

**HERITAGE SITES AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AS LEVERAGE FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT : THE "GRAND SITE DE FRANCE NETWORK" EXPERIENCE**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article is based on the experience of the "Grands Sites de France Network". *Grand Sites de France* is a national association, which brings together elected local authorities responsible for both day-to-day action and long term evolution, conservation and presentation of cultural landscapes and other natural and cultural heritage sites, protected for their landscape value. The article shows its experiences in the field of sustainable tourism and local development of regions via sustainable management of heritage sites.

KEY WORDS: Grand sites de France, Sustainable Tourism, Local Development, heritage sites,

**RESUMEN**

El artículo presenta la experiencia de la Red "Grand Sites de France". La red es una asociación nacional que aglutina a diversos responsables municipales y que tiene por objetivo el trabajo cotidiano para la conservación y la dinamización de los paisajes culturales y otros lugares con fuerte tradición natural y cultural y que han sido protegidos por su alto valor paisajístico. Las autoras pretenden compartir una experiencia de turismo sostenible y desarrollo local basada en la gestión sostenible del patrimonio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Grand sites the France, Turismo Sostenible, Desarrollo local, patrimonio

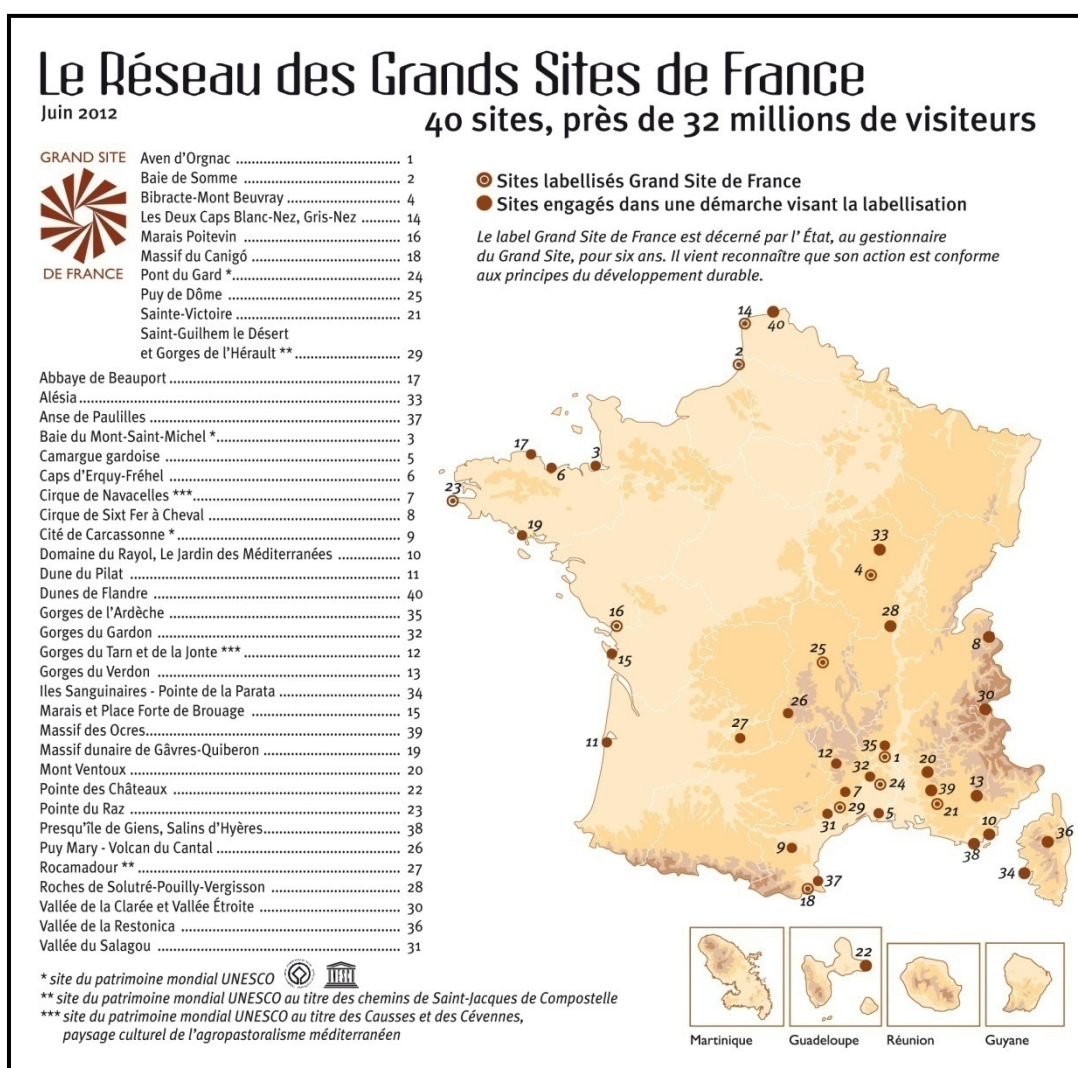
**RESUM**

L'article presenta l'experiència de la Xarxa "Grand Sites de France". La xarxa és una associació nacional que aglutina a diversos responsables municipals i que té per objectiu el treball quotidià per a la conservació i la dinamització dels paisatges culturals i altres llocs amb forta tradició natural i cultural que han estat protegits pel seu alt valor paisatgístic. Les autores pretenen compartir una experiència de turisme sostenible i desenvolupament local basada en la gestió sostenible del patrimoni.

PARAULES CLAU: Grand sites the France, Turisme Sostenible, Desenvolupament Local, patrimoni

## 1. What is the Grands Sites de France network

"Grands Sites de France" network is a national association, which brings together elected local authorities responsible for both day-to-day action and long term evolution, conservation and presentation of cultural landscapes and other natural and cultural heritage sites, protected for their landscape value. 40 sites and 32 million visitors annually, these two figures mean very strong tourism pressures, and some major challenges for their managers: How to find and maintain a balance between the need to protect our heritage and its undeniable tourist potential? How to develop it in a sustainable manner? Via integrated management.



In France, a national policy is currently carried out in cooperation with local authorities to manage sites with respect for their cultural and/or natural values, the genius loci and local populations. The policy aims at creating local development in cooperation with

local populations linked to the sites' values without damaging them. The responsibility for managing the Grands Sites in France has for many years been very centralized.

Nowadays, local authorities, in agreement with state administration, are the main driving force in implementing this strategy of sustainable tourism and management of heritage sites and their surroundings. State administration guarantees legal protection of the Grands Sites, decides on their classification and issues authorisations for restoration or modifications within protected areas. But with the exception of a few major monuments, which remain managed directly by the State, local bodies created and directed by elected local authorities are now responsible for the management of the Grands Sites.

The Grand Sites are more than places of outstanding beauty and immense value, they are more than just the monument or protected area in their centre, they are territories where people live and work, they comprise fields, pastures, economic activities etc. and site managers integrate this reality into their management. Heritage Sites cannot be apprehended only as sites for tourists, but also as living spaces and the fact that populations are taking part in the Grands Sites' actions is essential for it brings better understanding and pride to the inhabitants, better preservation and a better base for sustainable development. We always need to think of a site in its environment. This approach benefits to tourism as well since tourists are more and more looking for authenticity and for interaction with local populations.

This paper will present the global goal of this national policy, Grands Sites de France Network's work and practical accounts of on-the-ground managers. It will focus on the key role of good governance and the key role of local authorities in the partnership between the tourism sector and conservation sector, and in the integration of tourism planning in the management of heritage sites as well as the importance of working not only for tourists but for local populations as well, all in the aim of sustainable development in all its dimensions (environmental, social and economic).

## **2. The challenge: Finding and maintaining a balance**

This article is based solely on the experience of the Grands Sites de France Network in the field of sustainable tourism and local development of regions via sustainable management of heritage sites.

Answering the question of balance is not easy in France, a country that is the world's leading tourist destination (with 82 million international visitors annually), and which has strong domestic tourism (growing with the economic crisis we experienced during the past

four years). The concentration of natural and cultural heritage sites is very strong in France. They form the basis of the tourism economy, accounting for 6.2% of GDP.

What are the problems the sites face(d)? The majority of these sites have been protected since the 1950s, sometimes with poorly integrated infrastructures, with insufficient consideration for the environment and with no managing bodies for many of them. It has been recognized for some time now that the way these sites are managed must be changed. That is the role of the Grands Sites de France Network – to help managers in the adaptation of their practices to find balance between protection and opening to the public. What other problems are the sites facing today and what measures are being undertaken to improve things? We face invasion of cars and coaches, undesirable levels of crowding disrupting site's atmosphere (*genius loci*), obtrusive shopping outlets which are becoming the same wherever you go, souvenir shops with products that are anything but locally produced, local residents depending solely on tourism or, on the contrary, residents who object to the influx of tourists and develop hostile attitudes, regular visitors who no longer want to come to sites that have become “tourist traps”. In short, many heritage sites are victims of their own success – a success that is not sustainable.



Illegal parking at the Grand Site des Roches de Solutré-Pouilly-Vergisson before parking installation ©Grand Site des Roches de Solutré-Pouilly-Vergisson, 2001 and A shop with standardized and low quality products at the Grand Site de la Baie du Mont Saint-Michel ©Réseau des Grands Sites de France, 2008.

### 3. A national sustainable development policy for heritage and cultural landscapes

The national "Grand Site de France" policy has been implemented for 30 years. The Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development operates this policy and it concerns natural and cultural sites, protected for their landscape value by a long-standing and powerful law dating from 1930. This law relating to "the protection of natural monuments and sites with artistic, historic, scientific, legendary or picturesque character" allows protection of sites covering very large areas, often including important monuments which are themselves protected as historical monuments.

The Grands Sites often include areas of recognized ecological importance as well. These are subject to national and/or European laws on the protection of biodiversity such as Natura 2000. They are very popular and well known in France, and in some cases worldwide. They form the bedrock of tourism in France and you will no doubt be familiar with many of them, such as the Mont Saint Michel and its Bay in Normandy or the Sainte-Victoire Mountain in Provence, made famous by Paul Cézanne in his paintings. They all attract large numbers of visitors: the 40 sites in our network attract 32 million visitors annually, whether local, regional, national or international. Some of them are also included on the UNESCO World Heritage List, like Mont St Michel and its Bay, the Roman aqueduct of Pont du Gard, the fortified City of Carcassonne, and so on. In every case, the values and key concepts of the World Heritage Convention inspire our actions, independently on the status of the sites.



Grand Site du Pont du Gard ©Réseau des Grands Sites de France, 2010

Recently, the Ministry of Environment has created a label to distinguish the sites whose managing bodies have achieved a level of excellence in sustainable management (socially, economically and environmentally). This national label "Grand Site de France" became part of the environmental law in 2010. This label is given for 6 years, and its renewal is possible only after an evaluation. 12 Grands Sites have been awarded the "Grand Site de France" label up to date.

#### **4. Grands Sites de France Network's Creation and Aims**

Around 2000, local authorities managing the Grands Sites wanted to join in a network to share their experience and good practices, overcome their difficulties, move forward together and construct joint projects.

Therefore, our association (NGO) – the Grands Sites de France Network was created through a bottom-up initiative and not a "top-down" decision; managerial bodies join us on a voluntary basis. We have no authority over those local bodies, members of the association, as our role is to facilitate their moving forward together, learning new skills, exchanging on good practices etc. We are recognized and supported in this by the state, especially by the Ministry of the environment. The Grands Sites de France Network works closely with other heritage networks on the national level, such as national parks, natural reserves, various associations of historic towns etc. as well as with partners at the international level (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Council of Europe etc.) Our activities consist of on-site workshops, thematic meetings, trainings and group works. All our work is based on good practice exchange since we believe very strongly in our members' expertise.

In the 40 members of our network, 12 sites have been awarded the "Grand Site de France" label and are helping and inspiring the 28 other which are working on a daily basis to obtain it in the years to come. The Grands Sites de France Network has an official role in the "Grand Site de France" label procedures.



14<sup>th</sup> Grands Sites de France Network Annual Meeting, here a visit of the mining sites of the Grand Site du Massif du Canigó ©Réseau des Grands Sites de France, 2012

## 5. What changes in the Grands Sites visitor's expectations?

Studies carried out with our public show that more and more, visitors do not appreciate being drowned in a crowd, preferring to be treated in a more personalized manner. Mass tourism is not the way to go. Visitors want human contact, they want to meet the residents and workers of the places they visit or stay at, they want to eat local food and buy local products (food, pottery, carved wood, local stories etc.).

In a Grand Site, they are looking for a new, interesting and enriching experience, something unfamiliar and in a way overpowering by its magnitude, beauty and identity, but also relaxing and shareable with friends and family, especially their children. Heritage sites are important places for inter-generational relationships and for value transmission from parents or grandparents to younger generations. Therefore, information about the site, its values and its inhabitants must be accessible and adapted to visitors with a wide range of cultural expectations and backgrounds, and programmes for young visitors are to be developed. One expression comes up often in surveys carried out with the French public: "Don't over-develop these sites!" Culturally, public is attached to the notion of heritage as a common asset with a local anchorage which should not be turned into business.

## **6. Sustainable management to protect sites, channel sustainable tourism and be the local development engine**

Local authorities, in agreement with French state administration, have decided to react to un-sustainable tourism and development of the 50s, 60s and 70s. In the past 20 years, they have all worked to change site management methods in order to adopt a strategy of sustainable development, to manage sites with respect for its cultural and/or natural values, the "spirit" (atmosphere) of the place, to work in respect of and in coordination with local populations and to promote local economic development. Many tourists want to have an intimate experience with the place they are visiting and they are more and more numerous to care about the impact their visit may have on the site – positive in terms of local economy and negative on the protected site itself.

Grands Sites' experience shows that protection laws, however powerful they are (and the legal arsenal regarding these sites is very powerful in France), are essential but not enough to protect this emblematic heritage. It's not a case of "tourism versus protection" or "visitors versus locals". On the contrary, the healthy management of heritage tourism is central for the Grands Sites' protection. We cannot protect these sites if we are not acting according to principles of integrated sustainable development and we cannot offer a "real" experience to tourists if we cut them from local populations and vice-versa. The appreciation of the other comes with knowledge.



People enjoying the Grand Site de la Dune du Pilat ©Réseau des Grands Sites de France, 2012

Local authorities have wide-ranging powers and have responsibility for policy coordination across their territory (town planning, economic development, environmental policy, local transport, etc.), which allows them to have a global vision and to act globally on both the site AND its environment, and not only on the protected zone. This broad vision allows the managing bodies to act towards local economic development via heritage sites and sustainable tourism. It is important to state that tourism may play an important role in local economic development but it cannot be the unique way to take. It is the managing bodies that draw up the strategy of presentation and transmission, including congestion management, and the site management plan, while respecting rules of protection and in close cooperation with the culture and environment state bodies at the national or regional levels and local inhabitants and workers. Local authorities are also in charge of day-to-day running of the Grands Sites and the reception of visitors: information, guidance, services, facilities, ticketing, designing maps and interpretation tools, programming cultural events, public relations and site promotion, carrying out necessary work, and so on. Preservation, management and tourism promotion should be in balance and harmony between visitors and 'locals' is a basic need for local economic development.

Another significant point is that heritage sites' impacts on local economy are important but indirect. This is often a difficult point to explain to partners, investors or public state authorities that think in terms of economic profitability and direct economic impact. The impact is indirect and will be attained only through management in a framework of sustainable development. If a site is well managed, all funds being invested in it contribute to sustainable tourism and economic development of the area.

## **7. Three examples of sustainable tourism and local development**

These three examples show different strategies local development through sustainable tourism in heritage sites. We choose the following sites, all of whom have obtained the "Grand Site de France" label from the Ministry of the Environment: Grand Site du Marais



poitevin (Poitevin marsh in Western France), Grand Site du Puy Mary – Volcan du Cantal (biggest extinct volcano in Europe) and Grand Site Sainte-Victoire.

*Grand Site du Marais Poitevin* is a cultural landscape of canals, fields, pastures and villages in Western France. It used to suffer from short-term tourism (1.5 days in average) concentrated in the heart of the area. The only attraction used to be visits of the canals in small boats. Agriculture was being abandoned since extensive agriculture – the only possible in the area, was not profitable any more. This meant that the landscape started to close itself and the visitor could not live the experience he came for, this feeling being emphasised by the over-concentration of tourists. The managing authority did an important work with local populations and local economic actors (mostly farmers and boatmen). The marsh landscape got back and is keeping its beauty via the renewal of traditional agricultural practices. The boatmen follow a quality chart, which guarantees a quality experience for the visitor. This work on quality and on diversification of tourism (400km of cycling paths were built for example) paid off. In 2011, the average length of stay was of 7 days – visitors stay longer, spend more money in the region and the tourism flow is dispatched in the entire site. Both the tourist's experience and local economy have improved. For its exemplary sustainable management, the site got the "Grand Site de France" label in 2010. That same year, the site got the "European Destination of Excellence" award for sustainable tourism development.



Cows boarding a boat at the heart of the Grand Site du Marais poitevin ©Réseau des Grands Sites de France, 2008

*Grand Site du Puy Mary – Volcan du Cantal* is part of the largest extinct volcano in Europe. It is a very big site (approx. 36000ha with 10000ha strictly protected). Its location in a very rural and remote area played an important part in the economic decline of the region in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By the 1990s, population density dropped to 4 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> and there were very few young people left in the villages around the Puy Mary Mountain. For almost fifteen years now, Grand Site's du Puy Mary managing body has been working with local mayors and local populations to create a new project for the region. Nowadays, local actors and populations are strongly engaged in the project. Several new small scale tourism amenities opened around Puy Mary in the last few years – mostly

restaurants and accommodations. By playing the card of authenticity and cosiness, use of local products and a "back to basics" approach, they managed to attract large numbers of visitors throughout the year. Visitors sensitive to authenticity are mostly sensitive to the environmental and landscape values of the site, which is a real plus. The managing body accompanies the local businesses in their implementation and boosts the project with interpretation centres that are for visitors and locals alike. Local economy got a new start.



Making children understand the Grand Site du Puy Mary – Volcan du Cantal and its integrated management via a game workshop ©Réseau des Grands Sites de France, 2010

*Grand Site Sainte-Victoire*, a site located in the direct vicinity of Aix-en-Provence, is best known for the numerous paintings Paul Cézanne did of it. But it is also a site with rich biodiversity (Natura 2000) and an inhabited territory with a common goal – to preserve, manage and promote the site in a framework of sustainable development. Local populations take part in the project. The managing body recently commanded a study of the site's and tourism impact on local economy. Since there is no entrance fee for tourists, all benefits are indirect. The attraction of Sainte-Victoire brings tourists to the region (not only to the site itself). 60 million euros are spent annually by the visitors. They also generate 700 jobs and 9 million on local taxes. Sainte-Victoire's name also generates impacts in terms of brand value and in terms of real estate value. Even though the impact of a heritage site on local economy is very difficult to measure, if well managed and reinvested locally, it is always positive, there can be no doubt.



Local products in the Grand Site Sainte-Victoire shop ©Réseau des Grands Sites de France, 2008.

It should be underlined that a heritage site's public management structure is usually financed by the profit from related services and merchandise (for example parking, guides, souvenirs sales, etc.), as well as from public funds. Few are the sites with admission fees to the site. The site has a duty to function efficiently as a public service, but it is has no obligation to be profitable. Even though it is sometimes difficult to understand, heritage sites' impacts on local economy are important but indirect and will be attained only through management in a framework of sustainable development and if a site is well managed, all funds being invested in it contribute to the economic development of the area. Public pays attention to this point and wants to see fairness.

## 8. Becoming international since 2010

Since 2010, the Grand Site de France Network has been opening itself to international perspective. The International Training and Exchange Centre for Francophone Heritage Sites' Managers was created in 2010 in the framework of a wide partnership. In 2012, the Steering Committee comprises the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO, French National Commission for UNESCO, France-UNESCO Convention, ICOMOS France, the Association of French World Heritage Properties, 3 French Ministries (Foreign Affairs, Culture and Environment), the Regional Council of Burgundy, the University of Burgundy, the Ecole Arts et Métiers ParisTech of Cluny, the Centre des Monuments nationaux and the European Centre of Archaeology in Bibracte, France.

It is intended for French-speaking site managers worldwide, whether they come from French-speaking countries or not, who wish to manage their sites in a sustainable manner, confront their views and share their practices with peers who face similar issues. Three major themes are in the competences of the Centre: 1) international network and information resources platform, 2) training and 3) sites' cooperations. The first intensive training for 19 managers from 13 countries took place in December 2011 under the auspices

of the French National Commission for UNESCO. In 2012 and 2013 a Workshop on heritage sites' international cooperation is organised in November, a delocalised workshop is upcoming in January 2013 in Burkina Faso and another edition of the intensive training is in preparation for September 2013. Currently, the network is composed by 71 heritage sites' managers or experts from 26 countries, the online database consists of over 200 documents and links and several international cooperations between sites have begun<sup>1</sup>.



Heritage Sites' Managers in Cluny during the intensive training session in December 2011 ©Réseau des Grands Sites de France, 2011.

## 9. In conclusion

Based on our experience, management of heritage sites needs to be regulated by a local body representing public interest, in co-operation with state administration, local populations and scientists.

The challenge is to combine good public policies with private involvement with an important share of local involvement and investment, on the ground of shared values. Heritage site's managers and states shall always bear in mind that integrated management is the best option for the sites and the surrounding regions and that preservation, management and tourism promotion should be in balance and that there is a need to work towards a harmony between visitors and 'locals'.

It is necessary to bear in mind that heritage sites are not attraction parks hence short term economic profitability should never be a site manager's first aim. Heritage sites are also to be taken and treated as a whole with territories/regions that surround them and tourism is not the only means for local development.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information: <http://www.polepatrimoine.org>

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, do not hesitate to visit our website [www.grandsitedefrance.com](http://www.grandsitedefrance.com)