

Application for the Jean-Paul L'Allier Prize by OWHC

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The Journey towards a Sustainable Hanseatic town – Place development through Visitor Management

The project “The Journey towards a sustainable Hanseatic town – Place development through Visitor Management” took place during May 2022 until March 2023 in World Heritage of the Hanseatic town of Visby. The aim with the project was to find strategic solutions to challenges maintaining the balance between the large amount of visitors and the local inhabitants. The mind shift from aiming at destination development to aspiring place development was central to the success for the project. Place development is based on a site-specific challenge that involves more people on site than just actors in the tourism industry, and takes into account the needs of local residents, visitors, businesses, civil society, and the public.

The project owner was the Region Gotland but five other organizations were partners in the project. It was financed by the Swedish agency for Economics and Regional growth and with work time from all partners. Partners in the project were the County Administration, the Gotland museum, Uppsala university Campus Gotland, Visby centrum (association for local business) and Gotlands Besöksnäring (the Gotland tourism organization). The World Heritage council with 15 stakeholders acted as a reference group.

The initial aim of the project “The Journey towards sustainable Hanseatic town” was to identify how the cultural heritage and tourism industry organizations in the Hanseatic city of Visby can work together for a more sustainable and resilient place in a time after the corona experience, with again increasing tourism, while the number of permanent residents and everyday service in the World Heritage Site is decreasing.

The project, which focused on "sustainable place development" rather than "destination development", provided an opportunity to reflect on what sustainability means for Gotland and the Hanseatic town of Visby. The project participants took a closer look at what is meant by "sustainable tourism" and how strategic visitor management can contribute to the development of the place. The introduction of new concepts such as 'place development', 'resilience and "visitor management" also influenced the view of what needs to be developed in the World Heritage Site based on its current situation and in an increasingly unpredictable future.

The use of the UNESCO tool “How-to Guides for development of sustainable tourism in WH” was mandatory for the project. A complementary handbook for the Unesco method called “Handbook for Sustainable Tourism Development in World Heritage and Cultural Environments” had been developed by the Swedish National Heritage Board and the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional the year before (2021). Parallel an online self-assessment tool called “the Visitor Management Assessment and Strategy Tool” (VMAST) had been introduced also by Unesco and the two tools (How-to guides and VMAST) contributed with different approaches to "sustainable development" in the World Heritage for critical thinking on issues related to tourism and long-term

cooperation around the World Heritage Site. In our project we used both to compare and evaluate the use of them to our WH property.

The main results from the project

Having the opportunity to deepen the knowledge about the World Heritage site and the challenges affecting it always makes a big difference and it affected to the mind-set of the involved stakeholders. In short the consensus between the tourism organizations and the cultural heritage organization were;

“In sustainable place development, the goal is not only “more sustainable tourism” but that visitor management should also contribute to the preservation of the universal value of the World Heritage Site and the transition to a sustainable and resilient local community” (World Heritage Catalysis, consultant to the project)

Other important results from the project were:

1. Deepening of the the management plan for World Heritage Site of the Hanseatic City of Visby (2023-2030) with a focus on sustainable place development through strategic visitor management, local cooperation and new organization of the World Heritage Council.
2. Business intelligence and visitor analysis for was shared by the tourism organizations and the cultural heritage organization to create a more holistic picture of the property.
3. New organization of the World Heritage Council with a steering group consisting of highest decision makers from the County Administrative Board, Regional Gotland and Gotland museum, who in the future want to contribute to a more strategic approach to sustainable development in the World Heritage.

'The journey towards a sustainable Hanseatic city' is by no means finished. As one of many World Heritage Sites in Sweden and the Nordic region, Visby shares the vision of the Nordic World Heritage Sites as catalysts in a model region for sustainable tourism (Nordic World Heritage Association 2020). The in-depth study of the management plan "Strategy and Action Plan for the World Heritage Site of the Hanseatic City of Visby 2020-2030" is an example of how to introduce resilience thinking into the World Heritage work and concludes with proposals for further method development and implementation through national and regional cooperation. At the moment intense work is put down in the collaboration between different stakeholders to implement the new strategic and more efficient organisation for management and development of the World Heritage site.

Contribution to the general method development for UNESCO and World Heritage properties

The project “Journey towards Sustainable Hanseatic town” project was the only one of 13 approved projects in the announcement by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth that chose to combine the handbook's How-to guides with UNESCO's Visitor Management Assessment and Strategy Tool (VMAST) in the project implementation. The project has thus contributed to a further development of the method in the handbook by adding a deeper sustainability perspective through VMAST.

The handbook supports a process-oriented approach with structures for clear and inspiring leadership at work where participants are allowed to "move forward in uncertainty" and where there

are no answers to all questions. Using both How-to Guides and VMAST adds slightly different support to the process. By evaluating VMAST, which is a more untested tool among the Swedish World Heritage Sites, the project showed how the two resources can complement each other. The method is not an answer or task you "get done with", but rather it provides an opportunity to start and establish new ways of working that can and should be used in the continued World Heritage work.

Best practice is not a state – it is a continuous commitment and effort to improve practices over time. (UNESCO VMAST).

The below illustration describes the differences between the two tools and how such a practice can be implemented through regular assessment, anticipation and prioritization, development/further development of strategies and implementation:

How To guides	VMAST
Destination “Sustainable tourism” Tourists/visitors in focus Engage the local community in tourism management and development	Place Sustainable place Local community in focus Apply strategic visitor management to achieve local development objectives
Online pdf guides	Online engagement tool
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple structure • A lens to simplify complexity • Traditional growth based development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment and strategy development tool in one • Adaptive and responsive management tool • A tool to recognise and manage complexity • Useful in supporting transformative change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not useful in supporting transformative change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be considered overwhelming.
https://whc.unesco.org/en/sustainabletourismtoolkit/	https://www.vmast.net

A sustainable tourism industry is responsible for tourism's current and future economic, social and environmental impact on the World Heritage Site by starting from the needs of visitors, companies, the environment and the local community. This requires a responsible attitude and the willingness to manage tourism based on the conditions and challenges that concern the place. In an increasingly uncertain world, it is crucial to strengthen the resilience of local communities as the ability to cope with change, resist disruption and continue to evolve through renewal and innovation. In the Hanseatic city of Visby, the project gave the World Heritage organization the opportunity to explore what sustainable place development and resilience mean in this particular place, now and in the future.