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Managing sacred sites for tourism: A case study of visitor facilities in Palmyra, New York

Abstract

Sacred sites are qualitatively different than others developed for tourism purposes. However, sacred sites do have touristic appeal and can benefit from their popularity as both pilgrimage and secular tourist attractions. To protect the sacred resource and to make the touristic or culminating pilgrimage experience meaningful, many site managers develop well designed, well maintained and efficiently operated tourist facilities such as visitor centers, interpretive resources, and events. These facilities serve specifically to accommodate a wide range of site-based experiences from satisfaction of curiosity to life-changing hierophanies. Palmyra, New York is rich with cultural and religious sites that attract thousands of tourists each year. Most sites are meaningful to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) who travel to Palmyra to see the birthplace of their religion. Latter-day Saint sacred sites are important to the many pilgrim-like visitors and to the community in which they are located. The world-class tourist facilities and events associated with LDS sacred sites provide positive opportunities for social and economic development in the region. Specifically, this case study examines the positive impacts, which include site preservation and protection, education and interpretation, social identification, hospitality, social buffering, employment, local spending, tourism product enhancement, marketing, and business networking.

Keywords:

sacred sites; pilgrimage; religious tourism; visitor centers; interpretation; economic development; USA

Introduction

To some tourists, the statue of a venerated deity or saint, a ritualistic celebration, an obscure bucolic grove, or magnificent cathedral is something that is relatively profane and is to be admired because of its artistic quality, entertainment impact, natural charm, or architectural and archaeological significance. To others, such sites, events and structures are no less than hierophanies and their inherent sacredness provides meaningful attraction and may also inspire pilgrimage. To yet another type of tourist, these sites, events and structures are, at first, a curiosity and later, because of a numinous experience at the site, become sacred to the tourist.

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Tourists to sacred sites are attracted by curiosity and by devotion. The curious onlookers are drawn by a desire to see something different or to better understand why others are drawn to the site for reasons of devotion. Devotees or pilgrims to sacred sites are attracted by a sense of obligation, a desire to center their faith or spiritual understanding, or be enlightened or qualified. Whatever their reasons for visiting a sacred site, tourists and pilgrims both need services and from that need is born the potential for economic development in the community or region wherein the sacred attraction is located. Tourist facilities, which include a variety of basic traveler services and interpretive facilities, can both contribute to making the sacred site experience meaningful to the visitor and enhance the host community's economic base.

This case study examines the use of visitor centers and other site-related facilities at a location in the United States of America that is considered sacred by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). The sacred sites under examination are located in and near the village of Palmyra, New York. The study examines the role of tourist facilities in creating or supporting a 'meaningful' touristic experience, and their impact on the economic fortunes and cultural identity of the host community. In detailing the economic evolution of the community and development of the sacred sites and events, this study also explores the social dynamics that make the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane particularly perplexing for both host communities and sacred site managers. Palmyra's sacred site tourist facilities are discussed as they pertain to management of the meaningful tourism experience and to development of the local tourism enterprise.

Literature review

In the context of tourism, there are two general types of sacred spaces or sites: touristic sacred sites and sacralized tourist sites. Touristic sacred sites are sites which exist for sacred practices or are otherwise sacred in their nature, and which develop touristic attractiveness because of their sacredness. Such sites are not sacred to all visitors, but the general knowledge that they are so important and meaningful to some gives them curious appeal to others. Some examples discussed in the research literature include Toraja funerals (Crystal, 1977), Mormon temples (Hudman & Jackson, 1992), Amish communities (Boynton, 1986; Buck, 1977; Denlinger, 1975), and Haitian Voodoo ceremonies (Goldberg, 1983; Greenwood, 1974). These are sites and events that are considered sacred and have touristic appeal.

Sacralized tourist sites are sites that are developed and promoted for tourism purposes, but are presented and operated in such a way as to instill or emphasize sacred qualities. Some examples of sacralized tourist sites include wayside churches, historic homes (Fine & Speer, 1985), the Alamo, the Lincoln memorial and the childhood homes of political leaders.

For a site to become sacred in the eyes of those who visit, whether tourist or true pilgrim, it must be considered to be holy, set apart for the service or worship of deity, worthy of veneration, or entitled to reverence. The site achieves this status as the result

of a sacred experience enjoyed by one or more visitors who, in turn, testify of their experience to others who then accept their testimony and desire to be either vicarious or direct partakers of that sacred experience. Eliade (1957) described the sacred experience as a "centering" event during which an individual finds, in the midst of a relatively homogenous existence, a break or interruption and a realization that the physical space in which this interruption occurs is a space that is qualitatively different from others.

There are, of course, some sacred sites that are not touristic, and many tourist sites that are not at all sacred. When a tourist site is sacralized, according to MacCannell (1976), it goes through five steps. The first step is naming. Naming is the demarcation of the site as being worthy of preservation and veneration. The next step is the display of an object or opening of a site for visitation. This framing and elevation of a site defines and places an official boundary around it for protection and enhancement. Thus defined, a sacred site is further developed by enshrinement. This third step involves the expressed or implied necessity for pilgrimages to the site and the performance of specific rituals upon arrival. MacCannell's fourth step is mechanical reproduction. This is the production of material or verbal tokens to remind visitors of the site and its significance to them. The final step is social reproduction. Social reproduction is manifest in the naming of groups, cities and regions after the site, as it becomes a famous attraction.

The challenge in taking a non-sacred site and giving it touristic appeal through contrived significance and reverence is to make sure that the site is either perceived as being authentic or is overtly presented as a staged experience. It may be staged in every way but, as a covert tourist space, it must be perceived to be real or, as overt tourist space, it must be clearly understood that it is staged (MacCannell, 1973).

For those genuinely sacred sites that have touristic attractiveness, there is presented a different kind of challenge. How, for example, can the suspicion, skepticism and denial of authenticity by curious but non-believing sightseers be minimized when the treatment of the site or the presentation of the event by those who consider it sacred are such that they support the perception of staging? Also, where the sacredness of the site is generally recognized as being authentic, how can that sacredness be maintained in the presence of hordes of 'gawking gentiles' who, by their very presence and curiosity, threaten to detract from its holy, set apart, reverent nature? In response to these questions, the literature is somewhat mute, but the practice speaks volumes.

It is common for sacred site managers to present and protect the sacred resource by providing certain tourist facilities that are treated as virtually axiomatic key variables in responding to these challenges. At sacred sites, these important facilities include structures, programs and services that strive to permit tourist consumption without violation of the sacred space or activities of the site. Examples include visitor centers, interpretive displays/signs, performances, self-guided tour materials, and mobility limiting structures.

These tourist facilities are developed to balance the tourists' need for authenticity with the host culture's need to limit outside interference with their sacred lifestyles, events, sites and objects. Establishing and maintaining that delicate balance is a significant challenge, and research is needed to guide the decision-making associated with sacred site facility development and management. The practical value of inquiry into the juxtaposition of sacred and touristic experiences is manifest in the wide array of decisions that must be made in the planning, design and management of tourist facilities. Furthermore, a better understanding of the contribution of tourist facilities to the meaningful experience can also lead to an improved understanding of the contribution of tourist facilities to local and regional economic development. With a paucity of research devoted to examination of the impact of and the impact on tourists and local economies with respect to sacred or sacralized sites, this study provides timely and practical insights. Likewise, the literature is relatively quiet with respect to the nature of the tourism-generated sacred experience and this study, while not addressing the need directly, highlights the importance of scholarly work in all aspects of sacred site tourism.

It is the qualitative difference between the profane world and the meaningful, venerated space that gives a sacred site its attractiveness to tourists, but it is the inappropriate or poorly managed attention that tourists give to a sacred site that often desecrates it. Thus, the challenge for managers of tourism-friendly sacred sites is to invite people to come and hopefully experience or, at least, understand and appreciate what makes them sacred and, at the same time, protect and preserve the site as an uncommon, set apart, and authentic cultural resource. The challenge is exacerbated by the fact that not all tourists are interested in having a sacred experience. They may be motivated to visit the site by nothing more than simple curiosity or a perceived need to view it and take a verification photograph. Some may even approach their visit to a sacred site with apprehension and concern that they will be expected to or unwittingly have more than a superficial encounter and that, by so doing, experience an unsolicited and discomfoming change in spiritual or cultural perspective. However, in order for the visit to the sacred site to be worthwhile, it should be somewhat meaningful and sacred site managers should, therefore, recognize the need for and opportunities to create meaningful tourist experiences.

Discussion

The following discussion presents a non-empirical analysis of sacred site tourism in the Palmyra, New York area. The analytical framework of the case study is built around a literature-based examination of sacred sites in general, and developed (using data from expert interviews and site observations) to explain the unique nature of tourism to Palmyra's LDS sacred sites, and the impact of tourist facilities on host community identity and economic development.

PALMYRA, NEW YORK AND ITS LDS SACRED SITES

The area that is now Palmyra was settled in 1789 on a tract of land purchased for that purpose by American Revolutionary War veterans General John Swift and Colonel

John Jenkins. Growth of the community was modest at first, but the construction of the ambitious 362-mile barge canal between Lake Erie and New York City changed that. Palmyra served the varied needs of thousands of construction workers and their families and, when the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, the two ports in and near Palmyra made the village an important trade and commerce center. The canal made it possible to ship heavy items, including two large printing presses that were eventually established in the village. The printing presses gave Palmyra further significance in the cultural landscape, as well as future importance in the LDS story. The old Erie Canal and its modern replacement remind twenty-first century Americans of a nation of frontiers and exploration that was in search of national meaning.

Palmyra, which was once dubbed The Queen of the Erie Canal, attracts modern tourists who come in search of a meaningful experience. Some go to learn about and develop a greater appreciation of the rich history of this small community and to see or travel on the original canal as well as the newer versions of this engineering marvel. They see museums and other historical artifacts and walk the streets (parts of which have been carefully restored and seem to be frozen in time). By visiting Palmyra, the modern tourist could easily get the feeling that he or she has lived a day in the 1830's American frontier.

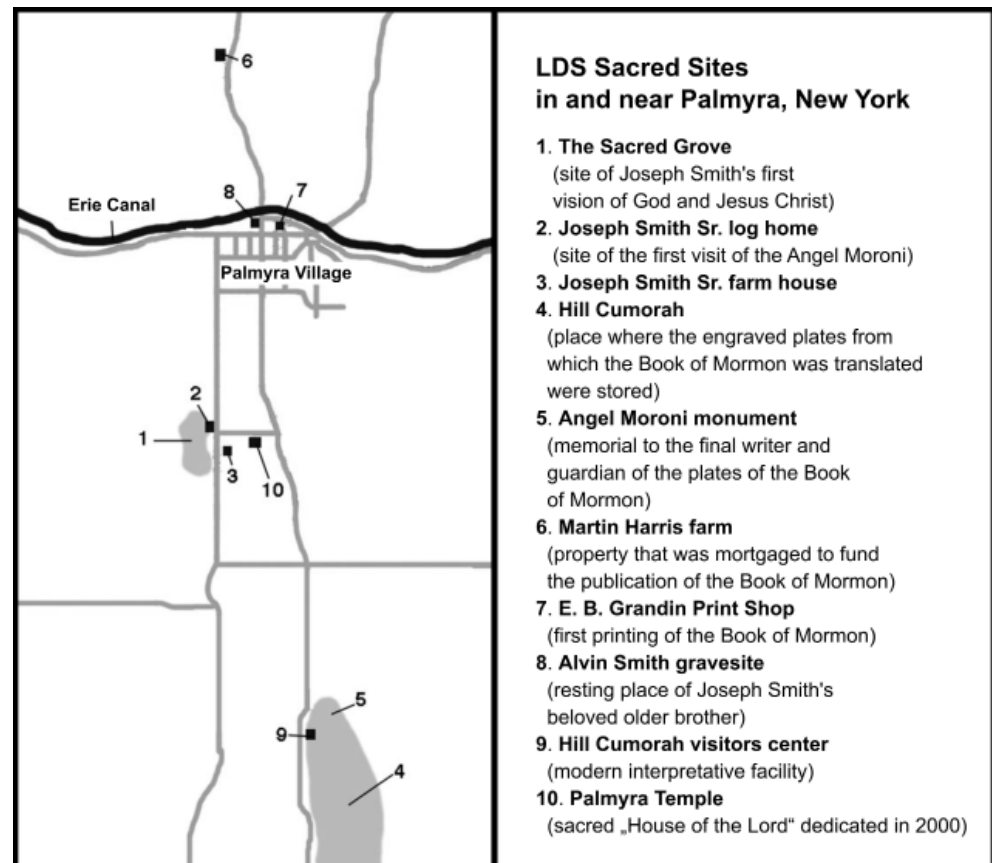
The other major historical role played by Palmyra is that of the birthplace of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). In 1820, a local farm boy, Joseph Smith Jr., announced that he had had a heavenly visitation in a grove near his family's humble homestead. At the time, there was extensive religious competition in the area and Smith's proclamation that none of the existing sects was 'true', attracted a great deal of positive and negative attention. While living in Palmyra, the young prophet was directed to ancient hidden records engraved on metallic plates that he translated and published as the Book of Mormon. He established a new church that now has over 13 million members worldwide. Many visitors to the Palmyra area are members of the LDS church and go there on what could appropriately be called an unofficial religious pilgrimage. They visit several sites that are considered to be sacred (by official Church designation and according to MacCannell's 1976 definition). It should be noted that the LDS church has no official practice of pilgrimage. These Palmyra sites are sacred in LDS culture, but are not sites that Latter-day Saints are required to visit in order to meet the obligations of their personal spiritual quest. Travel to the LDS sites in and near Palmyra is, therefore, not technically a pilgrimage, but it carries the same meaning and is driven by the same internal compulsion for the 200,000 or more LDS tourists that make the trip each year.

The designated LDS sacred sites are the Joseph Smith log home (a replica of the house in which the boy prophet lived when first visited by heavenly messengers), the Sacred Grove (an undisturbed woodland where Smith first saw God and Jesus Christ), the Smith farmhouse (where the Smith family lived for a short while), the Hill Cumorah (where the plates upon which were written the ancient text of the Book of Mormon

were stored), and the E. B. Grandin Print Shop (site of the first printing of the translated Book of Mormon). Two other sites in Palmyra are also visited by many of the LDS tourists. They are the site of the Martin Harris Farm (Mr. Harris witnessed the ancient Book of Mormon plates and mortgaged his farm to pay for the first [1830] printing of their translation), and the simple grave of Alvin Smith (Joseph's beloved older brother who died as a young man). Another LDS sacred site is the recently constructed Palmyra, New York Temple (Figure 1). This temple is one of over 150 around the world and enjoys no greater sacred significance than the others. It is, however, emotionally significant because of its setting within site of the Sacred Grove and in the midst of so many important LDS historical locations.

Figure 1

RELATIVE LOCATIONS OF LDS SACRED SITES IN AND AROUND PALMYRA, NEW YORK



Source: Based on annotated GoogleMap by Village of Palmyra, New York.

TOURIST FACILITIES AT LDS SITES

LDS sacred sites in and near Palmyra provide a wide range of tourist facilities. The least accommodating is the Palmyra LDS temple, which is not open to tourists and does not even have a visitor center like many other LDS temples do. The Alvin Smith grave has been carefully preserved but is not on church-owned or managed property and there are no tourist facilities at this site. In fact, the only tourist facility is a historical marker that identifies the other famous 'resident' of the cemetery, General John Swift. LDS visitors use church-produced maps to locate the cemetery. The Martin

Harris farm is owned and maintained by the LDS church, which accommodates tourists by providing parking areas and separate toilet facilities as well as two simple interpretive wayside signs. The Martin Harris home is not open for tours and there are no interpreters on site. In contrast, the E. B. Grandin Print Shop is staffed by trained interpreters and has been restored and renovated as a museum to accommodate independent and guided tours. At the Smith farm site (which is located outside of the village proper), the reconstructed log home, restored farmhouse, and protected Sacred Grove have visitor-parking areas and are supported by a modern visitor center. The visitor center is staffed with trained interpreters and guides and includes high-tech audio-visual displays. Visitors to the Sacred Grove are self-guided but assisted by unobtrusive wayside signs. On-site tour guides assist visitors to the log home and farmhouse. Visitors to the Hill Cumorah can follow self-guided paved trails to the monument at the top of the hill, or they can avail themselves of many interpretive services provided at the world-class Hill Cumorah Visitor Center on site. The visitor center is fully staffed and includes a large high-tech interpretive area. Additionally, thousands of tourists (LDS and non-LDS) visit the Hill Cumorah Pageant each July. This grand outdoor theatrical production with a cast of over 600 performers is held at the hill and dramatizes the major historical and spiritual events recounted in the Book of Mormon. The Hill Cumorah Pageant attracts over 35,000 spectators and is the largest tourist event in the region.

PROVIDING A MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE

Tourist facilities at LDS sacred sites in and around Palmyra help to create a meaningful tourist experience for all who visit: both the LDS pilgrim and the unaffiliated curious onlooker. They do so by informing and educating the visitor, preserving the integrity (authenticity) of the sites, and extending hospitality.

As educational tools, wayside signs, multi-media interpretive resources, tour guides, and performances all help to create meaning for the visitor by placing the events associated with the sites into a historical and social context. They tell the story of the place and of the religion that is so closely tied thereto. They help non-LDS visitors to understand the beliefs and perspectives of the Latter-day Saints, and they help the LDS visitors to contextualize their faith and vicariously share with their founder the feelings that are residual in this place where they believe the veil between heaven and earth has previously been parted.

With the exception of the cemetery where Alvin Smith is buried, the LDS sacred sites are owned and operated by the LDS Church. The tourist experience at the sites is, therefore, highly managed and the interpretation is consistent with LDS views and understanding of history. The sites are staffed by LDS missionaries and are supported by a technologically advanced and highly effective public relations unit of the Church. Other interpretive viewpoints are also available elsewhere in the community and may be presented with dispassionate objectivity (local historical societies) or laden with emotion and bias (protesters who aggressively confront visitors and express their

objections to some aspect of LDS theology or practice). Because of their permanence, convenience and perceived credibility, the established tourist facilities clearly have the advantage in educating visitors and helping visitors to center their faith, understand the story, and find meaning in what has made these sites sacred.

Tourist facilities in and near Palmyra serve to protect the sites and allow visitors to reflect on the sacred events in settings that are relatively true to the historical context. By reconstructing the Joseph Smith log home, for example, the site managers have made it possible for visitors to be told the story of the angel Moroni's visit to young Joseph Smith at the very location and in a room that is identical to the one in which the divine interaction occurred. Protected and left undisturbed (except for a few groomed trails and benches for introspective rest), the presentation of the Sacred Grove allows visitors to wander in and see the general location of Joseph's first vision. The extensive visitor facilities at the Hill Cumorah also help to preserve the site for interpretation and for meaningful personal experiences. Tourist facilities at Palmyra's sacred sites have facilitated MacCannell's defining requirement of a sacred site to be framed and enshrined.

No matter what personal significance a site may have to a visitor, that visitor will appreciate the site more if he or she feels welcome. Visitor centers, hosts, and interpreters at the LDS sacred sites are hospitable, welcoming, and knowledgeable. They are unpaid, full-time volunteers who are well trained and usually serving 'missions' lasting a year or more. Many have skills that allow them to serve international guests in their own languages. As such, their interest is in their guests having a meaningful or spiritual experience at the site, and their reward for exceptional hospitality is intrinsic. Hosts and interpreters welcome questions and encourage visitors to linger and reflect on their experiences at the sites. They take every opportunity to 'bear their testimony' and express their heartfelt belief, gratitude and love. By design, tourist facilities at these LDS sacred sites promote good feelings about the sites and establish a measure of personal connection thereto.

While hospitality and concern for the meaningfulness of visitors' experiences is an important function of tourist facility management, it should be recognized that catering to the 'belonging and separation' needs of local residents can and should be another management priority. The inevitable irritation that develops when large numbers of tourists directly impact the nature of the community (Doxey, 1975; Fridgen, 1996) can be minimized by facilities and programs that act as social and, sometimes, physical barriers between hosts and guests (Harrill, 2004). Tourist facilities can be those buffering agents.

Except in July (especially during the Hill Cumorah Pageant), the steady stream of visitors to LDS sacred sites has a negligible impact on crowding, traffic congestion, and other demands on social services that might interfere with the day-to-day activities and conditions of Palmyra's year-round residents (Daly, 2009). Because most of the

Palmyra LDS sacred sites provide adequate parking and comfort facilities, and are geographically separated from the village community, tourists often come and go without interacting with members of the host community. In many respects, the LDS sacred sites are designed or operated to be *in* the community but not *of* the community, and potentially negative interactions are thereby minimized.

However, the tourist facilities also serve to draw local residents in to that part of their history that attracts tourists. In addition to educational benefits offered through the visitor centers, other social and economic benefits accrue from community connections with the LDS Church, its local enterprises, and LDS volunteers (missionaries from other areas and local church members). There is a rich tradition of LDS sponsored or supported community service projects and ongoing community leadership/service in Palmyra (Kommer, 2009). The tourist facilities also serve as a base upon which tolerance and community integration is built (Sykes, 2009).

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

This socially separating function of tourist facilities is, in some ways, viewed as a benefit. But, from an economic perspective, the separation of guests and hosts has a neutral or negative impact on the local community. Not only do effective facilities keep the tourists away from the local residents, but also they unintentionally keep the tourists away from local businesses. The facilities help to create a complete on-site spiritual experience and many tourists do not venture into exploring other elements of the community for complementary cultural or economic experiences. The potential retail-based economic benefits of sacred site tourism may be overestimated (Smith & Krannich, 1998) when tourism facilities are as complex and complete as they are in Palmyra.

During the annual Hill Cumorah Pageant, thousands of visitors come to the area and many spend the day in the village of Palmyra. Several local businesses benefit significantly from a swollen customer base, but most do not perceive a significant increase in sales during this major event. Additionally, the local government incurs extra costs in providing more policing and traffic management services during this time (Daly, 2009). It may seem that the LDS tourist facilities do little to stimulate tourism-based economic activity in the community.

However, upon further examination, it becomes clear that tourist facilities at sacred sites can and do help to improve the economic fortunes of the host community. They do this primarily by increasing the year-round touristic attractiveness of the location through the creation and marketing of a competitive product (Hayes, 2009). Palmyra, for example, has non-LDS attractions that would continue to draw tourists but not the numbers of tourists that come because Palmyra has its historic attractions as well as the extremely well facilitated LDS sacred sites. It is the unique combination of sacred sites and other community attractions (all of which are well managed and presented) that gives this community a competitive advantage in certain types of tourism.

Not only do tourist facilities at sacred sites help to bring visitors (customers) into the local tourism enterprise setting, they also keep the visitors at the site longer than if those facilities were not there. The economic benefit of this is the potential for sales at local dining, retailing, and lodging establishments. This is particularly relevant at sites like those in Palmyra because the LDS sacred sites intentionally do not have associated food, retail, or lodging services. The facilities serve to keep the tourists in the region longer, but do not compete with local enterprises for the resulting business.

Although it does not happen much at the LDS sites in Palmyra, tourist facilities at sacred sites can partner with other tourist facilities in the area to expand the sacred site visitors' awareness of and access to the wide variety of local and regional attractions and services. Maintaining the integrity (non-commercial nature) of the sacred site and protecting its objectivity may limit the facility's opportunity to fully participate in a marketing network, but visitor center directors and staff, and site interpreters will likely be asked for information and advice about off-site purchasing opportunities and points of interest (Sykes, 2009).

Finally, tourist facilities at sacred sites provide local sales and employment opportunities. Local materials and services are purchased for the construction and maintenance of facilities, and site employees or volunteers spend their money locally on day-to-day living requirements. LDS sacred sites in Palmyra utilize unpaid volunteers extensively. It may appear that the lack of employment income because of this practice has a neutral economic impact on the community, but it should be noted that these volunteers (missionaries) move to the area and bring their money from other parts of the country. Those exogenous funds are spent locally and the economic multiplier is much greater than if they were paid employees using locally generated funds.

Conclusion

In the early 1800's, Palmyra, New York was a thriving community and important commercial center along the Erie Canal. The publication of the Book of Mormon and the establishment of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gave it an additional claim to fame. However, the coming of the railroads eclipsed the importance of the canal, and Palmyra was left behind in another way when persecuted members of the LDS Church moved west and settled in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally in Utah. Now a small community in a big state, Palmyra looks to a variety of industries and enterprises to revitalize its economy and enhance its community life. The LDS Church has reacquired the sites of historical and sacred importance and developed them for preservation and interpretation to thousands of tourists, the majority of which are Latter-day Saints. Extensive tourist facilities have been developed at the LDS sacred sites and these have contributed in several ways to the social and economic development of the Palmyra region. They have also contributed to making the sacred site visitors' experience more meaningful.

The tourist facilities help to focus the attention of tourists who come either as curious onlookers or as devoted 'pilgrims'. For the former, they demarcate and elevate the sites,

and for the latter they frame and enshrine them. For both, they help to give identity to a place and time and tell the story of a unique experience that has affected millions of people.

The tourist facilities have also contributed to regional economic development by enhancing the tourism product, reaching to distant tourism markets, and connecting visitors to local businesses that serve their needs. They bring money into the community in several ways, and provide opportunities for businesses and civic enterprises to cooperate in community enhancement initiatives. Unfortunately, the government and business organizations in small communities like Palmyra do not quantify the costs and benefits of tourism and, instead, rely on perceptions and claims by those in the community who feel affected. The perceptions documented in this study are subject to verification by empirical data and analysis, but do inform the researcher and readers of issues, trends and responses related to sacred site tourism in Palmyra, and the role and impact of tourist facilities. Quantitative measurement and further research is warranted and should be replicated at other sacred sites. It behooves both host communities and sacred site managers to scientifically measure the social and economic impact of that which attracts and accommodates the meaningful experience of visitors.

From observations made in the course of this case study, it can be concluded that designed, presented and managed tourist facilities such as visitor centers, interpretive resources, events, and performances can and do have a significant impact on the tourist experience at the site. Facilitated experiences range from satisfaction of curiosity to education and appreciation to a centering or numinous experience. When facilitated by tourist facilities, the impact is generally very positive and it applies to both devotees and curious onlookers.

It is also evident from this case study that facilities that are operated to serve the interests of both the sacred site managers and the community in which they are located can have a positive impact on the local and regional economy. The impacts will be direct, indirect and induced, and may be significant. However, they may not be fully understood or appreciated by site managers or community residents. In a village like Palmyra, where the LDS presence has been longer than anywhere else in the world and LDS tourists regularly come to enjoy the sacred sites, use local services, and patronize (although to a limited extent) local businesses, the economic and social contribution of sacred site tourism may be taken for granted.

A truly sacred site needs no tourist accommodation to be sacred. It derives its status from non-corporeal sources and from events and conditions that are independent of tourism. However, tourism can be a means to protect and preserve a sacred site, and to permit that sacred site to give visitors a meaningful experience. Tourist facilities connect the sacred and the profane, and facilitate the positive influence of the sacred site on the profane community in which it is located.

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