

# Threatening Venice and its Lagoon: the effect of international policies on management sustainability and heritage preservation

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## Abstract

Art cities have been under scrutiny in the last decades, presenting phenomenon of over tourism with major impacts on livability. The case of Venice is particularly complex, presenting critical environmental conditions that threaten its survival. In 2016 UNESCO started a procedure to put Venice in the list of sites in danger, questioning to a large extent urban policies, and asking for enhanced preservation measures. This started a round of discussion with the State Party, mainly at the formal level. The purpose of this research is to review the case under the lens of value tensions between stakeholders. Reports, states of conservation and decisions produced are analyzed, applying a qualitative discourse analysis. The case study of Venice depicts the contradiction between vested interests that lie behind values, and the pivotal issue of the sustainability of the site. This research focuses on conflicts inside institutional actors, raised between the technical and the political level.

## Keywords

Venice, UNESCO, sustainability, preservation, policy

## Venice and its Lagoon: the case and its background

Venice and its Lagoon is one of the early sites listed in the WHL. The relevance of this case study, beyond its outstanding cultural and environmental value, lays in the political and public debate that rose around the site in the late 2010s, making it one of the most discussed cases of politicization of a UNESCO site<sup>1</sup>. The UNESCO site covers 70.176,4 ha of land and lagoon that are protected and managed by 21 different entities, with the City of Venice as Site Manager. The listing, occurred in 1987<sup>2</sup>, was the result of a nine-year political journey involving several actors: Italian State Party<sup>3</sup>, Venice City Council, civil society, and UNESCO<sup>4</sup>. This delay in the inscription rose institutional concern, with the World Heritage Committee underlining how «the inclusion [...] will further strengthen the coherency of the cultural policy of UNESCO<sup>5</sup>». The site was eventually listed as Venice and its Lagoon, underlying the tight relation between the city (cultural heritage) and the lagoon (natural heritage). Though, the property was classified as just cultural site. After Venice being listed in the WHL, more than 20 years passed without any significant exchange between UNESCO and the State Party. The beginning of the

debate on the conditions of the site dates back to 2014 when civil society addressed to UNESCO the poor state of maintenance and management of Venice and its Lagoon<sup>6</sup>. Consequent to this notification, the case of Venice and its Lagoon was discussed in the 38<sup>th</sup> meeting of the WH Committee<sup>7</sup>, where two pivotal decisions were taken: a) to run a joint UNESCO/ICOMOS/RAMSAR mission to the property in 2015, to assess current conditions of the property; b) to request the State Party to produce a report on the state of conservation of the site. If the State of Conservation report by the State Party<sup>8</sup> resulted in a brief technical document on ongoing projects and measures adopted, the outcome of the joint mission is an extensive report on the conditions of the site, published in 2016<sup>9</sup>. What emerged from this first mission report is an overall state of degradation of the site, with severe threats to its tangible, intangible, cultural, and mostly natural heritage. The report identifies several issues, but the main problems regard four areas: environmental, economic and social sustainability, and heritage conservation. In this document, the main concern is on environmental and social sustainability: the main issue is over-tourism and its unsustainable impact on other social and economic aspects. The report ends up with a set of 23 recommendations to the Site Manager that should solve the issues of the site. In the following gathering of the WH Committee, the reported state of conservation of the Venice and its Lagoon was discussed: here, for the first time, Venice is threatened to be inscribed in the list of World Heritage in Danger<sup>10</sup>. Despite the concern for the overall condition of the site, UNESCO Decision 40 is oriented toward resolving the issues. As normal practice, the WH Committee asked the State Party to submit an updated State of Conservation. This time, the state of conservation<sup>11</sup> presented a strong political connotation, linked to recent changes in the local government. It is not a technical reply to UNESCO Decision 40, but an extensive stance against UNESCO's evaluation of the property linked to recent changes in the local government: the document calls out UNESCO for ignoring the real state of conservation of the site. The aim is on one hand to defend the current administration, on the other to provide justification for ongoing problems. The years from 2017 to 2020 are characterized by highly intense sequence of UNESCO Decisions and States of Conservation one after the other. In this period, the politics leave the stage back to professionals: the reports and decisions show technical knowledge, rather than a political interest. The UNESCO Decisions 41 and 43 express concern for a few ongoing activities in the WH sites, but at the same time they welcome the progresses reported by the State Party<sup>12,13</sup>. The possibility of inscribing the site in the list of World Heritage in danger, though, still remains. In parallel, two States of Conservation reports by the State Party (2018<sup>14</sup>, 2020-21<sup>15</sup>) were produced by Venice City Council, as requested by UNESCO's decisions. These two reports present a technical description of the conditions of the site and offering further information to integrate and update the City of Venice 2017 report. During this term, the diplomatic relationship between Venice City Council (and Venice Major) and UNESCO were denoted by the reciprocal will of pursuing a shared solution for the WH site. This three-year period is concluded by a second joint mission, invited by Venice City Council. The following UNESCO 2020 Report, published in January 2021, is structured in 54 recommendations, depicting an even-worst scenario than in 2015<sup>16</sup>. The report criticises the performance of the site administration, pointing out the absence of substantial improvements in the management of the site and in the solution of existing problems. Given the dramatic scenario described in the report, the draft at the 44<sup>th</sup> session of the World Heritage Committee outlined the decision to inscribe Venice and its Lagoon in the list of sites in danger. Nevertheless, during the

convention, the Ethiopia's delegate opposed to the inclusion of Venice in the black list, underlying the progresses made by the Italian State Party<sup>17,18</sup>. The diplomatic pressure beyond the Ethiopian delegate intervention succeeded in subverting the initial draft of Decision 44. As a result, not only the proposal by the experts of listing Venice and its Lagoon in the WHL in danger was dropped, but also any further threat to put the site on the list of WH in danger was weakened.

### **Multilevel tensions: international agencies and local government**

The debate on heritage conservation and sustainable city management clearly highlights the difficulties and tensions in the relationship between international agencies and local governments. In the context of the EU Horizon 2020 project UNCHARTED, our research team studied tensions and potential conflicts. The first issue highlighted concerns the international agencies' evaluation of the management practices of local administrations. Each local context, and in particular a complex case like Venice, presents factual peculiarities that require *ad hoc* solutions. These solutions must adapt to the context of reference, with limited possibilities of decision and action for the local authorities and agents involved. The evaluations of the international agencies are based on objective data, but do not take into account the practical complexity in the implementation of the recommendations provided to the State Party. The second question concerns the value given by the State Party to Venice being on the WHL of UNESCO, and with which status. UNESCO's threat to insert Venice and its Lagoon on the WH list in danger did not quite trigger a virtuous mechanism of practical resolution, but has instead mostly unleashed the political machine to defend the status of the WH property. At the local level it is possible to see a first moment of reaction in contrast to UNESCO, and then a second moment of reconciliation - but only on the diplomatic level. At the national level, instead, after years of delegating the relationship with UNESCO to local authorities, the Italian Government abruptly intervened in 2021, by banning large ships from the city's historic centre - which conceals a strong political connotation - to avoid Venice's inclusion on UNESCO's blacklist. We thus see how in the case of Venice and its Lagoon UNESCO has little control, being able to limit itself only to threats of political nature, while the state party, despite the almost total lack of effective resolutions to preserve the site, does not accept the inclusion of Venice and its Lagoon in the WH in danger list - which would be an actual declaration of failure in the administration of the site. This issue rose in the conflict between sustainable development and economic exploitation, which lays in the impossibility to find solutions that favour economic development without compromising the ecosystem of the city and its social, economic, and heritage preservation. This tension resulted eventually in an ambiguous and latent conflict<sup>19</sup>, till the international threat was eventually set aside in 2021. In conclusion, the case of Venice exemplifies the difficulties in the management of a complex site, in the relationship between sovereign state and international agencies, and in the assessment of a World Heritage site.

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