

Does tourism at the site of Chichén Itzá help or hinder the archaeological zone in terms of heritage practices?



(Schwen,2009) El Castillo.

Introduction

This report focuses on the history and heritage of Mexico specifically at the site of Chichen Itzá, the term heritage must be defined for the question to be answered. Heritage can mean a range of things to different people and is fairly difficult to define, "heritage is a social/political construct, it is produced and consumed" Staiff et al,2013) heritage is constructed by people, this shows that heritage is socially constructed by peoples in relation to the historic environments around them.

Chichén Itzá is located on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico, it is an ancient Maya site that is home to some of the most well preserved Mesoamerican structures (whc.unesco.org) in Mexico including the most famous El Castillo pyramid (see image above). Thousands of tourists flock to the site every year and this has helped put Mexico on the map. The tourists provide Chichén Itzá with many different things including jobs for the local people and they spend money on the tickets which goes to the government which they then spend on helping the site grow and providing services for the tourists.

This report will cover a wide range of heritage practices including what the local people and the Mexican authorities are doing to preserve and conserve the ruins and the archaeological zone; all the stakeholders in the site and how they are affecting the site and how they value the site; if the focus of the site has changed after being purchased by the State of Yucatan; why tourists visit the site and if they're helping or hindering the site; also why the tourists visit and value the site; and finally any threats to the site such as authenticity.

Literature Review

UNESCO's very own website talks about the site Chichén Itzá, its significance within Mexican society and the history of the site. The page covers many different themes and the heritage of the site is a major theme as many issues such as authenticity are covered. It is also clear that heritage and the protection of this site is a major theme as it discusses the management of the site and all the laws and requirements that need to be followed in relation to the site. The webpage is not too long but it discusses the main points which is what the site is, why it is important to the people of Mexico, finally how and why the monuments are protected (whc.unesco.org). Also UNESCO released a charter that outlined all of their rules and regulations of their World Heritage sites and how they retrieve this status (Parent, 1979). These will be very useful to the report as it will be interesting to look at UNESCO's view on the site and what they are doing to help the site.

Similar to this is an article that illustrates the role of cultural heritage and why the Maya heritage at the site is important to the Mexican peoples. Although, this article goes into far more detail about the impact the people are having on the site and the heritage itself. The main theme through this article appears to be the "socio-cultural heritage" (Milman 2015), and the impact the souvenir vendors are having on this heritage. The author discusses how some of the souvenirs and the actions of the vendors are not authentic to the Maya civilization which is having a

negative impact at the site. The article discusses an experiment that was carried out at Chichén Itzá by taking photographs of the souvenir vendors and the tourists this would show a wide range of findings, which were the age gender and relationship between the vendors, their interaction/non- interaction with the tourists and where they were positioned at Chichén Itzá (Milman,2015). Finally, they discuss what will happen in the future and how other stakeholders can work with the vendors to solve this problem by asking the Mexicans “what it means to be Maya” (Milman 2015). This article is useful to the report as it shows the authenticity challenges the site faces and it also shows the tourism and the impact the tourists have on the site, mainly the economic impact.

Another similar article is one about heritage tourism which is very similar to the article just mentioned. However it is also quite different to the other sources as this article highlights the involvement of the local people and “keeping heritage in the family” (Breglia 2005) and having the workers at the site have Maya genealogy. This article also highlights that these workers become stakeholders and they have a political role to do with the site and this can have an impact on the site. This source discusses the local people around the site and how they work and protect Chichén Itzá, the article shows that working at the site has been passed down from generation to generation and the author even goes as far to say that modern day care taking of the is a “family business” (12) (Breglia,2005). This article is useful to the report as it highlights a different role of the local people at the site rather than just souvenir vendors, it also shows the security have with the local people and the tourists which is a very interesting point of view to incorporate.

Albright,2010 discusses the ownership of the site and how it was bought by the State of Yucatan in 2010 and before that it was owned privately. It also talks about the problems that the souvenir vendors have caused (Albright,2010). This is useful to my report as it has opened doors as I can look at what was going on prior to 2010 and compare it to post 2010 to see the discourse of the site. Also, in another article it is discussed that a concert staged in front of the pyramid caused a lot of damage at the site (Albright,2010). These are useful as they give an insight to the threats and the challenges Chichén Itzá faces.

Value and Stakeholders

To fully understand the site and why it is valued we must ask who are the stakeholders? As these are the people who value the site for a range of different

reasons. Many stakeholders believe that the heritage “everyones and no-ones” (Breglia,2006).

The site holds a lot of value to the local people around the site of Chichén Itzá and they believe that they are of traditional Maya decent, these also tend to be the souvenir vendors at the site (Milman,2015). This shows that the local people value the site as tourism provides them with a lot of their income, also Milman,2015 also states that the Mexican authorities want to work with the locals and souvenir vendors to discuss “what it means to be Maya” this shows that the site is valued as many of the locals associate themselves with the site and class themselves as “Maya”. Although, Albright 2005 suggests that the vendors caused many problems for the Mexican government and the president of Mexico had to get involved this shows that the vendors may value the site too much for their income and this causes many different problems for the government.

Similar to this the local people that work at the site are also known as “antiguos, the ancient ones” (Breglia,2005) this shows that they are from traditional Maya descent and have a close cultural connection with the site which means that they value the site greatly as they have a close affiliation with the site as it is the land of their ancestors. Staiff et al,2013 states that heritage reflects and validates “identity as nations, communities, families and even individuals” this sums up nicely why the local people would value Chichén Itzá as it reflects their cultural identity. They also used to help with the excavations at the site this may have given the local community the sense of community by working together to help find artefacts from their ancestors this sense of community would make them value the site more. Moreover, many years ago the security used to live on the archaeological site (Breglia,2005) which would make the site extremely valuable to them as it used to be their home part of the time. They also work to protect and conserve the site and keep it clean (Breglia,2005) this would make it valuable to them as they are putting their hard work into the site and it also shows that they are proud of their heritage by looking after it. In terms of heritage practices the local people help preserve and conserve the site because they value their heritage so much they want to help keep it clean and make sure everything is up to scratch so the tourists can keep visiting and inject money into the site.

Another major component to the site is the tourists, not only do the tourists add economic value to the site they also value the site. The fact that tourists have to pay for a ticket to visit the site which suggests that they value the site as they have made that choice to visit the site and pay the money to visit Chichén Itzá. Tourists

would also value the site as they visit the site to learn about the site which will increase their knowledge . Also, many tourists will value the site due to *communitas* this is them coming together to share the same experience where they're life take full meaning (Turner,2012), this would make it extremely valuable to the tourist as the site has layers of meaning to them. Moreover, Mexico is a large country and the Yucatan peninsula is the very Southeast of Mexico which means that a proportion of the tourists will be from Mexico travelling to the peninsula to visit the site. They would value the site as it is Mexico's history and their culture and they have travelled a long way to see it. Also, tourists would value the site in terms of the theory: phenomenology (Tilley,1994). People get to experience the landscape for themselves and get to learn from Maya descendants which is an original experience and makes the trip more valuable because they are experience what it is like to live and be an ancient and a modern Mayan.

The site used to be owned privately and they had a good relationship with the government and respected their wishes about the site (Albright,2010). Also, when the land was owned privately the owners would have a portion of all the money tourists spent on tickets to visit the site (Albright,2010) this shows that the private owners valued the site as it was their main source of income and tourism played a major part in providing them with this. Although, Breglia,2006 discusses about the effects that privatisation has had on the site saying that the private ownership matters in terms of as "private ownership has significantly affected how state officials and the local residents shaped their claims to the culture patrimony" (65) this shows that there is much debate between the stakeholders about the claims to the site as they all value the site for different reasons.

The State of Yucatan will also value the site as post 2010 they now own the site, the tourism to this site generates an extortionate amount of money on tickets to visit the archaeological zone so the site holds great economic value to the state. They also introduced a new federal agency called the INAH Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National Institute of Anthropology and History) (Breglia,2006) this shows that they value the site and the heritage of Mexico, this federation was setup to protect heritage sites all over Mexico which shows that they value Chichén Itzá.

UNESCO also values the site, since 1988 the site was designated a World Heritage Site. UNESCO states as it follows their charter that they introduced in 1979 which outlines the criteria for World Heritage sites ,Chichén Itzá is valued by UNESCO as the site is quite rare and it has traditional architecture and it is a significant type of

Mayan pyramid (Parent,1979) which shows that is very valuable and UNESCO will help the site and protect and conserve the site to make sure everybody else can visit and learn about Chichén Itzá.

Tourism

Tourists flock to the Yucatan Peninsula just to see this site and these tourists have a massive impact at the site. Although, today people do not have to leave the comfort of their own homes to see the site as digital tourism is now very prominent.

YouTube is one of the major contenders in digital tourism one video shows a digital tour of the site, it pans around the site shows all the different structures (Chichcalan,2017). The video is very informative as it shows what the site looks like visually although and this can be informative for people who are planning a holiday as they will be able to see if they would like to go on the tour. Although, it does show older structures which are not at the site but underneath it and this can be misleading for the people carrying out the digital tourism as they may not read fully and believe that the site looks like that and the video is an accurate representation rather than in the makers words a “Mexicanized representation” (Chichcalan,2017). This helps the site as you can see everything and the reconstruction helps with conservation as you don’t need to visit the site to experience the site.

In contrast to this there is a guided tour of the site where an actual tourist at the site has made a video document of his tour around the site, the viewer gets to experience the exact same as him and the information is coming from an educated tour guide (Vince Lia,2016). This allows people to stay at home and visualise what it is like to be at the site and the information will be accurate and it is an enjoyable experience for the viewer, this can also inform people who are about to take a trip to Mexico and they can decide whether the tour and the site is of interest to them. From these two videos it is clear that digital tourism has both advantages and disadvantages, although, it is mainly a good thing as Mexican heritage can be accessed by everyone who wishes to learn more.

After watching these videos I compared their guided tour to my personal experience of a guided tour at Chichén Itzá, in Vince Lia’s video I noticed there was a lot more focus on the Mayan mythology and the religion rather than the architecture. Also, the tour guides now carry around clipboards with images that show the intangible heritage (heritage that does not have a physical appearance) at the site which is helping the site as it is educating the tourists on what is now invisible at the site. The tour guides did not have the clipboards with images on so

as a tour group we had to visualise the intangible heritage so this new perspective is much better for the site.

Also from the videos and my own personal experience they all agree with the statement made by Staiff et al,2013 that “The tourist is exposed to a prepared space and representational practices”(8), the guided tour video shows that there are paths in place for the tourists to walk and the site is surrounded by jungle although when it was found the site was consumed by the forest around it which means that all the trees have been removed to prepare the space for the tourists. To add to this the site was changed from “jungle covered ruins to renowned international tourist destination” (65) (Breglia, 2006) this shows that the land has been tampered with and the jungle surrounding the monuments was destroyed to turn the archaeological zone into a tourist destination. This agrees with the statement by Staiff et al that heritage is “produced and consumed” the area has been altered and cleared for the tourists to consume.

Tourists have also hindered Chichén Itzá as many years ago tourists were allowed to walk up the famous El Castillo, however many people would trip and fall and one lady even fell down the bottom half of the pyramid, so the authorities took the decision to stop people from walking up the pyramid, adding to this tourists were eroding the steps away which was causing significant amount of damage to the steps which wasn't good for the structure (<http://endlesscancun.blogspot.com>). This also agrees with Staiff et al,2013 that tourism is “controlled” the authorities have sectioned off a piece of heritage from the people. Also in the videos you can see that everyone is being taken around in groups which again shows that the way they move around the site is controlled and “produced” (Staiff et al,2013) which also shows that heritage is political (Staiff et al, 2013).

Challenges

Chichén Itzá also faces many challenges its main challenge being the authenticity at the site due to the souvenir vendors , Milman,2015 findings showed that some of the souvenirs that the vendors were selling to the tourists were “not always related to Chichén Itzá's story or the Mayan culture” (Milman,2015) this shows that there is a major issue with the authenticity of the souvenirs, this causes further problems as they are being sold to un-knowing tourists and the souvenirs have nothing to do with the culture. Similar to this there is also trouble with authenticity with the use of the site as the site has been used for many different events over the years however not all of these events have been related to the Mayan culture in anyway (whc.unesco.org) this causes a range of problems and hinders the site as it appears

that they are leaning towards the economic aspects of the site, by holding these unrelated events people are still paying for tickets to visit, rather than focus on the cultural value of the site and the rich history of the site that draws people toward it. Also, this may hinder the site as tourists are less likely to visit the site if they're holding events that are not authentic to the site as they want to experience the heritage and the Maya culture at the site which these events are not representing.

Leading on from this, Albright, 2010 also writes another article about how concerts at Chichén Itzá have damaged the site one of the most famous being Elton John how performed at the foot of the pyramid the INAH opposed these concerts but they still went ahead (Albright, 2010) this shows again the authenticity of the site is under scrutiny. It can also be inferred that these concerts have been held to draw the public in which means that the tourists are having a major impact at the site even causing damage.



(Perez, 2010) Elton John at Chichén Itzá.

Another problem is the influence of other forms of media and literature that are very influential in forming people's views of the site's history and the Mayan culture itself. Breglia, 2006 writes that the ideology of the modern Maya has been constructed by three very influential texts and media (57). Breglia evaluates the three forms the first one being "Sylvanus G. Morley's 1925 National Geographic article "Chichén Itzá, an Ancient American Mecca" the author includes the photos that Sylvanus used in his article which includes the a photograph of a modern Maya boy resting against an ancient Maya ruins although the caption discusses the problems the modern descendants of the Maya face the author then criticizes this stating that this has made the modern Maya are "explicitly made into a body of archaeological interest" (Breglia, 2006) also she makes the bold statement in saying that "the modern Maya is anachronistic" (58) (Breglia, 2006) . As these photographs were put in an influential magazine this will form people's opinions on the culture before they visit Mexico and see what the culture is like for themselves. This may hinder the site as people have a perceived opinion on the site and the culture that may not be very true.

The second form is a film which is “Sergei Eisenstein’s ¡Que Viva México!” the author states that this film makes the “living Maya are a more romanticised anachronism” (Breglia,2006) this shows that the film is again a specific view of Maya culture and media is a major influencer and as this is a film people may believe that this is an accurate representation of the history and the culture when as the Breglia states that it may be a “romanticised” representation.

The last text is one by Redfield it is a journal titled “Maya Archaeology as the Mayas See It” Breglia explains that within the article Redfield has a very different concept on what heritage is making the bold statement that the ruins at Chichén Itzá “are not...heritage” (Breglia,2006) Breglia then explains his reasons behind this statements saying that “the local Maya do not possess adequate historical or scientific knowledge of the ruins for them their knowledge[...] is unsophisticated folklore” (Breglia,2006) this is very bold and may hinder the reputation of the site as the author has stated that the local people do not have enough knowledge on the site and it is just mythology which does not leave a impression with tourists that plan on visiting the site. All three of these focus very much on the site and it’s heritage although these appear to be quite biased in creating a certain image towards the Maya civilisation and the heritage at the site which can be seen as an orientalist perspective of Mexico and the Mayan culture which hinders Chichén Itzá.

Recommendations

If I was to recommend anything for the sight to change I would suggest holding more events at the site that are related to the heritage at the site as I feel that would boost tourism even more. I would also suggest that the government work with the souvenir vendors and the local people to improve relations and work with them to make their souvenirs more authentic so the site authenticity is up to a high standard.

Conclusion

It is clear that tourism has a major impact on the heritage of a site, and the heritage practices that are carried out at Chichén Itzá. Tourism has helped the site in many different ways people now visit Mexico to see these sites specifically, tourists have become stakeholders in the site because they provide so much to all heritage sites not just Chichén Itzá. They have helped put money into the site which has led to the Mexican government setting up the INAH to help all cultural sites over Mexico, the government have started to take notice that these sites need to be conserved and protected. The stakeholders have also helped the site as the local people help

protect and conserve the site, they get the site ready for the tourists to consume the site and attempt to show off Mayan culture to the world in the most authentic way as possible. However, tourism has also hindered the site as the authenticity of the site is now being questioned, this is mainly due to the souvenir vendors that are producing souvenirs that are not authentic to the Mayan culture. Like most things heritage is political which means that the authorities have seen a way to make money through the site so they hold events to draw more people in however they have looked over the negative impacts that these events have on the site and with the sites authenticity. Literature and media have also hindered the site by presenting in a certain way and even saying that the heritage of the site is just folklore. In its simplest form tourism has helped the site along with the various stakeholders but has also hindered Chichén Itzá as it is now being commercialised and becoming a tourist enclave.

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