



VISBY (SWEDEN)

Developing a Strategy for Sustainable Tourism for the Hanseatic Town of Visby

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Hanseatic Town of Visby, a medieval town located on the island of Gotland 100 km off the mainland of Sweden, was inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List in 1995. Since then, two management plans have been adopted, the latest one in 2003. A new management plan process was initiated in 2017 and new goals and actions are currently being formulated based on integrated site management approaches and stakeholder participation. New areas for consideration have emerged since the last plan such as managing disaster risks and sustainable tourism.

World Heritage sites are increasingly promoted as platforms for sustainable development (Cave & Negussie, 2017). The ongoing work in Visby seeks to adopt such an approach by drawing on the goals of Agenda 2030 and by reflecting the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape refers to mass tourism as one of the key challenges facing cities in the 21st century stressing the importance of tourism-related functions contributing to the well-being of local communities by ensuring economic and social diversity (UNESCO, 2011). Sustainable tourism in cities is essentially about balance and sustainable use of urban space. Equally important as preserving the physical layers of heritage significance is maintaining cities as multifunctional and diverse living entities which poses important questions about balancing preservation with sound urban development.

In Visby, the building of a new cruise pier, completed in 2018, has reinforced the need for good strategies to safeguard heritage conservation and a living town by learning from other World Heritage sites where overtourism has become a problem. A working group on sustainable tourism was established within the framework of developing a holistic management plan based on integrated site-management. Utilizing the UNESCO World Heritage Sustainable Tourism toolkit constituted a starting point for the working group.

For the sustainable tourism working group, it was necessary to secure representation of conservation, destination management and local community interests. Building a strong relationship with the research community and a new Masters Programme in Sustainable Destination Development at Uppsala University Campus Gotland was essential. A partnership was also developed with the Mining Area of the Great Copper Mountain in Falun through the Association of World Heritage in Sweden to learn from their experience as a leading example in Sweden and building on the principle of solidarity and sharing of

Photos: City of Visby

experiences as enshrined in the World Heritage Convention. Furthermore, it was essential to synchronize World Heritage management with regional development and tourism strategies, as well as ensuring leadership within the tourism sector.

The UNESCO toolkit is essential in achieving a heritage-led approach to tourism. However, understanding and implementing the guides have been considered complicated. The first step was to find a way of simplifying the UNESCO methodology considering financial constraints. Similarly, there has been a discussion within the Nordic World Heritage Association noting that many World Heritage sites are not using the toolkit, partly due to lack of resources. This has led to a project seeking to explore how the toolkit can be made more relevant in order for Nordic countries to become a model region for sustainable tourism. Capacity development means building on already existing resources and projects. The Swedish National Heritage Board translation of the UNESCO toolkit into a Swedish context also helped in simplifying the methodology.

Principles of sustainable development and the HUL approach were used as a blueprint for the site management plan as a whole. The working group identified key areas of focus reflecting cultural, economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development. Firstly, a code of conduct needed to be developed to address aspired behavior amongst both visitors and locals. Secondly, carrying capacities and steering visitor flows was considered crucial and to learn from other urban destinations to avoid overtourism. Thirdly, climate leadership was identified as a key area on every single level, from transportation to hotel management. Fourthly, creating economic gain for local businesses and for heritage resources was considered urgent. Fifthly, engagement of local communities was considered key to success. Finally, given the global scale of cruise tourism enhancing sustainability within the industry is best achieved through collaboration with Cruise Baltic as a regional network of partner destinations within the Baltic region. The work contributed to the Cruise Baltic Sustainability Manifesto, adopted in Copenhagen in April 2019 by the Cruise Baltic Association.

Watch the presentation

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