

Chapter 5

Governing World Heritage – Taking Stock of the Structures that Determine the Protection and Conservation of World Heritage Sites



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Abstract The World Heritage Convention combines efforts of heritage protection and conservation on the global, national and local level. It has been adopted by almost 200 countries and has a complex governance system with actors on every level. While these actors are critical to the protection and conservation of World Heritage Sites, very limited research is available that assesses their role and the importance of governmental and managerial structures on a holistic level. This study assesses different governance structures and illustrates how they influence protective efforts. The World Heritage Site Index, which is a comprehensive database of information from almost 900 World Heritage Sites, creates a unique perspective that allows for the comparative assessment of sites regardless of their designation or typology. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study reveals clear governance structures that influence the protection of World Heritage Sites and offers a perspective on potential steps toward ensuring that these structures work for and not against the protection and conservation of these sites.

Keywords Heritage governance · Mixed methods · Comparative assessment · Community involvement · Governance communication

5.1 Governing the World's Most Outstanding Sites

Governing and managing sites is one of the central elements of World Heritage. Every site has some form of governance structure or bodies that are responsible for its management and protection. Yet, very little attention has been focused on this subject on a larger scale. Many studies have evaluated the structures of individual

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cases and sites, but larger comparative assessments or the study of global institutions within the World Heritage framework such as the World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS, IUCN or UNESCO are severely lacking. Even the state parties and complete assessments of national systems of World Heritage have received little to no attention from researchers until now. There has been some research on aspects such as financial support for culture within a country (Trupiano, 2005), rethinking resource distribution on a larger scale (Bertacchini et al., 2011), how sites play into the identity of a nation (Labadi, 2007) or how national conservation systems transition between political models (Bonini Baraldi & Ferri, 2019). However, this research has been limited in scale and does not hone in on the institutions that are critical for World Heritage Sites. On an even smaller scale, numerous case studies focus on specific sites or aspects of national heritage management and their underlying management and governance structures (Lindholm & Ekblom, 2019; Maksić et al., 2018; Yakusheva, 2019; Zan & Bonini Baraldi, 2013). Many of these resources are not even directly related to UNESCO World Heritage and speak more about heritage and protected areas in general. Works by researchers such as William Logan (2001), Lynn Meskell (2013), Thomas M. Schmitt (2009, 2011) and Luke James and Tim Winter (2017) are some of the few notable exceptions in this underdeveloped area. These authors have gone beyond sole case studies and focused on the underlying systematic structures that are of significance in a governance context. Though these researchers have provided important insights into the World Heritage System and its governing bodies, there are very few of them focusing on this area. Questions around the functioning of the underlying governing structures of UNESCO World Heritage and how they impact the individual sites are incredibly underdeveloped. After 50 years, it is appropriate to take stock of global and national systems, how they operate, what is working well and what may need some improvement. In this context, the guiding question in this chapter is whether different governance structures are important and if there are certain stakeholders that have a primarily positive or negative influence on the protection of World Heritage Sites.

Several issues arise when trying to compare governance structures. While it is possible to draw out and compare individual governance components from two countries, there is no tangible way to say whether one is performing better than the other. As such, the World Heritage Site Index (WHSI) (Schmedt, 2021) was created as an entirely new way of assessing World Heritage Sites and answering these underlying questions. It is the first large scale database that can compare sites with one another on a variety of topics, including governance-related issues. The underlying data of the WHSI is based on the assessment of Periodic Reports from the second reporting cycle. These reports are standardized questionnaires created by the World Heritage Centre and answered in regular intervals by each country (Section I) and site (Section II) represented on the World Heritage List. The index takes the individual reports of every World Heritage Site in Section II that participated in the second reporting cycle and creates a matrix for all codable questions. In total, 184 individual questions in the reports of 882 individual sites create the backbone of this index. The resulting database is the largest of its kind outside of UNESCO itself and is the only comprehensive set of data that enables comparison between any two or

more sites, regardless of their typology, designation, country or region. Within the 184 questions, a subset of 74 questions is directly related to governance structures and issues. These questions address aspects such as legal frameworks, management structures, cooperation amongst stakeholders and finances and are the basis for the following assessment.

To create an overview of the performance of the individual sites, questions are coded on a Likert-Scale of 0–5. The resulting overall score represents a unique indicator that is comparable between all cultural, natural and mixed sites and allows a perspective of whether a site appears to perform well or not. It must be noted that there are limitations to the value of this indicator. These limitations mainly arise from the fact that the periodic reports are self-assessments and are prepared by site managers, governmental officials and a variety of other groups and individuals within the respective countries and sites. Therefore, the WHSI does not represent an independent mode of evaluation through expert assessments but rather represents the perception of the protective efforts from the point of view of the individuals preparing the reports.

5.2 Assessing the WHSI Data and Its Implications

To assess such a large set of data and create an analytical overview of the underlying structures, specific statistical methods are applied to answer the underlying research question. Furthermore, a set of factor analyses is carried out to identify and evaluate the governance structures of World Heritage sites. These analyses take the 74 governance-related questions within the WHSI and correlate them with one another. The results form groups of questions that are highly correlated with one another and are referred to as components. Each of these components essentially suggests a specific underlying structure that is responsible for how the questions were answered. In other words, as all of the questions are governance-related, each component indicates a specific structure that is responsible for the governance of World Heritage Sites. As all 882 sites are included in this analysis, the results may not reflect each site but are rather a general representation of the most common structures.

Most of the components created through the factor analyses follow very intuitive patterns that are found across cultural and natural sites alike. These components and their underlying governance structures focus on community involvement, training opportunities, availability of professionals, management, maintenance and monitoring involvement of different stakeholders. Yet, there are certain differences and separate components that are notable and suggest more complex underlying structures at many sites. For example, monitoring involvement and training opportunities for conservation and research are separate at natural sites, while they are addressed together at cultural sites. This indicates that the treatment of these aspects differs significantly from a structural perspective. Another even more prominent difference is evident in questions and components related to the legal framework and the sites'

boundaries and buffer zones. While natural sites combine these two groups of questions into one component, cultural sites separate them. This suggests that the boundaries and buffer zones of natural sites are likely to be designated by the same entity or specific governing structure that also determines the legal framework. Compared to this, cultural sites have one structure that is responsible for the creation of the legal framework while an entirely different structure is responsible for the designation of boundaries and buffer zones. A more extensive and detailed evaluation of this assessment can be found in previously published work (Schmedt, 2021).

While some of these differences are interesting and demonstrate how sites are structured, they do not clarify whether such structures are beneficial for the individual sites or if they are relevant to a site's protective efforts. The WHSI helps address this issue by calculating the average score of sites within a country. While not fully comparable due to the vastly different numbers of sites in each country, this mean average of a country creates a compelling perspective that can be correlated with specific governance structures. As Fig. 5.1 illustrates, there is a significant variance in scores between countries and no one region is performing below average. While there are no low-performing countries in the Europe and North America Region, every other region also has high-performing representatives. For example, the overall highest performing country is Malaysia in the Asia and Pacific Region with an average score of 4.56. Within the top 10 countries, five are from Europe and North America (Azerbaijan (2) 4.32, Germany (3) 4.42, San Marino (4) 4.24, Israel (7) 4.11 and Greece (9) 3.98), three are from Asia and Pacific (Malaysia (1) 4.56, Turkmenistan (8) 4.03 and Japan (10) 3.98) one from Africa (Botswana (6) 4.13), and one from Latin America and Caribbean (Saint Kitts and Nevis (5) 4.21). Only the Arab States did not have a country within the top 10. Iran is the highest performing country from this region at rank 23 with an average score of 3.82.

Even though the regions of Europe and North America and Asia and Pacific overshadow the higher ranks, the remaining regions are also well-represented and there

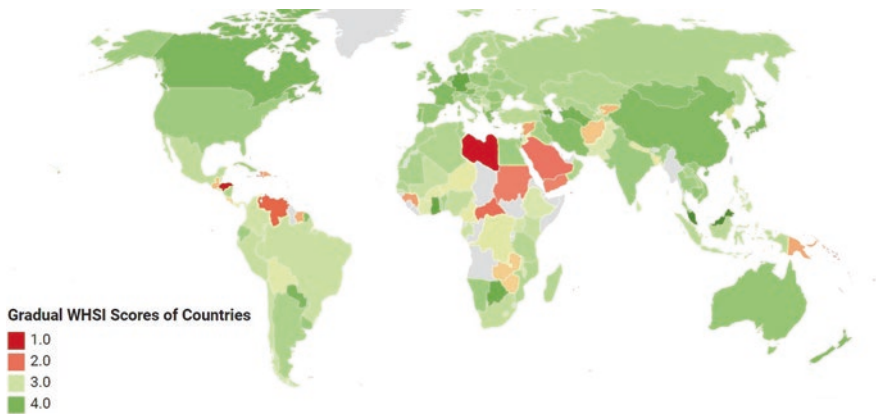


Fig. 5.1 Average WHSI Scores of Sites within a Country. (Note. Prepared by Eike Schmedt, 2021)

is no direct connection between specific regions and overall performance. This pattern is further confirmed by a second statistical assessment that compared the overall scores of the WHSI with established indices such as gross domestic product (GDP) or the Global Competitiveness Index. Through regressions models, these comparisons aimed to assess the potential connection between economic aspects, protective efforts outside the World Heritage Convention and other similar elements of individual World Heritage Sites. While most of these models were statistically significant, they were not strong enough to represent a viable argumentative basis. For example, a high GDP is positively correlated with the performance of a country's sites in the WHSI, but not significantly enough to argue that a higher GDP can determine the performance of sites on the World Heritage List. As this is the case throughout all regression models, it is clear that no single variable can be utilized to explain why certain countries perform higher or lower on the WHSI. Yet, as most of them are statistically significant, it could be argued that these established indices might not be determinants but single aspects of the protection of World Heritage Sites that must be considered.

5.3 Governance Structures and Their Impact

The findings concerning internal structures and components as well as the comparison with established indices create valuable insights into the performance of World Heritage Sites and aspects that might have an impact on their protection. However, they do not clearly answer the underlying research question. This is achieved by assessing some of the countries within the index and comparing their respective structures to the factor analyses as well as the overall scores. To maintain the scale of the WHSI, the structures of 10 countries (2 from each region) are assessed and compared to the findings of the statistical assessment. Connecting the statistical assessments with real-world examples and structures allowed for concrete evaluations of different approaches to managing and governing World Heritage Sites. It included countries with highly complex governance structures such as Germany and Mexico as well as countries with flat governance structures such as Tunisia.¹

Comparing the existing structures with the WHSI scores and analytics revealed a large number of governance aspects that have positive as well as negative influences on the protection of World Heritage Sites. This comparison also directly answers the research question as it demonstrates that governance and management structures are important and that they have a significant influence on how well World Heritage Sites perform on the World Heritage Site Index. To be more precise, the evaluation revealed that the national level of governance, which includes national ministries, offices and organizations, is the most important component of almost

¹The 10 countries included in the assessment are: Bulgaria, Egypt, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Peru, South Africa, Tanzania and Tunisia. Case selection followed criteria independent from the WHSI and was based on site distribution and representation of the World Heritage List.

every World Heritage governance structure. This hardly comes as a surprise as the World Heritage Convention itself asserts that the individual countries and their respective bodies have absolute authority over their respective sites. The only exception to this focus on the national level is Germany, which has a highly decentralized structure, especially for its cultural sites. This is primarily due to the federalized structure and organization of the German governance system but goes beyond the simple decentralization of authority.

However, decentralization by itself is not indicative of performance. While the German system highlights the positive elements of decentralization, some other countries indicate that it could have a negative impact. Countries such as Mexico, which have a mixed structure of centralized and decentralized authority perform much lower than Germany for example. On the flipside, flat hierarchical systems such as Japan perform very well. A deeper assessment revealed that the number of entities and levels involved in the World Heritage governance system of a country do not predict performance, but that the coordination, communication and clear structures of authority are critical (Schmedt, 2021). This held true for cultural and natural sites with very few exceptions. The assessment further indicates that high performing countries, in particular, have very strong structures to include communities on the local and provincial/state level. Such structures comprise the involvement of communities in general management, monitoring, interpretation and preservation efforts. All countries that had such structures in place and had an active network of entities involved in the protection and conservation of World Heritage Sites performed very well.

Additional elements that are crucial for the protection of sites within a country include adequate training of professionals and staff members, sufficient funding and strong legal frameworks that reach beyond the scope of World Heritage. Adequate and secure funding in particular appear as essential elements and are directly related to the national level of governance in most countries. Flexibility is also an important aspect of World Heritage governance systems, and each site requires its own specific structure to properly function. While some of these aspects seem to contradict one another, they do paint a very clear picture of which authorities, responsibilities and different entities are needed in the governance of World Heritage Sites for them to perform well (Schmedt, 2021).

The best example to explain all of these aspects is the case of Japan. Japan ranks at number 10 of 152 countries included in the WHSI and has a very centralized system with the Agency for Cultural Affairs at its core. This agency, which is a body of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, is responsible for almost all sites in the country, including two of the three natural sites. While it does work together and share responsibilities with the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and the Ministry of the Environment at some sites, it is the central body within the country that governs matters of World Heritage. The critical difference to other centralized countries is that, while the agency has the final authority for projects and measures taken at each site, the day-to-day management is in the hands of local stakeholders such as cities, religious authorities and management offices. As such, the local communities and

stakeholders are much more involved in the management, protection and conservation of the sites and only large-scale projects require the involvement and approval of the Agency for Cultural Affairs. The agency further offers continuous support for the local stakeholders and provides expertise and information if requested. This governance structure takes the best parts of centralized and decentralized systems and combines them in a unique but very efficient manner. Having a centralized entity allows resources and expertise to be combined and easily shared amongst all sites. Yet, this entity is only involved if necessary or requested, and the day-to-day aspects of managing and preserving the World Heritage Sites are in the hands of local stakeholders and communities. This shared responsibility and adequate communication are a highly effective way of governing World Heritage Sites and create a clear structure that every involved party can easily understand, while still allowing local and national entities to provide their specific expertise for the benefit of the site.

In comparison, Mexico, which ranks at 95 in the WHSI, showcases how the variation of centralized and decentralized structures can lead to lower performances if not implemented fully. On the surface, the Japanese and Mexican governance models appear very similar. Both have centralized agencies with authority and several other ministries and national offices involved in the governance of World Heritage Sites. The differences start with the consistent involvement of local communities and stakeholders. While Japan has local structures for every individual site, a large number of the sites in Mexico do not have any associated local organizations or stakeholders. As such, the centralized agency in Mexico, the Institute of History and Anthropology, has more authority over the individual sites but also increased responsibility and pressure to handle the day-to-day management in addition to larger strategic planning efforts. The individual reports further mention the large disconnect between governing and managing entities within the Mexican World Heritage system and showcase the critical importance of communication and coordination within each individual system.

To recap, the comparison of the performance of countries in the WHSI with their individual governance structures has revealed several findings that indicate a positive influence on the performance of World Heritage Sites. First, governance at the national level is critical and in almost all cases is responsible for creating and implementing an adequate legal framework and organizational structure that includes all the necessary stakeholders and entities. Second, funding structures must be clarified and dependable for adequate planning. While most countries and their respective sites primarily rely on national-level support for financial resources, it is not a requirement and various different models of funding perform very well as long as the resources are sufficient and secure. Third, neither simple nor complex governance structures are indicative of the performance of a country. Yet, decentralized structures perform better if the communication between all involved stakeholders is adequately organized and the responsibilities are clear. Fourth, the more local communities are actively involved in the management and governance process and engage in communication, protection and conservation efforts, the better the overall performance of a site and country.

5.4 The Way Forward

After almost 50 years and 1121 sites in 167 countries, it is safe to say that the World Heritage Convention has been interpreted and implemented in a vast number of different ways. Correlating the underlying governance structures with the individual performance of sites and countries allows us to identify how these interpretations and implementations affect the sites and what improvements can be made in the future. The analysis above demonstrates what aspects of governance structures are important for the protection of World Heritage Sites. Many of these aspects are directly related to the national level governance in each country and how the convention is implemented and supported. It is clear that a strong and comprehensive legal framework is necessary and that adequate resources, both personnel and financial, are crucial for the performance of individual sites. As such, these two aspects are key indicators for high-performing countries on the World Heritage Site Index and can help guide other countries in their implementation and structuring.

The findings that certain structures and the involvement of communities are significant indicators of high performing countries and sites are even more important than the recognition of significant elements on the national level. These aspects of communication between different stakeholders and the involvement of communities are crucial for a site and country to perform well overall. The importance of these aspects has been well-established as part of the strategic objectives of the World Heritage Convention and the 5 Cs (Albert, 2012). Established in the Budapest Declaration on World Heritage in 2002 and expanded upon in 2007, the 5 Cs aim to foster a more balanced World Heritage List and further promote heritage as a tool of sustainable development through mutual understanding between societies. While this research did not intend to include any existing strategies in the evaluation, it is telling that the results of a comparative assessment of the entire World Heritage List highlight some of the core components of an existing strategy. The presented research confirms, through statistically significant results, that Communication, Community Involvement and in conjunction, Capacity Building in local communities are crucial elements for the performance of World Heritage Sites on a larger scale (Schmedt, 2021).

Even though the results support existing strategies in their scope and aim, they also indicate that the implementation of these strategies could be improved in many countries. As the example of Mexico demonstrated, there is immense potential for improvement in community involvement, communication and capacity building. The reports themselves identify these structural issues and should be taken into account when addressing specific issues or evaluating individual sites. In other words, the World Heritage community knows what actions are required to protect World Heritage Sites and has created a strategic framework for this purpose but has fallen behind in its execution. This study creates a clear argument for committing more resources and attention to the implementation of the 5 Cs, as it demonstrates their direct benefits for the performance of World Heritage Sites. These issues are at the heart of the Convention, and identifying them as aspects that can directly

influence the performance of sites is the first step in addressing concerns and encouraging necessary changes. To address these issues, global and national institutions in the World Heritage community must come together and develop a concrete plan of implementation with the necessary resources. However, this brings up debates that have been ongoing in the field of World Heritage for years.

The World Heritage Convention was born out of the recognition that certain places in the world must be preserved and protected for future generations and that this requires the combined efforts of the international community. While the establishment of the 5 Cs indicates that specific needs are recognized among the World Heritage community, more resources must be dedicated to their implementation. A site is not guaranteed adequate protection and support just because it receives the status of UNESCO World Heritage. The World Heritage community must address the issue of an increasing number of inscriptions on the World Heritage List, with fewer resources for their protection and insufficient support from the Advisory Bodies, World Heritage Centre and national institutions, which are already operating at their capacity. There must be a renewed focus on existing sites to take stock of what is working and what might need to be changed to protect these sites for future generations. In essence, it comes down to whether the World Heritage System can return to its roots as an international community to protect the world's most outstanding sites. Moving forward into the next 50 years, the World Heritage community, and the involved states parties, in particular, will need to decide on their priorities. Do they want to follow the fundamental idea of the Convention and protect World Heritage Sites for future generations, or do they want to have more and more tourist destinations and commodified places? It is the most important decision to make, and it will decide if the Convention continues to be hailed as a success or if it succumbs to politicization which could lead to a degradation of its original intentions and the protection and conservation of these outstanding sites for future generations.

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