management of visitors – whether they be predominantly domestic or international – and the sustainability of the World Heritage property itself, remain of utmost importance and concern.

Within the context of only 1,121 World Heritage sites (869 cultural, 213 natural, and 39 mixed properties) that represent a finite testimony and finite resource of the world's natural and cultural heritage, it is with great consideration and attention that the next steps towards safeguarding that heritage must be undertaken collectively by the 194 State Parties and the international community as whole. It is clear that COVID-19 and its global consequences have placed many sites at risk in both the short and long-term and that there is an incredible variety of experience and great challenges being faced at different World Heritage properties, many of which are dealing with both significant decreases in revenues normally generated by visitors and significant decreases in subsidies or where subsidies were not usually provided, as well as the loss of staff to manage, conserve and maintain them for future generations. The potential for loss of parts of the values or components of any one of these sites on the World Heritage List due to COVID-19 is of grave concern to us all.

This and other studies across the culture sector have shown the vast impact of culture on the economy, as well as the important role of World Heritage sites for local economies and livelihoods. Furthermore, it should be noted that even though the pandemic is global, the globe is not homogeneous. As the pandemic has affected the World Heritage properties in vastly different ways, the recovery will also have different patterns. UNESCO will continue advocating to promote sustainable recovery, including through the following suggested actions:

- Continued advocacy for sustainable and resilient World Heritage management that focuses on protecting the Outstanding Universal Value of each site and highlighting these values and attributes for visitors;
- Continued advocacy for alternative forms of conservation and training programmes at World Heritage sites to enhance sustainability and local participation;
- Encouraging sites to orient away from dependency on large volume, mass international tourism towards better managed tourism and local-scale businesses and services, when and where appropriate;
- Supporting and advocating for the application of new health protocols and standards for safe travel, while also diversifying the experience offered to tourists;
- Contribute to restoring traveller confidence and stimulating adapted demand with new safe and clean labels for the sector, information apps for visitors and domestic tourism promotion campaigns with the support of UNESCO;
- Promoting and supporting the preparation of comprehensive tourism recovery plans, to rebuild destinations, encourage innovation and investment, and rethink the tourism sector;
- Advocating for maintaining subsidies in sites that already receive them and introducing them in sites that currently do not, in order to mitigate the effects of the crisis and ensure sustainability for future generations;
- Underline the importance of the inclusion of culture in national recovery plans.



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ANNEX: QUESTIONNAIRE SENT TO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Introduction

The unprecedented crisis arising from the COVID-19 pandemic has had, and continues to have, major impacts on World Heritage properties globally. Among them, the full or partial closure of World Heritage properties has resulted in socio-economic impacts (including disruption of community life in and around properties, loss of livelihoods and the deepening of poverty), in reduced maintenance and conservation, lack of protection and management and increased threats, including from poaching and illicit trafficking. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis will be a long-lasting, making some current challenges more acute and creating additional ones.

This survey intends to better understand the COVID-19-related changes that have occurred at the site-level between 2019 and 2020, to help in building an appropriate response by UNESCO to this exceptional crisis.

Therefore, as a World Heritage Site Manager, we would like to kindly ask you to fill in one questionnaire for each property you are in charge of.

This survey will remain accessible until 20 February 2021. We count on your support.

UNESCO World Heritage Centre

Section A - Personal Information

[A1] First Name

[A2] Last Name

[A3] Job Title *

[A4] Institution / Organization

Prefer not to disclose personal information / Please choose only one of the following:

Yes / No

[A5] Country - Please choose only one of the following (list)

[A6] Please choose 'your' World Heritage property: (drop-down list according to the State Party selected)

Section B - Information on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Property

[B1] Was your property forced to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020?

Yes / No

If yes, was this closure partial

Yes / No

[please specify]

If yes, can you estimate how many days of closure?_days

[B2] What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the visitation of the property in 2020 compared to 2019?

2019 2020

Number of visitors

[B3] Was the staff still able to work on the conservation of the property during this period?

Yes /No

[B4] Were any permanent staff members made redundant due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes / No

If yes, percentage of permanent staff made redundant?Less than 10%

11-20%

21-30%

31-40%

41-50%

51-60%

61-70%

71-80%

81-90%

More than 90%

[B5] Were any temporary staff members made redundant due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes / No

If yes, percentage of temporary staff made redundant?Less than 10%

11-20%

21-30%

31-40%

41-50%

51-60%

61-70%

71-80%

81-90%

More than 90%

[B6] Are there any entry fees applicable to your property?

Yes / No

If yes, what is the amount of the entry fees (in USD): ____

[B7] What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the revenues of the property compared to 2019?

2019 2020

Entry fees (USD)

[B8] Does your property benefit from local/regional/national subsidies?

Yes / No

If yes, what is the percentage of the property's expenditures covered by these subsidies?

Less than 10%

11-20%

21-30%

31-40%

41-50%

51-60%

61-70%

71-80%

81-90%

More than 90%

If subsidies are granted, do they cover: Staff (salaries, etc.)

Conservation work

Development of site presentation tools
Other (specify):

[B9] Has the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on those subsidies?

Subsidies have increased Subsidies remained stable Subsidies decreased

What was the percentage of increase/decrease of these subsidies?

Less than 10%

11-20%

21-30%

31-40%

41-50%

51-60%

61-70%

71-80%

81-90%

More than 90%

[B10] Has the COVID-19 pandemic lead to an increase in specific threats to the property?

Yes / No

If so, please specify

[B11] Has COVID-19 had an impact on communities living in or around the property?

Yes / No

If so, please specify

Thank you for completing this survey.

World Heritage in the face of COVID-19

COVID-19 has impacted all sectors and all regions, and the world's over 1,000 UNESCO World Heritage properties are no exception. To understand the impact of COVID-19 on World Heritage one year after the start of the pandemic, UNESCO launched a far-reaching survey of World Heritage site managers and national authorities.