



Changing approaches to heritage

The Lake District world heritage bid

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I'm Rodney Harrison, I'm a lecturer in heritage studies at the Open University.

The Lake District is currently in the process of putting together a nomination for World Heritage status and this is going to go to the World Heritage Committee in 2011. We were really interested in capturing some of this process and the viewpoints of different stakeholders who were involved in it. The other really interesting point about the Lake District is there are lots of issues there to do with balancing conservation with tourism, and the sort of economic values of heritage in a natural environment, in an environment in which its values are articulated by some of its stakeholders at least in terms of its biodiversity of values, so we were really interested in looking at how natural heritage is managed, how national parks are managed, and how the sort of competing interests of recreation and tourism are managed within national parks. There's a sense that an acknowledgement of World Heritage status will bring all sorts of benefits to the National Park. On the one hand it's seen as acknowledgement of the sort of specialness of the place which is seen to validate the opinions of those people that also hold it to be special that live in the community there. This is a way of kind of acknowledging that sense of uniqueness within a global community, and I think it would also likely draw further global attention to the Lake District as a tourist destination which would have economic benefits for the UK and for the businesses which rely on tourism in the Lake District more generally.

So the process of developing a World Heritage nomination involves the preparation of a nomination file, and a World Heritage site management plan, and these go to the World Heritage Committee for consideration. The nomination file has to make an argument for the outstanding universal value of the place in terms of ten World Heritage site criteria, and the Lake District is being submitted under what's a reasonably new category for the World Heritage list of cultural landscape which acknowledges that the values of living and working landscapes rather than considering landscapes to only be of value when they're in unmodified sort of wilderness states. We hear from people who see the values of the Lake District primarily in terms of literary heritage, and others who see it as a working landscape and they see its value in terms of its productivity as farming land. And then we hear from others still who see its value as primarily recreational and they're very upset that you can no longer run motor boats on the lakes and ski on the lakes, and then a kind of overriding blanket-all of those that see the values primarily in terms of its natural heritage. So this really illustrates not only the diversity of viewpoints around what heritage is but also the potential for this diversity of viewpoints to generate conflict over places where people hold different sets of values about the significance of these different places. This is really important for people to understand because when you read the UNESCO World Heritage documents you might come away from that thinking that heritage is just one thing, but these audio pieces really convey the differences, quite stark differences, in people's understandings of the values of heritage and the Lake District's district in particular so when we, you know, hear from somebody who thinks about the values primarily in terms of conservation that's obviously in direct conflict with somebody that sees its value's primarily in terms of recreation.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee considers nominations which are put forward to it from State's parties which are the different member countries of the UN so in the case of the Lake District it's the UK putting forward the Lake District for consideration for listing on the World Heritage list, so each State party prepares their nomination file according to a particular format which has been set out by the World Heritage Committee, and it's then sent to UNESCO and it's passed on to two advisory bodies, which are ICOMOS, the International

Council on Monuments and Sites, and the World Conservation Union, and these two advisory bodies assess the nomination file against the ten World Heritage criteria and provide their advice back to the World Heritage Committee. So once a site has been nominated and evaluated it's up to this inter-governmental World Heritage Committee to make a final decision on whether it should be inscribed on the World Heritage list or not, and once a year this committee meets to decide the fate of a whole series of sites which have been put forward to it about whether they'll be inscribed or not, or whether it needs to defer its decision and request further information on sites from the State's party, so that's very much the processual side of what UNESCO does in terms of World Heritage listing, and what we're listening to in the audio is a State party in the context of putting together the documents that it needs to send on to UNESCO for this process to be kicked off.

There's a whole series of processes and people know that they have to jump through the hoops to have a place recognised, and I think those processes are quite remote from the reasons why people might want to have a place inscribed on the World Heritage list to begin with, and some of those reasons are primarily about status, it's about sort of competition to have the most World Heritage sites when you compare yourself with other countries, and we might question whether that impulse to have places listed on the World Heritage list is a good one from a conservation prospective or not. Clearly, World Heritage is a sort of brand and it attracts a certain kind of visitor and it attracts a certain sort of profile for tourism that it wouldn't have if it wasn't World Heritage. But other than that World Heritage inscription only gives very minimal levels of protection, the sort of protection that it can give isn't the same that legislation at a national level would give it, so the fact that it's already a national park means it's already got protection in terms of its identified conservation values. But it really draws it to attention at a kind of world level but other than that, you know, I'm not sure what it means, I think World Heritage as a brand means lots of different things to lots of different people in the same way that heritage has grown to mean lots of different things to lots of different people. I think it's a very contested notion and it's one which, again, we would like people to question and approach critically and think about what it means, you know does this mean that this place is better than a place which is not listed on a World Heritage list, and what does it mean in terms of if you say a place has universal heritage values, what does that mean to local people whose interests in and whose use of the site might conflict with the sort of conservation values that are seen to apply at a global level?