



Visitor management at a World Heritage Site

Skara Brae Prehistoric Village, Orkney, Scotland

Case study and student material

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

Introduction

The [UNESCO World Heritage List](#) (WHL) sets out to represent the very best of the world's natural and cultural heritage, comprising a collection of sites that are of such outstanding universal value to humanity that it would be unconscionable for them not to be protected for the benefit of future generations. Presently there are 878 sites inscribed on the List, located in 145 different countries, and these are titled World Heritage Sites (WHS). Examples include world-famous tourism attractions such as Stonehenge in the UK and the Great Wall of China, as well as many less well-known properties and monuments. The List includes large-scale cultural landscapes, such as the city of Bath in the UK or the historic town of Sintra in Portugal. There are also natural areas inscribed on the List, such as the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania and Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

The WHL began in 1976 and is still being built up, with a number of successful nominees being added every year. As a result, the range of sites represented on the List also continues to expand. Nevertheless, it can be said that all of these sites share a common problem, which is that they all require effective visitor management strategies. This purpose of case study is to examine visitor management at the Skara Brae Prehistoric Village, which is part of the [Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS](#) in Scotland. Following a brief description of the site, its context and its presentation, the case study identifies the need for visitor management at the site and outlines the various visitor pressures that are faced. In doing so, the case study considers how these pressures have been managed. It concludes by drawing lessons for visitor management at heritage sites more generally.

Visitor Management

There are a number of reasons why visitor management is becoming an increasingly important task to be undertaken by those responsible for heritage sites, particularly those that have achieved WHS status. As Shackley (2006) notes, many such sites have seen a significant growth in visitor numbers, promoted by a range of factors including the more diverse use of discretionary time in many Western societies, increased car ownership and reduced travel costs (for example, the emergence of the low-cost airlines) and the extensive media publicity given to sites on the WHL. Furthermore, the market for visits to heritage sites has matured and visitors are generally more discerning, having ever greater expectations about access to the site and the quality of its interpretation. Visitor pressure on heritage sites has probably never been higher, and this is especially true of those that have been awarded WHS status.

Managers of heritage sites therefore find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand visitors are needed, not only because they are likely to represent an important source of revenue for the site, through for example admission fees or secondary spending at the site, but also because there is an increasing expectation that heritage sites should provide both educational and recreational opportunities for the general public. On the other hand, visitors bring the risk of harmful impacts to the site and to the various artefacts located there. The range of possible visitor impacts is well documented (e.g. Shackley, 1998; Garrod, 2008) and includes, for example, overcrowding on the site and people congestion at particular bottlenecks; physical stresses on the site due to visitors trampling on sensitive parts of the site or handling sensitive artefacts; litter, graffiti and vandalism; traffic congestion on the site and in the local area, and possible vibration damage from cars and coaches. In most cases, both the risk of

occurrence and the potential magnitude of such impacts are likely to rise as visitor numbers increase. Winning more visitors may therefore be at the same time both a blessing and a curse for a typical heritage site.

While some sites are relatively robust and can withstand increased levels of visitation, others will be more susceptible to damage. Some will be visited regularly by large numbers of people, while others will only have a small number of visits on an irregular basis. Some sites will only experience visitor pressure at peak times, while others will be subject to some degree of visitor impact all of the time. It is important, therefore, that the managers of each site examine the visitor-impact balance carefully and design visitor management strategies that will be appropriate to the particular context of their site. The visitor management imperative is particularly important to sites that are inscribed on the WHL, especially given the potential for WHS status to result in greater awareness on the part of prospective visitors and for higher visitation levels to result (Shackley, 1998; Fyall and Rakic, 2006). Since 1996, all sites that are nominated for WHS status must first develop a Management Plan. Typically such documents include consideration of the various impacts that visitors are already having or may potentially have on the site, and detail the policies that have been or will be introduced in order to address them. Management Plans are also intended to specify how the site will be maintained, how the needs of visitors will be met (including visitor safety and access for disabled people), and how the site will be interpreted to visitors, for example through the use of guides, booklets and information boards.

The Skara Brae Prehistoric Village

In the winter of 1850, a great storm battered Orkney. There was nothing particularly unusual about that, but on this occasion the combination of Orkney's notorious winds and extremely high tides stripped the grass from a large mound known as Skerrabra. This revealed the outline of a series of stone buildings that intrigued the local laird, William Watt of Skail, who began an excavation of the site.

Located on the main island of [Orkney](#) in the Northern Isles off the coast of Scotland, [Skara Brae](#) is now recognised as one of the best-preserved group of Stone Age houses in Western Europe. The village was inhabited from around 3100BC to 2500BC and appears to have been continually modified throughout this period of time. Six houses are presently visible, although there were almost certainly more than this originally: the north side of the settlement has been lost to the sea, a retaining wall having been built in 1920s in an attempt to prevent further loss. Recent geophysics also suggests that there may be further remnants of the village still buried to the south-east. Figure 1 provides an overview of the site.

The houses appear to have been linked together by narrow roofed passages. They contain stone furniture, hearths and drains, and give a remarkably vivid picture of life in prehistoric times (see Figure 2). Successive excavations also uncovered a wealth of artefacts and ecofacts, including hand tools, pottery, jewellery and gaming dice. No weapons were found and the houses do not seem to have been fortified, suggesting that the inhabitants led a relatively peaceful way of life. Many of the items to be unearthed are now on display in the site's purpose-built visitor centre. The importance of Skara Brae is widely acknowledged and in 1999 it was inscribed on the WHL as part of the [Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site](#).

Chapter extract

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