Cultural Tourism

Gold Mine or Land Mine?

Christina Cameron

In one way, cultural tourism is the raison d'être of our heritage institutions; yet in another way, it threatens their very existence. Our challenge is to get the right balance.

The concept of cultural tourism is new in Canada. Our knowledge of available products and the expectations of the international and domestic markets is somewhat limited. Research conducted by Tourism Canada clearly shows that our international visitors are no longer just interested in our magnificent landscapes, but also want to discover Canadian society with its different cultural manifestations.

Cultural Tourism as Gold Mine

Tourism Canada conducted a number of market studies in the late 1980s. The 1986 Longwoods study found that Canada's cultural distinctiveness was the single most important factor attracting Americans to Canada. The 1987 study concluded that culture is a major draw to urban areas: "The concentration of museums, galleries, theatres, historic sites … forms a vital component of an urban experience, capable of attracting large numbers of visitors. Cultural activities, while not always the prime motive for travel to an area, may help to lengthen the stay and enrich the trip experience."[1] The 1989 study, again by Longwoods, revealed a relatively high degree of interest among American urban tourists, touring visitors, and business / pleasure travellers in heritage institutions, in particular historic sites. The 1991 study from Tourism Canada reaffirmed the desire from international tourist markets for more opportunities to discover the nature of the people of Canada. There is a consistent pattern here. And finally, to round off this overview of market studies, in March 1993 the Canadian Tourism Research Institute, part of the Conference Board of Canada, reported that there is an emerging trend in the important Japanese travel market towards "an increase in history- or culture-related tours."[2]

The World Tourism Organization predicts that global tourism will be the world's largest industry by the year 2,000, reaching an anticipated billion travellers annually by the year 2,010. By way of comparison, this same organization reported less than half that number of international tourist arrivals in 1991, at 450 million. What is more relevant to our discussion today is the trend away from sun and sand holidays to cultural and eco-tourism.

In support of the thesis that cultural tourism in Canada will continue to grow are the emerging demographic and psychographic trends. I refer here to the rising education level of the world's population, the most significant factor in cultural participation. I refer also to the increasing age of the population of the Western world. Statistics show that cultural and heritage activities increase through middle age to peak between 45 and 65. By way of example, the number of Americans aged 55 or older will increase by over 40 percent in the next 20 years. Moreover, a new factor, environmental degradation, may further lead to greater demand for cultural tourism. There is no doubt that factors such as ozone depletion and exposure to ultraviolet radiation will affect leisure patterns as people move from outdoor activities to indoor pursuits.

Unfortunately, there is little scientific information from which we can clearly understand the exact part the heritage institutions play in the cultural tourism industry.

We do have statistics on the economic benefits of tourism in general. In 1990, for instance, international and domestic travellers spent approximately $26 billion while travelling in Canada. It is estimated that tourism generated nearly $18 billion in direct income and provided direct employment for more than 600,000 Canadians. As well, it generated $12 billion in revenue for all levels of government.[3]

But we do not have good statistics on the economic benefits of cultural tourism. This is not to say that heritage institutions have paid no attention to measuring these benefits. I know that the museums and art galleries do undertake such analyses from time to time, as does CPS. Take, for example, the 13 national historic sites administered by CPS in Nova Scotia (the Fortress of Louisbourg, Halifax Citadel, Fort Anne, and the Alexander Graham Bell complex at Baddeck, among others). The overall economic impact of these 13 sites amounts to $30 million and 650 person-years of employment. In the Annapolis Valley alone, the four CPS-administered sites generate $3.5 million and 75 person-years of employment.[4]

What we have failed to do is estimate the global contribution of heritage institutions to the economic benefits of tourism. The job is not a simple one. It may be easy enough to estimate the impacts of the 1,200 museums in Canada with their 24 million visitors,[5] or the impacts of our 800 heritage institutions, as defined by Statistics Canada. It is feasible to capture the economic benefits of the 115 national historic sites administered by the federal government, with their 7 million visitors, and even the cultural dimensions of our 36 national parks, with their 20 million visitors.

But then it gets more complicated. There are another 600 or so national historic sites in Canada, not administered by the government, not statistically identified as "heritage institutions," but nonetheless important generators of cultural tourism. I'm thinking here of historic streetscapes and districts like Rennie's Mill Road in St. John's, historic Lunenburg, and, of course, the historic centre of Québec City, a listed world heritage site. I'm also thinking of landmarks like Christ Church Cathedral in Fredericton, Bonsecours Market in Montréal, the Parliament Buildings here in Ottawa, Union Station in Toronto, the Fort Garry Hotel in Winnipeg, and Stanley

Park in Vancouver. Taken together, this network of nationally-significant sites contributes greatly to attracting and retaining visitors, both domestic and international.

I am convinced that heritage institutions are a gold mine for the tourism industry. Even with the inadequate data available, studies indicate that heritage institutions attract more tourists than the performing arts do.[6] Museums and historic sites are portals to the cultural landscape, offering tourists authentic experiences of our regions and country. This appears to be what the markets of the future will be seeking. So I conclude this section by affirming that, yes, cultural tourism is a gold mine for the country, and heritage institutions are an essential element. I would suggest that we would be well advised, in times of scarce resources, to work with the tourism industry to identify clearly the contribution that heritage institutions make to the tourism economy.

Cultural Tourism as Land Mine

The concept of cultural tourism as land mine deserves some nuancing. This is a "good news, bad news" scenario. Most heritage institutions have been founded to serve the public. Visitors are the lifeblood of most heritage institutions I know. We take pride in our visitors and strive to ensure that they both enjoy and learn from our special places. At a more pragmatic level, we are all in the game of counting numbers of visitors, to prove that these institutions are wanted and needed by the constituency that ultimately pays for them.

On the positive side of the ledger, it can be argued that tourism has done as much as any government or industry to protect the heritage of this country. Whether it is the establishment of museums and galleries, the renovation of old buildings, the setting aside of conservation areas, or the establishment of historic sites, all these efforts are due in part to their accompanying tourism potential. It may please us to believe that funding for the protection and presentation of heritage resources is driven by the spirit of social good. But the reality is that it is more often the promise of economic benefits through tourism development that loosens the purse strings of investors, be they from the private or the public sector.

It can be a virtuous circle. Visitors spend money that in turn is spent, among other things, on improving the "heritage product" on offer. These improvements help to attract more visitors, greater expenditure, further improvements, and so on. Given proper management, this cycle is good for the heritage institutions and the economy.

On the other hand, there is the issue of wear and tear. Without proper management, environmental problems can result from large volumes of traffic and people; historic fabric can become eroded; and heritage resources can be spoilt by unsympathetic alterations or by being "over-restored" in the name of enhancing the visitor experience.

We who are responsible for heritage institutions are charged with protecting that heritage for the benefit of this and future generations. Cultural tourism has come under attack for undermining, alienating, and sometimes enslaving local cultures through its intrusive infrastructure, its commoditization of meaningless cultural products, and its creation of staged unauthentic experiences.[7] But perhaps the biggest downside of tourism is that, if successful, it can destroy through excessive use not only the heritage resources of a site, but also the quality of the cultural experience that brought the visitor in the first place.

There are many examples in Europe, where cultural tourism has thrived for centuries, examples that show how excessive tourism has led to overcrowding and ultimately to the destruction of the heritage resources. Floors and paths are particularly vulnerable. The rare black and gold marble floor at St. Paul's in London, the mosaic floor at St. Mark's in Venice, and the stone floor at Notre-Dame in Paris are all disappearing under the footfalls of thousands of visitors each day. Hiking trails on the Devon coast and the historic footpath beside Hadrian's Wall look like tracks from dune-buggy races. The issue here is one of physical carrying capacity.

Excessive tourism not only puts pressure on the physical resources; it can also destroy the cultural experience that drew the tourists in the first place. Let us take the example of Stonehenge. Until recently, this circle of megaliths stood magnificently alone in an open field. Visitors used to be able to stop their cars and walk up to it without bother. But because of vandalism and the pressure of too many people, this world heritage site is now surrounded with a wire fence. It receives over a million visitors a year. At any moment there are several hundred visitors milling around the site. Lost forever is the haunting, quiet experience of this mysterious, ancient temple. This is what I refer to as spiritual carrying capacity.

I have chosen these examples from Europe because these countries have enjoyed—or endured—intensive cultural tourism for so long. And the pressure continues to mount. In the United Kingdom, for example, over the past decade visits to heritage attractions have increased 21%. Canada has an advantage in that we are on the rising wave of cultural tourism that is far from its crest. We still have time to do things differently.

But lest we get too complacent, here are some Canadian examples. Québec City's historic district received over 4 million visitors in 1990, a 25-percent increase in the last decade. Clearly this outnumbers the permanent residents by a six-to-one ratio, as residents and former residents know only too well. Or take Green Gables in Prince Edward Island National Park. During the summer months, this small, two-storey wooden cottage that inspired the Anne stories groans under the weight of 5,000 visitors a day. Surely this is well above both its physical and its spiritual carrying capacity. Then there are the upper lockstations of the Trent-Severn heritage waterway, say around Bobcaygeon or Fenelon Falls, on a warm summer weekend. The search to tie up cruisers, houseboats, and runabouts has stripped the bark off all the trees at water edge and eroded the shoreline. Moreover, onshore facilities in these small communities are completely overwhelmed. Or take the example of the West Coast Trail in Pacific Rim National Park. Overcrowding and deterioration of the trail have led CPS to limit its use. Like golfers, hikers now have to reserve starting times, sometimes weeks in advance. And then there is Banff.

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Sustainable Tourism

If we accept the premise that cultural tourism in Canada will increase, then those of us who manage heritage institutions will be challenged to find the balance between consumption and conservation; we will be challenged to attain sustainable tourism.

Inherent in this concept is the notion of trusteeship. Those entrusted with the management of heritage institutions have a responsibility to pass them on in good condition to future generations. This approach is consistent with the goal of sustainable development, a concept given global endorsement as a result of the Brundtland report, *Our Common Future*. In line with our discussion of sustainable tourism is Brundtland's definition of sustainable development: "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[8]

The United Kingdom has taken the lead in examining this issue of sustainable tourism. In 1991, government sponsored a task force, with members from the private and public sectors involved in industry, environment, heritage, and employment. Their work resulted in a key report entitled *Tourism and the Environment: Maintaining the Balance*. It is an important declaration for sustainable tourism, based on maintaining the balance among the three poles: tourism, environment, and local communities.

The task force developed a set of principles to manage the relationship among the visitor, the place, and the host community. Reading some of these principles will give you the flavour of this forward-looking approach.

> *The environment has an intrinsic value which outweighs its value as a tourism asset. Its enjoyment by future generations and its long term survival must not be prejudiced by short term considerations.*
>
> *Tourism should be recognized as a positive activity with the potential to benefit the community and the place as well as the visitor.*
>
> *Tourism activities and developments should respect the scale, nature and character of the place in which they are sited.*
>
> *In any location, harmony must be sought between the needs of the visitor, the place and the host community.*
>
> *The tourism industry, local authorities and environmental agencies all have a duty to respect these principles and work together to achieve their practical realisation.*[9]

The U.K. report goes on to describe case studies and suggested techniques for controlling excessive tourist use, conserving heritage resources, and ensuring maximum benefit for host communities. Its fundamental message is the need to create strategic alliances and partnerships among all those who have stakes in attaining sustainable tourism.

In Canada there are hints of this kind of activity. The heritage institutions are wrestling individually with notions of carrying capacity. The management of blockbuster exhibitions and the West Coast Trail are examples. But it will require more effort and a systematic application of conservation science before we have credible standards of carrying capacity.

What about the tourism industry? As part of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, Canada's Tourism Industry Association has recently produced a *Code of Ethics for Sustainable Tourism*. The code is based on the belief that a high-quality tourism experience depends on the conservation of natural resources, protection of the environment, and preservation of our cultural heritage. There are separate codes for the industry and the tourists.

For the industry, the code calls for members to encourage an appreciation of heritage, to respect the values and aspirations of the host communities, and to strive to achieve tourism development in a manner that harmonizes economic objectives with the protection and enhancement of heritage.

For the tourists, the code calls on visitors to enjoy our diverse heritage and help in its protection and preservation, and to experience our communities while respecting our traditions, customs, and local regulations.

In addition to these codes of ethics, the package also includes detailed guidelines for all participants, including accommodations, food services, tour operators, and ministries of tourism. These are fine words and the basis for sustainable cultural tourism. What remains to be seen is whether the tourism industry will take them to heart and translate them into meaningful action.

A promising model is the emerging eco-tourism movement. Eco-tourism combines travel experiences with low impact on natural resources, environmental conservation, sustainable economic activity, and learning by the consumer. Eco-tourism recognizes that the natural and cultural resources of a region are the key element of the travel experience and accepts therefore that there are limits on use. It requires that there be an educational experience for all participants associated with the activity—visitors, travel agents, and local communities. Finally, eco-tourism promotes environmental ethics and seeks that all participants abide by an ethical framework.

What has not yet happened in Canada is the development of the strategic partnerships that cut across various sectors of activity. There is lots of sporadic ad hoc partnering springing up. For example, many of our park and site superintendents become members of local Chambers of Commerce or tourist boards, giving them opportunities to forge partnerships with neighbouring heritage institutions and infuse heritage concerns into the decision-making process. CPS's well-known public consultation process for its management or master plans for field units also provides a forum to exchange views and develop shared values for sustained use of the parks or sites. And there are the newly formed interdepartmental and intergovernmental committees tasked with ensuring that heritage is factored into decisions on land use around the world heritage district at Québec City.

But these are mere beginnings. If we are going to meet the challenge of sustainable tourism in a postindustrial era, we will need to develop broadly based alliances to integrate competing conservation and development goals. The individual interests of the heritage conservationists and the tourism industry are converging.

Collectively we need to demonstrate the economic benefits of tourism, so that our heritage institutions enjoy stable financial support. We need to develop meaningful standards of carrying capacity to ensure conservation of the heritage resources for this and future generations. We need to develop marketing and de-marketing strategies

in light of carrying capacity. And we need to ensure that cultural tourism is managed in such a way that it enhances, not destroys, the environment that is its key attraction.

Notes

1 Canada. Department of Industry, Science and Technology. Tourism Canada, *A Profile of Canada's Attractions from a Tourism Perspective* (Ottawa: 1987), pp. 7-8.

2 Conference Board of Canada. Canadian Tourism Research Institute, "Flat Performance Forecast," *CTRI Exclusive* (March 1993), p. 10. Ottawa.

3 Canada. Department of Industry, Science and Technology. Tourism Canada, *Canadian Tourism Facts* (Ottawa: 1991), p.1.

4 Canada. Department of the Environment. Canadian Parks Service, "An Economic Statement and Visit Profile of Atlantic Region National Parks and National Historic Sites," manuscript on file, Socio-Economic Analysis Section, Atlantic Regional Office, Halifax, April 1992.

5 Canada. Department of Industry, Science and Technology. Tourism Canada, *Enquete sur le secteur du tourisme culturel* (Ottawa: 1991), p. 21.

6 Ekos Research Associates, *Culture, Multiculturalism and Tourism Pilot Projects and Related Studies: A Synthesis* (Ottawa: Communications Canada, 1988), p. iv.

7 G. MacDonald, "Cultural Tourism in the Museum Community," in R.S. Tabata et al., eds., *Joining Hands for Quality Tourism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1992), pp. 243-45.

8 Great Britain. Tourist Board and Employment Department, *Tourism and the Environment: Maintaining the Balance* (London: 1991), p. 15.

9 Ibid.

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Christina Cameron is Director General of the National Historic Sites Directorate, Parks Canada.

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