

Structure of Tourism Markets

Assignment 3

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Visitor Management at Machu Picchu, Peru

Introduction to the Site

Machu Picchu is a 15th-century Inca citadel high in the Andes of southern Peru, about 2,430 metres above sea level. It was probably built as a royal estate for the emperor Pachacuti and was later abandoned, which is partly why it survived the Spanish conquest largely intact. It became widely known after Hiram Bingham's expedition in 1911. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, listed in 1983 for both cultural and natural value, and it sits inside a larger protected sanctuary of cloud forest, rare wildlife and Inca trails. It is Peru's most visited attraction, drawing well over a million visitors in a typical year, and tourism is a major part of the national and regional economy.

Visitors are currently managed through a mix of rules. Entry is by timed ticket only, with a daily cap (roughly 4,500 people, raised somewhat in peak season). Visitors must follow set one-way circuits and, in most cases, be accompanied by a licensed guide. Large bags, tripods, drones and single-use plastics are banned, and the Inca Trail is limited to around 500 people a day, including porters and guides.

Main Visitor Management Challenges

The first challenge is balancing numbers against conservation. The site is on a steep, geologically unstable ridge, and UNESCO and heritage experts have long warned that heavy foot traffic, erosion and landslides threaten the stonework and terraces. Any daily limit is a compromise, and the debate over whether the cap is too high has never really been settled.

The second is crowding at peak times. Most visitors arrive between mid-morning and early afternoon and want the same photo spots, which creates bottlenecks even when the daily total is within the limit. Timed entry helps, but tickets sell out weeks ahead in the dry season, and this makes the system feel restrictive.

Third, enforcement is difficult. Staff must deal with people leaving the marked paths, climbing on walls, or disregarding the bans on drones and litter. Sustaining consistent enforcement across such a large site is hard.

Finally, there are governance and access problems. Ticketing and transport are heavily centralised, and disputes over ticket allocation, rail access and local revenue have led to protests and temporary closures in recent years. Everyone must pass through the town of Aguas Calientes, which puts pressure on its water, waste and housing.

Potential Impacts of Visitors

On the site: Constant footfall wears down paths and stone surfaces, and vibration and moisture can accelerate deterioration. Litter, graffiti and careless behaviour cause further damage, and the sanctuary's fragile ecosystems and endangered species, such as the spectacled bear, are affected by trail use and development.

On the local community: Tourism provides jobs and income for guides, hoteliers, porters, restaurants and rail operators, and that benefit is real. However, much of the money is captured by large operators, while residents deal with rising prices, crowding, waste and strain on infrastructure. Dependence on one attraction also leaves the community vulnerable to shocks, as the COVID-19 closure and the protest-related shutdowns showed. Where locals feel excluded from decision-making, resentment towards tourism can grow.

On the visitor experience: Overcrowding, long queues and rigid circuits can reduce the sense of awe that draws people there. The rules also frustrate some visitors, particularly independent travellers. On the other hand, well-run limits, guides and good interpretation improve safety, learning and enjoyment, and the site's ongoing protection ensures that future visitors can have the same experience.