



Project proposal

Interpretation Problems of the Aggtelek Karst Caves and Elaboration of the Interpretation Strategy of the Site

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Project statement:

The project is intended to discuss the interpretation problems of the Aggtelek Karst Caves World Heritage Site and provide solutions in form of an interpretation strategy.

I. Draft structure of the final paper

1. General introduction to the tourism management at the Aggtelek Caves WH Site

The Aggtelek National Park is most famous for its World Heritage caves. Tourism is a key issue and it has a direct effect on some of these caves. But the fact that it is not a single object World Heritage site and also it is a cross-border site, makes tourism management a complex task.

Some basic facts:

- The area has unique natural assets: besides the cave systems the two sides of the border are under various international designations (national parks, biosphere reserves, Ramsar sites, NATURA 2000 areas).
- It is a cultural landscape, as well, including some outstanding cultural assets, and great folk traditions.
- High potentials for eco and other sustainable tourism forms.

Potential threats:

- Without an integrated strategy for interpretation we lose the opportunity to present this multi-faceted nature of the site both to tourists and to local people, which eventually decreases the integrity of the site.
- This complexity forecasts that in a few years time capital investments want to exploit these great potentials (esp. that free borders are not an obstacle any more).
- Abuse of carrying capacity and degradation of the site.

Steps to be taken:

- The management of the site has to be prepared for such foreseen trends and should provide alternatives in its strategy.
- Since tourism seems to be a key issue on the long run, tourism management planning and visitor management planning should be more comprehensive.
- Visitor management provides opportunities for raising awareness of the World Heritage site (this specific one, but in a general sense, too)
- Enhancing cross-border links and cooperation.

Interpretation is one aspect of tourism management, but at present my observation is that lacking an interpretation strategy greatly hinders proper tourism management.

2. Baseline information on the interpretation activities

2.1. To become aware of the gaps to be filled, the present day situation and its historic context has to be analysed.

- A historic retrospective: history of tourism as such to one of the World Heritage Caves on the Hungarian side goes back to 1806. Since that date the volume, the approach, the service and many other features have changed dramatically, but some of the present day practices are a legacy from those days.

- Legal approach: the various legislative aspects and their changes in the course of time up to the present day has to be examined.

- Economic approach: no doubt tourism has been and is an economic factor, but especially in such a sensitive area, to establish sustainable tourism, the limits of utilisation has to be stated clearly.

- Social approach: what role the caves have played in the life of local population, what is the social carrying capacity of the region as far as tourism is concerned, and how these caves are perceived, what values they represent in the broader society

2.2. Present practices in interpretation: based on a SWOT analysis the many aspects of interpretation can be revealed.

2.3. Identifying gaps

- Infrastructure: the site already has certain infrastructure for visitor reception. In the context of this study the focus should be put on the facilities with immediate relation to interpretation tasks.

- Human capacities and skills: the assets to be interpreted and the target groups of interpretation require certain skills and capacities at the manager organisation. Predictably some of the deficiencies of today's interpretation practices are due to adequate skills and/or capacities.

- Communication and PR: the success of interpretation largely depends on the sufficient external and internal communication, also in the former case a distinction is to be made between communicating with local stakeholders and with the general and broad public. The present day deficiencies in this field are to be revealed and analysed.

2.4. The cross-border context

Taking into consideration that it is a cross-border World Heritage Site, it is such an added value in terms of interpretation potentials, as well, that this feature has to be incorporated for the sake of the site's integrity.

3. Comparative analysis of relevant world heritage sites

A better understanding of the various aspects of interpretation and visitor management in an international context is to be achieved with the studies of relevant sites. The bellow criteria do not have to be relevant and valid for one singular site, this way they should be read in an 'and/or' context.

The main points for selection:

- High profile site (World Heritage site or representing high value on at least national level)
- Site featuring high standard in interpretation and visitor management and setting good example in sustainable tourism
- Natural site receiving high number of visitors
- Cross-border and/or multi-lateral site
- Site featuring cultural elements, having strong social context

This comparative study should also position the Aggtelek Karst Caves on an international level, before setting the goals and objectives.

4. Development alternatives and impact assessment

This might be a highly hypothetical section in the project, but drafting various scenarios would provide the opportunity to set the most appropriate goals and objectives in terms of sustainability. This would also help in the implementation phase to provide sufficient information for decision makers.

5. Vision, goals, objectives – sustainable tourism at the Aggtelek Caves WH Site

Based on the previous analysis the specific tasks have to be determined. The targeted timeframe for the strategy is 10 years for the reason, that although it is a strategy it intends to push forward to actual actions and measures to be taken, and after ten years time the paper and the concept might need revision. The overall vision should state the strategic target to be achieved, whereas the goals and objectives break it down into more immediate tasks.

The bellow questions should be answered in this part:

- Where to develop infrastructure and in what volume?
- Capacity building: training and education challenges
- Means and forms of communication and PR

6. Implementation and adaptive management

The paper should include a log frame and timing chart of implementation preferably linking the individual tasks to possible funds and sources. Resulting in a paper document, no matter how carefully elaborated, one should take unexpected circumstances into consideration, which requires adaptive management during the implementation phase.

II. Ecpexted result:

1. At the present the out-dated interpretation practices at the Site result in:

- low acknowledgment of the World Heritage Site
- insufficient fulfilment of visitors needs
- low utilisation of communication potentials

The elaborated document will try to draft a strategy which can be recommended in the management activity of the Aggtelek National Park, and eventually improve the above pinpointed problems.

2. Local communities can benefit from such development for:

- many locals are employed in cave tourism directly, and many more indirectly
- most tourism businesses seek and are offered the opportunity to cooperate in tourism activities with the WH managing organisation (i.e. Aggtelek NP), the points of possible cooperation can be identified
- a tourism destination management organisation is to be established in the near future. For its activity sustainable tourism forms should be set as a focus. Any activity, research, document that analyse a specific topic from this approach, supports the coherent tourism development on a regional scale.

3. Since the final document will be available in English it is accessible to the international audience, and hopefully becomes a 'best practice' document, safeguarding the replicability of at least parts of it.

III. Methodology

Eventually the interpretation strategy of the WH Site is elaborated, based on:

- analyzing national and regional planning and management documents
- assessment of the Aggtelek National Park strategic and management documents
- SWOT analysis
- involvement of staff members (interviews)
- involvement of cross-border partners
- questionnairing visitors' needs
- consultants' and planners' involvement
- analyzing peer sights

IV. Contribution to raising awareness of the World Heritage Convention

- The involvement of local stakeholders is an immediate "forum" for raising awareness .
- In case the document finds acceptance at the Aggtelek NP management and the implementation is safeguarded, the results will directly communicate the general notion of the World Heritage Convention and the local reference to a wider public.
- It is accessible to the international public.

V. Proposed time frame of the project

Project phase and task	Sept 2009	Oct 2009	Nov 2009	Dec 2009	Jan 2010	Feb 2010	Mar 2010	Apr 2010	May 2010	Jun 2010	Jul 2010	Aug 2010
Project preparation and consultation												
Research												
Writing 1 st draft and consultation												
Final version												
Editing, submission												