Abstract

According to the Institute for International Education, about 10% of US college graduates study abroad. During the 2013/2014 academic year, that equated to 304,457 students! As our world becomes more interconnected, it is important for us to understand the significant role that education and travel can play in encouraging more students to broaden their horizons.

Tourism has the potential to have both positive and negative impacts on local sites and communities. International educators have a responsibility to make sure that as we grow our programs and look to increase our enrollments, we do so in a way that mitigates the negative impact we may have on the communities in which we are based.

What is heritage tourism?

Heritage tourism aims to preserve, conserve, restore, and protect buildings, objects, landscapes, and other artifacts of historical significance. It is defined as travel to experience the places, artifacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present; including cultural, historic, and natural resources.

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What is historic preservation?

Historic preservation looks to preserve, conserve, restore, and protect buildings, objects, landscapes, and other artifacts of historical significance.

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What are some examples of heritage sites impacted by tourism?

Machu Picchu is experiencing severe eroding due to more than 10,000 tourists hiking it year after year.

Mountaineers on Mount Everest often leave so much litter behind that mountaineer Sir Chris Bonington described it as the “world’s highest garbage dump.”

Thousands of tourists visit the tombs and historic sites in Egypt each year. The breadth from thousands of tourists visiting these spaces has increased the humidity so much that mold has begun to grow and it is beginning to destroy the stone wall, wall paintings, and carvings at the sites.

Residents of Easter Island have protected the high number of tourists who visit because the island ecosystem cannot sustain such large numbers of people. More than 65,000 visitors come to the island every year; many choose to stay permanently and work.

Tourists to the Galápagos Islands have brought with them a type of mosquito not found on the island. This mosquito carries a strain of avian flu that threatens the island’s unique ecosystem.

Standing stones at Stonehenge have been fenced off to protect them from damage because tourists were constantly touching them.

Due to thousands of tourists visiting the site every year, Machu Picchu and the Inca Trail have sustained serious erosion damage, and great harm has been caused to the local ecosystem. The situation is so bad that it could destroy Machu Picchu.

The number of tourists in Venice have overcrowded a city that was never intended to accommodate so many people. Residents are being crowded out as much as local authorities have considered a measure to restrict the number of tourists who enter the city at a time.

A tourist in Lisbon destroyed a 126-year-old statue while climbing it in an attempt to get a selfie.

What could be the pros and cons of considering these principles in program development or when vetting potential on-site partners?

What are the Learning Abroad Center doing?

Due to the nature of many of the programs we operate, I found that we were already meeting some of the principles set forth by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. I’m sure that many universities and program providers would find the same. Below are a few of our examples.

• The Minnesota Studies in International Development (MSID) programs have a long-standing history of working with local organizations in both rural and urban communities to provide students with ethical internships and research opportunities in grassroots organizations.

• Students on the Global Health in Thailandi: Humans, Elephant, Disease program visit a local hill tribe and spend time at an elephant sanctuary where they are exposed to the idea of how to come in to new communities and be respectful. They discuss how to appropriately dress for their various professional visits, as well how to represent themselves as students rather than tourists.

• Students on the Study & Intern in London program participate in a Blue Badge guided tour of the neighborhood where they will be living. This serves as an introduction to the location, its history, and the people who make up the community, both past and present.

• Students on the Study & Intern in Sydney program go through a half-day workshop where they are introduced to Aboriginal culture, traditions, and history. Students are also given the opportunity to participate in a extended workshop through a local university.

• The MSID–Senegal program sponsors a wrestling match in a rural community, providing the students with an opportunity to learn about the national sport and some of the rituals that surround it while providing an enjoyable recreational activity for the local community.

• The Study & Intern in Toledo program offers “Service-Learning and the Immigrant Experience;” a course where students volunteer with one of several Toledo institutions related to the immigration phenomenon in Spain, collaborating directly with the immigrant population or with Spaniards who work with the immigrant community.

That being said, there are still areas where we can improve. For example, many of my colleagues agreed that we could do a better job of making students aware of their impact on local communities or sites, photo stupets and the power of the images they post, or how to be more respectful of their surroundings and the communities they visit. Some noted that they had never considered these principles simply because they weren’t aware of them; historic preservation and heritage tourism aren’t areas that international educators would typically look to for best practices.

However, in follow-up conversations, we agreed that with a bit of brainstorming and planning, these are principles that we could very easily implement on our programs. It also started a conversation about which other fields outside of international education to which we could look for best practices for sustainability and conservation, including those outside of our own field that we may not have considered.

As we move forward, I hope that we will continue to learn from the principles of historic and heritage tourism and start to think about how we could incorporate these principles into our programs outside of the few examples shared here. The applicability of these few ideas should remind us that as our programs evolve and enrollments grow, it is important that we consider the value and benefits of our programs with the importance of academic diversity within the field itself. The applicability of these few ideas should remind us that as our programs evolve and enrollments grow, it is important that we consider the value and benefits of our programs with the importance of academic diversity within the field itself.

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