World Heritage Sites: Place Attachment and Authenticity Perception. Visitors and Users Perceptions

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Since its first classification in 1978, World Heritage Sites (WHS) and tourism have shared a long and common history. These places are viewed as icons and are highly valued as tourism destinations by the international community. As predicted by Russell Train, a mentor to the World Heritage Convention, the "World Heritage" classification would be eagerly sought, and the sites identified as such would become "five-star" world attractions (Rao, 2010). WHS is a significant tourism destination. It is increasingly sought by tourists who want to experience authentic places that will enable them to establish a strong connection with local history, culture, and communities living in a given territory (NCDOT, 2000). WHS are treasures that belong to everyone, so they must be available to residents and tourists alike and must simultaneously be protected to be enjoyed by future generations. WHS are regarded as places whose authenticity makes them different and unique (Turok, 2009); they are granted a universal value (Naoi 2004, Kolar and Zabkar 2010), as well as a cultural and a heritage value (McKercher and Du Cros 2003). The latter is one of the factors that will have the highest impact on tourists' destination choice (Yeoman et al., 2007). World Heritage Sites (WHS) represent the country's culture in which they are located and, at a broader international level, are symbols of these places (Shackley, 1998). From a human, social and cultural perspective, a WHS is much more than a collection of buildings representing the accumulation of cultures and traditions and the heritage values produced or reused by these cultures. More importantly, WHS are places made of people: residents, communities, visitors, tourists (Su and Wall, 2014). In WHS that are inhabited or fully functioning, the relationships between residents or users, visitors and tourists are especially complex. In addition, the connections those different players establish with the place itself are multifaceted. Residents have a crucial role in WHS destinations' fruition since they play the primary role in promoting tourists' immersion in experiences that are intended to be unique and authentic (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000). Residents relate with the tourists and perform storytelling experiences giving meaning to the place. However, WHS's authenticity is perceived by residents/users and visitors/tourists differently. Residents/users have a constructive perception of authenticity connected with cultural and social references; on the other hand, visitors/tourists have a more existential perspective linked to their enjoyment and entertainment (Richards, 2007). The current research paradigm reinforces the importance

of studying and understanding the subjective, emotional, and symbolic meanings individuals attach to places (Williams & Vaske, 2003). The main goal of this paper is to analyze the place attachment and authenticity perception that two different players â€" users and visitors â€" establish with the University of Coimbra, a fully functioning site which was inscribed on the UNESCO WHS list in 2013 (UNESCO, 2019). Information about 2550 visitors and users (mainly students attending the university) was then collected. Using mean tests, T-tests, and factorial analysis, it was possible to conclude that those two different players perceive this particular WHS quite differently, in dimensions like i) place-attachment, namely place identity, place rootedness, place familiarity, and place memory; and ii) authenticity perception attached to the object and the experience. To our knowledge, this is one of the few studies that seek to analyze place-attachment and authenticity in a World Heritage Site fully functioning, and that takes into account the perspective of both leading players: visitors and users. The results of this study allowed drawing significant implications for WHS management by bringing forward users' and visitors' conceptions about the same place. This broader perspective will, quite obviously, generate different expectations, needs, and motivations.