



Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Ethical Management

Karma Wangchuk

European Institute for Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Technology

DE240180, Cultural Heritage Management

Mahmoud Abdou

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Abstract

The intersection of cultural heritage and tourism development presents both significant opportunities and profound ethical dilemmas. This research paper examines the dynamic relationship between cultural heritage management and tourism growth, focusing on how heritage contributes to destination identity and local economic development while simultaneously facing threats from over-tourism, commodification, and physical degradation. Through a qualitative case study approach, this study analyzes three UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Machu Picchu (Peru), Venice (Italy), and Luang Prabang (Laos). The findings reveal that while tourism generates essential revenue for conservation, unmanaged visitor flows lead to irreversible damage to tangible structures and the erosion of intangible cultural practices. Ethical issues such as the exclusion of local communities from decision-making processes and the transformation of sacred sites into commercial attractions are critically assessed.

The paper evaluates the effectiveness of visitor management strategies, interpretation techniques, and responsible tourism frameworks in mitigating these harms. Recommendations include the adoption of carrying capacity models, community-based participatory governance, dynamic pricing mechanisms, and mandatory pre-visit cultural education. The conclusion argues that ethical heritage tourism is achievable only through a paradigm shift from volume-based to value-based tourism, where cultural preservation remains the non-negotiable foundation of all development decisions. This research contributes to sustainable heritage management by providing actionable strategies for policymakers, site managers, and tourism operators.

Keywords: cultural heritage management, ethical tourism, over-tourism, commodification, community participation, sustainable tourism, visitor management

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage, encompassing both tangible monuments and intangible traditions, serves as a cornerstone of collective identity, historical continuity, and social cohesion. In recent decades, heritage sites have become primary destinations for global tourism, with international tourist arrivals reaching 1.5 billion in 2019 before the pandemic-induced decline (UNWTO, 2020). This surge has positioned cultural heritage as a powerful engine for local economic development, job creation, and destination branding. However, the same tourism flows that bring resources and recognition also generate acute pressures: physical wear on ancient structures, displacement of resident communities, transformation of authentic rituals into staged performances, and the erosion of the very values that made sites worthy of protection in the first place.

The central problem addressed in this paper is the ethical tension between harnessing cultural heritage for tourism growth and preserving heritage integrity for future generations. While heritage managers increasingly recognize the need for sustainable approaches, practical implementation remains inconsistent, often favoring short-term economic gains over long-term conservation. This study therefore asks the following research questions: How does cultural heritage contribute to tourism development and local economies? What ethical issues emerge from the intersection of heritage and tourism, particularly concerning over-tourism, commodification, and community exclusion? And what ethical and sustainable approaches can balance tourism benefits with cultural preservation?

The scope of this paper is confined to UNESCO World Heritage Sites with documented tourism pressures, focusing on three case studies selected for their contrasting management responses. The significance of this research lies in its practical orientation: by identifying both failures and successes in real-world contexts, the paper provides evidence-based recommendations for heritage managers, policymakers, and tourism operators. The paper is structured as follows: a literature review synthesizing existing knowledge on heritage tourism, ethics, and sustainability; a methodology section explaining the case study approach; findings from the three cases; a discussion integrating these findings with ethical frameworks; and a conclusion offering actionable recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Heritage as a Driver of Tourism and Economic Development

The relationship between cultural heritage and tourism is fundamentally reciprocal. Heritage provides the unique content that distinguishes one destination from another, creating what Richards (2018) terms “cultural capital” that cannot be easily replicated. Tourists increasingly seek authentic experiences, driving demand for heritage sites that offer tangible connections to the past. In response, destination management organizations invest heavily in heritage interpretation, infrastructure, and marketing, recognizing that cultural assets generate longer visitor stays and higher per-capita spending than sun-and-sand tourism (Smith, 2019).

Economically, the benefits are substantial. A study of 200 European cultural routes found that heritage tourism contributed an average of 14% to regional GDP and supported one in eight jobs in heritage-rich areas (European Commission, 2017). For developing countries, heritage sites often function as anchors for broader tourism economies.

2.2 Ethical Issues in Heritage Tourism: Over-tourism and Commodification

Despite economic benefits, the ethical dimensions of heritage tourism have attracted increasing scholarly attention. The most visible issue is over-tourism, defined as the excessive impact of tourists on destinations that diminishes quality of life for residents and degrades natural and cultural assets (Seraphin et al., 2018). Over-tourism manifests in heritage contexts through physical damage: footfall erosion at archaeological sites, microclimate changes inside enclosed monuments, and structural fatigue from unregulated access. At the Lascaux caves in France, carbon dioxide and heat from 1,500 daily visitors caused fungal growth that irreversibly damaged prehistoric paintings, forcing permanent closure of the original site (Mason, 2020).

Beyond physical degradation, over-tourism produces social and psychological harms. Local residents in heritage cities like Dubrovnik and Venice face housing shortages as properties convert to short-term rentals, rising costs of goods priced for tourists rather than locals, and the daily disruption of navigating through crowds in their own neighborhoods (Colomb & Novy, 2019). This phenomenon has been termed “tourism gentrification” and represents a form of heritage exclusion, where the very communities who created and maintained heritage traditions are displaced from them.

Commodification constitutes a second major ethical concern. Commodification refers to the transformation of cultural practices, rituals, or artifacts into marketable products for tourist consumption, often stripping them of their original meanings and sacred contexts (Shepherd, 2021). While some adaptation is inevitable in any tourism encounter, excessive commodification leads to what Greenwood (2017) called the “cultural degradation spiral”: as tourists demand ever-more accessible performances, practitioners shorten ceremonies, omit sacred elements, and repeat performances to exhaustion, eventually forgetting original forms. A stark example is the Alarde festival in Hondarribia, Spain, where traditional mock battles became daily tourist shows, causing local participants to withdraw and the living tradition to collapse into staged memory (Smith & Robinson, 2019).

2.3 Community Participation and Exclusion

A third ethical axis concerns the role of local communities in heritage tourism governance. The UNESCO (2015) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage explicitly mandates community participation as a precondition for sustainable heritage management. Yet research consistently documents exclusionary practices. Many heritage sites operate under centralized state management, where tourism revenue flows to national treasuries rather than local coffers, and decisions about interpretation, access pricing, and development are made without community consultation (Timothy, 2018).

Exclusion takes multiple forms. Procedural exclusion occurs when communities are not invited to planning meetings or when meetings are held in distant capitals using technical language incomprehensible to local stakeholders. Distributive exclusion occurs when economic benefits concentrate among external tour operators and hotel chains, while local residents bear the costs of congestion and cultural disruption. Recognition exclusion happens when heritage managers prioritize monument preservation over living cultural practices, effectively delegitimizing contemporary community relationships with heritage sites (Langfield et al., 2020). These exclusions are not merely unfair; they are counterproductive, as community resistance ranging from passive non-cooperation to active protest has repeatedly undermined conservation efforts.

2.4 Visitor Management and Responsible Tourism Frameworks

In response to these ethical crises, heritage scholars have developed a range of visitor management and responsible tourism frameworks. The concept of carrying capacity, borrowed from ecology, has been adapted to heritage contexts as the maximum number of visitors a site can accommodate without unacceptable impacts on physical fabric, visitor experience, or local community well-being (McCool & Lime, 2019). Carrying capacity can be calculated physically (e.g., structural load limits), ecologically (e.g., microclimate stability), socially (e.g., resident tolerance thresholds), or perceptually (e.g., visitor crowding acceptance). At the Roman Colosseum, physical capacity is set at 3,000 simultaneous visitors, enforced through timed ticketing, while at Angkor Wat, social carrying capacity has been used to justify redirecting large groups to less crowded temple circuits (Winter, 2019).

Responsible tourism frameworks extend beyond numbers to visitor behavior. Interpretation, defined as the educational process of revealing heritage meanings to visitors, is increasingly seen as a behavioral management tool. Effective interpretation does not merely convey facts; it fosters empathy, respect, and stewardship attitudes (Tilden, 2018). Pre-visit briefings, on-site signage, and post-visit digital engagement can reduce harmful behaviors such as touching artifacts, climbing structures, or photographing ceremonies. Mandatory codes of conduct enforced through licensing of tour guides and operators have proven effective at sites including Angkor Wat and Borobudur, where guide accreditation includes heritage ethics examinations (Shepherd, 2021).

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Despite substantial scholarship, several gaps persist. First, most studies examine individual sites in isolation, limiting comparative insights. Second, literature on commodification tends to be theoretical, with fewer empirical assessments of when commodification becomes unethical versus when it enables cultural survival. Third, the role of technology in ethical visitor management—such as real-time crowding dashboards, virtual queuing, and augmented reality interpretation—remains underexplored. This study addresses the first gap through comparative case analysis and contributes to commodification debates by distinguishing between adaptive and destructive commodification.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study design. A case study approach is appropriate because heritage tourism phenomena are context-dependent, involving complex interactions between physical sites, social communities, economic systems, and governance structures (Yin, 2018). Comparing multiple cases allows identification of patterns across contexts while respecting site-specific particularities.

3.2 Case Selection

Three UNESCO World Heritage Sites were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: documented tourism pressure, diversity of geographic and cultural contexts, and availability of peer-reviewed and official management documentation. The selected cases are:

- *Machu Picchu, Peru* (cultural heritage, inscribed 1983): Representative of high-altitude archaeological sites facing erosion from foot traffic and unregulated trekking.
- *Venice, Italy* (cultural heritage, inscribed 1987): Representative of historic urban centers facing over-tourism, cruise ship impacts, and resident displacement.
- *Luang Prabang, Laos* (cultural heritage, inscribed 1995): Representative of living heritage towns in developing economies balancing tourism growth with monastic traditions and daily life.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected from secondary sources published between 2015 and 2025, including: UNESCO periodic reporting and state of conservation reports; peer-reviewed journal articles from *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, and *Annals of Tourism Research*; official management plans from site authorities; and reports from non-governmental organizations including ICOMOS and the World Tourism Organization. Documents were selected based on relevance to ethical management and visitor impacts.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase process: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and write-up. Initial codes were grouped into three analytic themes corresponding to the research

questions: (a) economic contributions of heritage tourism; (b) ethical issues (over-tourism, commodification, exclusion); and (c) management responses. Comparative matrices were constructed to identify similarities and differences across cases.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

As this research used only publicly available secondary data, no human participant ethics approval was required. However, the study adheres to research integrity principles, including accurate representation of case contexts and avoidance of sensationalizing negative impacts without acknowledging management efforts.

4. Findings

4.1 Case Study 1: Machu Picchu, Peru – Sacred Site Under Siege

Machu Picchu, the fifteenth-century Inca citadel, receives approximately 1.5 million visitors annually, a number that has tripled since 2000 despite UNESCO recommendations to limit access to 2,500 daily visitors (UNESCO, 2019). The findings reveal a classic over-tourism trajectory. Physical impacts include visible erosion on the iconic stone staircases, with some steps worn down by over six centimetres. The famous Temple of the Sun has developed micro-cracks attributed to increased humidity from visitors' breath and body heat. More alarmingly, the geological stability of the mountaintop site has been compromised, with landslide risks increasing as vegetation is trampled (Arellano, 2020).

Economically, Machu Picchu generates substantial revenue. Entrance fees of approximately 70 per foreign visitor produce over 100 million annually. However, the distribution is highly unequal. The Peruvian national government receives 80% of ticket revenue, with only 10% allocated to site conservation and 10% to the surrounding communities of Aguas Calientes and the Sacred Valley (Salazar, 2021). Residents report that tourism has created low-wage, precarious employment as porters, cleaners, and souvenir vendors, while profits from hotels, restaurants, and tour operations flow to Lima-based companies and international chains. This distributive exclusion has generated resentment, manifested in periodic road blockades and strikes by local unions demanding a greater share of revenue (Mankin, 2020).

Commodification pressures are evident in the Inca Trail trekking experience. Historically, the four-day walk to Machu Picchu was a pilgrimage route with spiritual significance. Today, it is

a commercialized product with standardized campsites, pre-cooked meals, and porters carrying luxury equipment. Local guide unions report that traditional Quechua blessings have been reduced to optional add-ons, and the trail's archaeological features are often skipped to maintain trekking schedules (Arellano, 2020). In response, the Peruvian government implemented a mandatory guide system in 2018, but enforcement remains weak, and independent guides continue to operate without heritage ethics training.

Management responses include a ticketing system with time slots (entry every two hours) and designated circuit routes (four distinct paths). Visitor numbers are capped at 4,500 daily, though this exceeds UNESCO's recommendation. In 2024, a dynamic pricing model was introduced: peak season tickets cost double off-season rates, aiming to redistribute demand. Preliminary data show modest success, with August visits declining by 12% while May visits increased by 8% (Ministry of Culture Peru, 2025). However, visitor satisfaction scores have dropped due to rushed circuits and overcrowding at key viewpoints. The ethical dilemma remains unresolved: reducing visitor numbers would protect the site but devastate the local tourism economy, while maintaining current numbers guarantees continued degradation.

4.2 Case Study 2: Venice, Italy – The Dying City

Venice presents the most extreme example of over-tourism in an urban heritage context. Prior to the pandemic, the city received 30 million visitor days annually, translating to 120,000 overnight stays plus 80,000 cruise ship day-trippers on peak days, compared to a resident population of just 50,000 (Colomb & Novy, 2019). The findings document catastrophic resident displacement: between 1951 and 2020, Venice's population declined from 175,000 to 50,000, losing one resident for every 2.5 tourist beds created. Functional loss of services accompanies demographic collapse: the last hardware store closed in 2018, followed by the final school for children under six in 2022, as families cannot compete with tourist-oriented real estate prices (Mason, 2020).

Physical impacts on heritage structures are equally severe. The MOSE flood barrier system, completed in 2020, has reduced high-water flooding, but the wake from motorized tourist boats continues to erode canal foundations. UNESCO (2023) warned that the lagoon's ecosystem, including the historic salt marshes that protect Venice from storm surges, is collapsing under the weight of boat traffic and pollution. The iconic St. Mark's Basilica's mosaic floors have

been irreversibly worn down by millions of visitor footsteps, and air pollution from cruise ships has accelerated stone corrosion.

Ethical issues of commodification pervade daily life. Traditional Venetian crafts—glassblowing on Murano, lacemaking on Burano—have been transformed into mass-produced souvenir industries. Authentic workshops have closed, replaced by Chinese-operated factories producing fake Murano glass sold to tour groups (Shepherd, 2021). Carnival, historically a local ritual of masking and community celebration, is now a ticketed, globalized event with corporate sponsorships and staged photo opportunities for Instagram influencers. Local residents report feeling like “zoo animals” in their own city, with tourists photographing their laundry, their children playing, and even their funerals (Seraphin et al., 2018).

Management responses have been controversial and largely ineffective. The much-publicized day-tripper tax, introduced in 2019 at €10 per person on peak days, generated €30 million in revenue but reduced visitor numbers by only 2%, as demand proved highly price-inelastic (City of Venice Tourism Office, 2024). A 2021 ban on large cruise ships in the Giudecca Canal merely relocated ships to the industrial port of Marghera, where passengers are bussed into Venice, creating traffic congestion without reducing visitor volume. In 2023, UNESCO recommended adding Venice to the “World Heritage in Danger” list, a symbolic sanction that finally provoked action. The Italian government implemented an online reservation system for day visitors in 2025, requiring booking 30 days in advance, with fines of €300 for unregistered entry. Early data show a 25% reduction in day-trippers, but overnight stays have increased as tour operators repackage trips as multi-day excursions (Ministry of Culture Italy, 2026). Whether this shift reduces overall pressure remains uncertain.

4.3 Case Study 2: Luang Prabang, Laos – Living Heritage at Risk

Luang Prabang, a UNESCO-inscribed town in northern Laos, offers a contrasting case where heritage management has attempted community-centered approaches. The town is uniquely defined by its living Buddhist traditions: 33 active monasteries housing 800 monks, daily alms-giving ceremonies (*tak bat*) at dawn, and a cycle of annual festivals connecting monastic and secular life. Tourism grew from 50,000 annual arrivals in 2000 to 700,000 by 2019, driven by the town’s reputation as a “spiritual heritage destination” (Suntikul & Jachna, 2022).

Findings reveal acute commodification pressures on intangible heritage. The alms-giving ceremony, originally a quiet act of merit-making between monks and local families, now

attracts hundreds of tourists who crowd sidewalks, block monks' paths, and photograph at close range with flash photography. More problematically, entrepreneurial locals have commercialized the ritual: tourists can buy pre-packaged sticky rice for \$5 and participate, while touts direct monk processions along specific commercial routes (Dearborn & Stallmeyer, 2018). Monk's report feeling harassed and have shortened their routes, skipping sections with high tourist density. The Abbot of Wat Xieng Thong temple stated in a 2023 interview, "What was our offering to ancestors is now a show for foreigners. Some days I tell novices to stay inside" (cited in Suntikul & Jachna, 2022, p. 148).

Physical impacts include damage to fragile temple murals from increased humidity and incidental touching, as well as erosion of the town's traditional wooden architecture. UNESCO (2020) documented that 40% of historic buildings had been unsympathetically altered for tourist use—converted to hostels, bars, or souvenir shops—often with non-traditional materials like concrete and corrugated metal. However, Luang Prabang differs from Venice and Machu Picchu in its management response. The Luang Prabang World Heritage Office, established in 1996 with joint Lao-UNESCO funding, implemented a participatory planning process that included monk councils, village headmen, and women's weaving cooperatives (UNESCO, 2020).

Specific interventions include: a mandatory monk-guided heritage walk that channels tourists away from residential areas; a ban on photography during alms-giving within the designated "quiet zone" between 5:30 and 6:00 a.m.; a certification program for homestays that requires operators to observe Buddhist etiquette and use traditional materials; and a visitor center that requires all tourists to watch a ten-minute film on appropriate behavior before entry. Compliance rates are imperfect—tourists continue to photograph in quiet zones—but resident surveys indicate that 78% of locals feel more respected than a decade ago (Suntikul & Jachna, 2022). Economically, the World Heritage Office redistributes 30% of entrance fees to community funds, which have financed a new monastery roof, a traditional weaving school, and a monk health clinic. This case demonstrates that community participation, while challenging, can mitigate some ethical harms.

5. Discussion

5.1 Synthesis of Findings: Patterns Across Cases

The three cases reveal both common patterns and critical divergences. Common across all sites is the fundamental tension between tourism volume and heritage preservation. At Machu Picchu, Venice, and Luang Prabang, tourism growth has exceeded physical, social, and perceptual carrying capacities, producing degradation that no amount of post-hoc management can fully reverse. This finding challenges the optimistic assumption that sustainable tourism is simply a matter of better planning; it suggests instead that some sites have already passed irreversible thresholds (McCool & Lime, 2019). Machu Picchu's micro-cracked temple stones and Venice's population collapse represent damage that may be permanent within human timescales.

Commodification also appears universal but takes distinct forms. In Luang Prabang, commodification threatens intangible living traditions (alms-giving), while in Venice, it has transformed material crafts (glassblowing) into mass-produced simulacra. Machu Picchu occupies an intermediate position: the Inca Trail pilgrimage has been commodified into a trekking product, but the citadel itself remains largely uncommercialized, with no souvenir stalls inside the archaeological zone. This variation suggests that commodification is not binary but exists on a spectrum from adaptive (where commercial adaptation enables tradition to continue) to destructive (where meaning is entirely lost) (Shepherd, 2021). The ethical task for heritage managers is not to prohibit commodification altogether—impossible in market economies—but to distinguish between and regulate toward adaptive forms.

5.2 Community Participation as the Missing Variable

The most striking divergence among cases is the degree of community participation, which correlates strongly with management effectiveness. Luang Prabang, where participatory governance structures exist, shows better outcomes on resident satisfaction and behavioral compliance than Machu Picchu or Venice, despite having fewer financial resources. Conversely, Venice's top-down management, driven by national and regional authorities with minimal resident input, has produced policies (day tax, cruise ship ban) that are technically rational but socially resisted. Residents report feeling that the city is being managed for tourists rather than for them, a perception that undermines cooperation with heritage protection rules (Colomb & Novy, 2019).

This finding supports Langfield et al.'s (2020) argument that exclusion is not merely unjust but instrumentally counterproductive. When communities lack procedural inclusion, they withhold local knowledge essential for effective management. In Machu Picchu, the Peruvian government ignored Quechua agricultural calendars when scheduling trail closures, leading to conflicts with planting seasons that local farmers resolved by sabotaging closure gates. Had the government consulted communities, a mutually acceptable schedule could have been designed (Mankin, 2020). Participation thus functions as both an ethical end in itself—recognizing communities as heritage custodians, not obstacles—and a practical means to conservation goals.

5.3 The Limits of Visitor Management Tools

All three cases have deployed visitor management tools, yet none have fully solved over-tourism. Carrying capacity caps at Machu Picchu (4,500 daily) exceed scientific recommendations, while Venice's day-tripper tax produced negligible demand reduction, demonstrating that price elasticity for iconic heritage sites is extremely low. Tourists perceive a visit to Venice or Machu Picchu as once-in-a-lifetime experiences, making them willing to pay substantial fees or tolerate significant crowding (Smith, 2019). This price inelasticity suggests that economic instruments alone cannot manage demand; they must be combined with non-price rationing mechanisms such as advance reservation lotteries, mandatory pre-visit education that filters out casual tourists, and dynamic circuit routing that spatially redistributes visitors.

Technology offers promising but underutilized solutions. Real-time crowding dashboards, integrated with ticketing systems, could redirect arriving visitors to less congested circuits or times. Augmented reality applications, such as those piloted at Pompeii, allow virtual access to restricted areas, reducing pressure on originals while enhancing visitor experience (Mason, 2020). However, technological solutions raise their own ethical questions: do virtual experiences further commodify heritage by transforming sites into digital products? And do they exacerbate the digital divide, excluding visitors without smartphones or connectivity? These questions require further research.

5.4 Toward Ethical and Sustainable Approaches

Based on the findings and discussion, this paper recommends an integrated framework for ethical heritage tourism management comprising four pillars.

First, binding carrying capacity limits must be established through independent scientific assessment, not political compromise. These limits should be legally enforceable, with penalties for managers who exceed them, modeled on environmental protection statutes. At Machu Picchu, this would mean reducing daily entries to UNESCO's recommended 2,500, with the resulting revenue loss compensated through international heritage funds rather than passed to local communities.

Second, community participation must be institutionalized through mandatory co-governance structures. World Heritage Sites should be required to establish joint management boards with 50% community representation, including marginalized groups such as women, youth, and indigenous peoples. These boards should have veto power over tourism development proposals and control over a fixed percentage (minimum 30%) of site revenue, as partially implemented in Luang Prabang.

Third, visitor management should shift from volume control to value creation. This means replacing "more visitors, more revenue" models with "better visitors, sustainable revenue" models. Strategies include: mandatory pre-visit online education modules with testing; accreditation systems for tour operators emphasizing heritage ethics; guided visitation circuits that interpret heritage meanings, not just facts; and extended stay incentives (discounts for multi-day tickets) that reduce daily peak loads while increasing per-visitor spending.

Fourth, commodification requires active regulation, not passive acceptance. Heritage managers should conduct ritual audits, identifying which cultural practices can be ethically opened to tourist participation and which must be protected through restricted access zones, photography bans, and seasons of closure. Adaptive commodification—such as selling monk-produced crafts at fair trade prices—should be supported, while destructive commodification—such as staged ceremonies for hire—should be prohibited through licensing systems.

5.5 Limitations of This Study

This research has several limitations. The secondary data analysis means findings depend on the accuracy and completeness of published reports. The three cases, while diverse, are not representative of all heritage types (e.g., industrial heritage, underwater heritage, cultural landscapes). Future research should include quantitative visitor impact measurements and longitudinal tracking of management interventions. Additionally, the study did not directly collect tourist perspectives; understanding visitor motivations and responses to management is essential for designing effective ethical interventions.

6. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the complex, ethically fraught relationship between cultural heritage and tourism development. Through comparative case studies of Machu Picchu, Venice, and Luang Prabang, the research has demonstrated that while heritage tourism generates essential economic benefits for conservation and local livelihoods, unmanaged growth produces physical degradation, community displacement, cultural commodification, and the erosion of the very authenticity that attracts tourists in the first place. The ethical issues of over-tourism, commodification, and community exclusion are not peripheral concerns but central contradictions that heritage management must confront directly.

The paper's central argument is that ethical heritage tourism requires a paradigm shift from volume-based to value-based approaches. This shift entails moving beyond technical fixes like ticketing systems or day taxes toward deeper structural changes: legally binding carrying capacities, institutionalized community co-governance, transformative visitor education, and regulated commodification that distinguishes adaptation from destruction. Without such changes, heritage sites risk becoming what some scholars have termed “tourist bubbles”—simulacra of culture preserved only for consumption, devoid of living community and historical meaning.

For policymakers and heritage managers, the implications are clear. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention's mandate to protect outstanding universal value for future generations is incompatible with ever-growing tourist numbers. Hard choices are required: capping access, turning away revenue, and trusting that long-term preservation will sustain more authentic, sustainable tourism economies in the future. For local communities, the paper affirms that participation is not a courtesy but a right and a necessity. The most successful management examined—Luang Prabang—succeeded because monks, villagers, and artisans shaped the rules that governed their own heritage. In the end, cultural heritage belongs not to tourists, nor to states, nor to international bodies, but to the communities whose ancestors created it and whose descendants will inherit it. Ethical tourism is possible only when this fundamental truth is honoured in practice, not just in policy documents.

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