Tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage is embodied in those practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills, as well as in associated objects and cultural spaces, that communities and individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Transmitted through generations and constantly recreated, it provides humanity with a sense of identity and continuity. (*)

This global wealth of traditions has become one of the principal motivations for travel, with tourists seeking to engage with new cultures and experience the global variety of performing arts, handicrafts, rituals, cuisines, and interpretations of nature and the universe.

As celebrated on World Tourism Day 2011, ‘Tourism – Linking Cultures’, the cultural interaction spurred by such encounters prompts dialogue, builds understanding, and, in turn, fosters peace and tolerance.

(*) Based on the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003).

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), a United Nations specialized agency, is the leading international organization with the decisive and central role in promoting the development of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. It serves as a global forum for tourism policy issues and a practical source of tourism know-how. Its membership includes 154 countries, 7 territories, 2 permanent observers and over 400 Affiliate Members.

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One of the current challenges facing the tourism sector is to contribute to the identification, protection and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage through tourism development.

Fostering the responsible use of this living heritage for tourism purposes can provide new employment opportunities, help alleviate poverty, curb rural flight migration among the young and marginally-employed, and nurture a sense of pride among community members. Tourism also offers a powerful incentive for preserving and enhancing intangible cultural heritage, since the revenue it generates can be channelled back into initiatives to aid its long-term survival.

Extremely fragile, intangible cultural heritage must be thoughtfully managed if it is to survive in an increasingly globalized world. True partnerships between communities and the tourism and heritage sectors can only occur if all sides develop a genuine appreciation for each other’s aspirations and values.

Tourism interests need to acquire an awareness of cultural heritage management concepts, ideals and practices, while heritage managers must endeavour to comprehend the complex phenomenon of tourism and its modus operandi. Through mutual understanding, both can build on their shared interest in intangible cultural heritage, in close consultation with local communities, the ultimate bearers of mankind’s intangible cultural legacy.

In response to these issues, the first UNWTO study on Tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage provides comprehensive baseline research on the links between tourism and intangible cultural heritage. The report is part of the organization’s overall contribution to the study of culture and tourism, highlighted this year by the celebration of World Tourism Day under the theme ‘Tourism – Linking Cultures’ (27 September 2011, Aswan, Egypt).

The UNWTO publication explores major challenges, risks and opportunities for tourism development related to intangible cultural heritage, while suggesting practical steps for the elaboration, management and marketing of intangible cultural heritage-based tourism products.

Through an extensive compendium of case studies drawn from across five continents, the report offers in-depth information on, and analysis of, government-led actions, public-private partnerships and community initiatives. These practical examples feature tourism development projects related to six pivotal areas: handicrafts and the visual arts; gastronomy; social practices, rituals and festive events; music and the performing arts; oral traditions and expressions; and knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe.

Highlighting innovative forms of policy-making, the UNWTO study on Tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage recommends specific actions for stakeholders to foster the sustainable and responsible development of tourism by incorporating and safeguarding intangible cultural assets.

The publication will be available towards the end of 2011 on the UNWTO Elibrary: www-e-unwto.org

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