

1. Definitions of Key Terms

Stakeholder: A stakeholder is any individual, group, or organization that possesses an interest, legal obligation, moral right, or other concern in the decisions or outcomes of an entity or project . In heritage contexts, stakeholders either affect or are affected by heritage management activities. They include both internal parties (e.g., site owners, employees) and external parties (e.g., local communities, visitors, government agencies, tourism operators, and NGOs). The concept is broad and inclusive, recognizing that diverse actors have legitimate interests, concerns, and potential influence over heritage decisions .

Rights holder: Rights holders are individuals or social groups who have specific entitlements or claims in relation to duty-bearers (such as states or institutions) . Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all human beings are rights holders. In heritage contexts, this term often applies to communities whose cultural heritage, land, or traditional practices are intrinsically linked to their identity, well-being, and survival. Indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, and local communities whose intangible heritage and ancestral sites are at stake are prominent rights holders . Recognizing them as active agents—not passive beneficiaries—is essential to ensuring their rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled.

People-centered heritage management: This approach positions communities and individuals connected to heritage at the core of conservation logic, rather than treating them as peripheral participants . It emphasizes that heritage value derives from how people experience, use, and relate to heritage in their everyday lives . People-centered management is community-led, seeking solutions negotiated by local communities, and views heritage as a vehicle for positive social change, inclusivity, and community development . Crucially, it goes beyond formal participation to ensure the most connected communities have the greatest voice in decision-making, with a focus on human and social needs over purely material or expert-defined objectives .

Capacity building: Capacity building comprises activities that enhance the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities of individuals, organizations, communities, or institutions to effectively participate in governance and collective action . It extends beyond training to include organizational development (strengthening management structures and processes) and institutional/legal framework development (creating enabling regulatory environments) . The goal is to equalize power, increase access to decision-making, and enable more equitable distribution of benefits. In heritage contexts, capacity building empowers local communities to manage heritage sustainably, engage meaningfully in governance, and realize their rights .

2. Analysis of a Heritage Site: The Forbidden City, Beijing

The management approach at the Forbidden City (Palace Museum) in Beijing demonstrates a complex interplay between expert-centered and values-based frameworks, with emerging but still limited people-centered elements.

Expert-Centered Characteristics: Historically, the Forbidden City's management has been predominantly expert-centered, driven by professional conservationists, historians, and architects . Decisions about restoration, preservation techniques, and visitor access are primarily guided by technical expertise, legal frameworks, and a philosophy emphasizing material authenticity and historical continuity . The "Authorised Heritage Discourse" (AHD)—prioritizing architectural authenticity and expert judgment—remains influential in determining significance and appropriate interventions . This is evident in the meticulous, scientifically rigorous restoration projects and the emphasis on preserving the site's tangible integrity as a monument to imperial history.

Values-Based and Emerging People-Centered Elements: Recent decades have seen a shift towards recognizing broader values and incorporating public engagement. The management now acknowledges the site's cultural, educational, and social significance beyond its material fabric. Visitor management, educational programs, and digital outreach reflect an effort to connect the heritage with contemporary society . However, "people-centered" principles—where the local community has decision-making power and heritage serves as a tool for community development and social equity—are less developed . While millions of visitors are accommodated, their role is largely as consumers rather than active participants in governance. The local residential communities directly affected by the site's management have limited formal influence over conservation or development decisions, which remain centralized under state authority. True people-centered management would require the local community's values and needs to be prioritized and integrated into the management system, potentially leading to different outcomes . The site's management thus remains primarily a combination of expert-centered direction and values-based recognition of diverse stakeholder interests, but falls short of full people-centered practice.

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