

Local Community Perception of World Heritage Listing of Wadi Al Hitan in Fayoum

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Abstract:

Places with unique and diverse cultural and natural heritage such as the Great Pyramids of Giza, Egypt, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Baroque Cathedrals of Latin America are irreplaceable sources that make the world's heritage. The World heritage is an inheritance from the past, what we live today and what we pass on to the future, it belongs to all the people of the world not only the countries on which it is located. Thus, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has established a convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972 to encourage their identification, protection and preservation. In 2009, the World Heritage designation list reached 878 sites including 679 cultural heritage sites, 174 natural heritage sites and 25 combined heritage sites in 186 countries (World Heritage Centre (WHC), 2009).

Wadi Al Hitan (WAH) (Arabic for Valley of the whales) is located in the Wadi Al Rayan Protected Area in the Western Desert of Egypt 150 kilometers (km) southwest of Cairo and 80 km west of Fayoum. WAH comprising 259 square km with a 200.15 square km core area and 58.85 square km buffer zone. WAH is the most important site in the world to demonstrate one of the iconic changes that make up the record of life on Earth; the evolution of the whales. It portrays vividly their form and mode of life during their transition from land animals to a marine existence. It exceeds the values of other comparable sites in terms of the number, concentration and quality of its fossils, and their accessibility and setting in an attractive and protected landscape. Other fossil material in the site makes it possible to reconstruct the surrounding environmental and ecological conditions of the time (WHC, 2009).

Of notable significance, WAH site which was designated as the first nature site on the World Heritage list in Egypt in 2005 and was inaugurated on the 10th of February 2008 has since become an important representative tourism resource of Fayoum and represents significant values that are currently absent from the World Heritage List.

The World Heritage designation listing of an area, an architectural artifact or monument often leads to an increase in the number of visitors, enhancement of the recognition of the site and financial support through subsidies from the governments or setting up of user prices (Kim et al., 2007). This, subsequently, raise local revenue due to the stronger demand of the site.

The purpose of this study is to assess local community perception of the world heritage listing of WAH. The literature was helpful in identifying world heritage but it did not provide an established instrument to assess the attitudinal perceptions of a community towards it. Thus, this issue became the focus of the study. Three hypotheses were proposed for assessing

local community perception and their overall satisfaction with the world heritage listing of WAH.

Hypothesis 1: distance from WAH influence community perception of World Heritage listing of WAH.

Hypothesis 2: employment in the tourism industry influence community perception of World Heritage listing of WAH.

Hypothesis 3: distance from WAH and employment in the tourism industry influence community overall satisfaction with World Heritage listing of WAH.

A field survey will be administered to local residents within the Fayoum Governorate. Descriptive analysis will be used to measure local community perception of World Heritage Listing of Wadi Al Hitan in Fayoum.

Keywords: World Heritage; Wadi Al Hitan; Local community