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DACCHE

Using cultural heritage as a stepping stone for sustainable tourism



(2026) Using cultural heritage as a stepping stone for sustainable tourism

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Introduction

One of the key questions of the DACCHE project has been: how can we encourage people to care for places and their past and future?

We believe that there is great potential in using the visitor experience to stimulate reflection and awareness on how we as humans have shaped the places we hold dear and what is needed from us to take care of them in the future. One key point here is that the reflection and the learning taking place is not only about the heritage or place itself, but how it can be used as a starting point for further reflection and ideally action in the visitor's life at home. You do not have to choose between spreading knowledge and stimulate reflection – in the best-case scenario, your visitors get both!

We have created this framework which is to be used as an inspiration for creating visitor experiences based on cultural heritage with the added theme of climate change. We hope that this framework can serve as an inspiration for developing sustainable visitor experiences based on cultural heritage in your own community, while also encouraging your visitors to reflect on their own lives in the light of climate change.

The DACCHE project held a workshop in Östersund in early 2026 with representatives from the regional tourism sector and heritage sector as well as the academia. The

participants discussed how to define heritage and how heritage can be used in creating meaningful and sustainable experiences for visitors. The conclusions from the workshop have been used as a starting point for the framework along with other learnings from the project. We have also collected resources from other projects and initiatives which can be of use when exploring these topics further.

We have summarised the framework into five key areas

- Use cultural heritage to make visitors reflect and inspire behavioural changes
- Use intangible cultural heritage to a larger extent
- Use cultural heritage to create slow and sustainable experiences
- Use cultural heritage and the landscape to create learning experiences
- Use cultural heritage and the landscape as a starting point for collaboration

Use heritage to make visitors reflect and inspire behavioural changes

During the project, we have experienced several times that being in the landscape and being told about the traces of the past which can be found there as well as how it is now affected by climate change is a strong experience. We have had the opportunity to listen to archaeologists and reindeer herders telling about the sandy shores of Donegal and the mountainous Gaskelaante region between Jämtland and Trøndelag while standing right there.

To make guided tours in the landscape and to heritage sites is a common tourism product. What is to some extent new here is the content – to not only introduce the history of a certain site but to also include information about how it is affected today by a warmer climate and what it might look like in the future. We may also need to introduce new ways of engaging the visitors to create a personal connection to the stories we tell.

If we want to make the visitors walk away with new perspectives and a sense of wanting to take care of our landscapes in the future, there is a need of a communication which let them reflect and draw their own conclusions. One way of doing this is to use heritage interpretation as a method.

Heritage interpretation is a communication method which aims at helping visitors to create their own meaning and develop relationships with the place they are visiting or the theme they are engaging with. The focus is not so much on conveying facts but to encourage visitors to think for themselves. To make this happen, you can use the TORE model which was developed by Sam H. Ham, professor emeritus at the University of Idaho. The basics of the TORE model is that your communication with the visitors is

- Thematic
- Organised
- Relevant
- Enjoyable

To be **thematic** means that you should formulate what it is that you want the visitor to take with them from the visit, the message so to say. This is not the same as having a topic – one topic could be approached through different themes. A strong theme gives the answer to “Why does this matter?”. **Organised** means that you need a clear structure which is easy for the visitor to follow. **Relevant** entails that you need to make the information meaningful and personal. Meaningful means that the visitor can make sense of the information and relate it to their existing experience and knowledge. Personal means that you need to find ways of relating the information to something that the visitor cares about. Finally, **enjoyable** entails that the visitor gets a strong and rewarding experience. This does not mean that the experience needs to shy away from difficult themes – it might be enjoyable to get to engage with feelings of sorrow, thoughtfulness or anger for a while if done in the right way.

In the DACCHE project, we have wanted to build a bridge between the story of the places and landscapes that we have worked with and the places that matter to the visitors. This has mainly been done through dialogue in different formats – to use the experience as a stepping stone to talk with the visitors about the places they care about and how they want to care for these places in the future.

Cultural heritage can also be used as a source of inspiration in behavioural changes, and there is much we can learn from traditional techniques and ways of thinking. It can be used in encounters with visitors to create authentic experiences that encourage reflection.

- Experiencing and learning about traditional crafts can stimulate reflection on sustainable consumption and production.
- Taking part in or learning about the cultivation of heritage crops can inspire thoughts about eating locally produced food or growing one's own.
- Historic buildings that have been adapted and given new functions can demonstrate sustainable resource use.
- Gaining insight into traditional and local knowledge related to practices such as reindeer herding or summer mountain farming can provide perspectives on the relationship between humans and nature.

It is important to note that we deliberately use terms such as *inspire* and *encourage reflection*. We do not envision these experiences leading people to adopt pre-industrial ways of living. Rather, they may challenge existing assumptions regarding consumption and lifestyles. Above all, we see an opportunity to use heritage-based experiences as a means of fostering reflection on what sustainability can mean. In this context, interpretation, as described earlier, can be a valuable tool for developing underlying themes that invite reflection and help visitors make connections between cultural heritage and sustainability.

Key questions to ask yourself

- What kind of message is it that I want to convey to the visitors?
- How can I make this message come through in a way that make the visitors relate to their own experiences?
- How can I combine knowledge and reflection in my activities?

Resources

Sam H. Ham has written the book **Interpretation: making a difference on purpose** with a lot of practical guidance on how to use the interpretation method. It has been translated into Swedish by Centrum för naturvägledning: **Interpretation – kommunikation som gör skillnad**.

The Erasmus+ project [TEHIC](#) has created a free online course in heritage interpretation as well as a handbook:

The European network [Interpret Europe](#) has a lot of different resources on heritage interpretation:.

[Interpret Sweden Network](#) has some resources for the Swedish context:

[Interpret Norway](#) holds courses and runs a network.

Use intangible heritage to a larger extent

In rural and remote areas, intangible or living heritage (often ICH in short) might be an important resource due to the lack of big physical traces of the past such as monuments, museums or iconic buildings. Here then, heritage is transmitted through oral traditions, festivities, traditions, craftsmanship, local gastronomy or community events to name a few examples. There is a growing interest in using these traditions as assets, and to make them visible and accessible to visitors. However, as it is intangible it might sometimes be more difficult to grasp what the intangible heritage can entail.

In a tourism context, this kind of heritage can create a sense of authenticity and to get to experience something genuine. The question is then how to make the intangible tangible – how can we give shape to experiences for visitors out of stories and traditions? The first step is to find the bearers of intangible heritage in your community. This can be individuals with great knowledge, associations, or entrepreneurs working with traditional methods. Museums and archives may of course be important assets as well, and not least can they lead you in the right direction through their networks.

After finding the right people to collaborate with, you need to investigate what kind of stories there is to tell – are there specific places which holds a lot of meaning, or certain traditions and festivities that can be highlighted? Or perhaps there is a traditional craft that you can let the visitors try for themselves? Make these investigations together with the knowledge bearers to find common ground.

The next step is then to find ways of making the intangible heritage come to life. Here DACCHE:s toolkit on communicating climate stories can be a guide into the process both of finding the story you want to tell and how to choose what means you can use to tell it to the visitors.

When turning everyday life or intangible heritage into experiences for visitors there is always a risk of simplifying it into a commodity. What is understood as “authentic” in the eyes of a visitor may also be based on stereotypical understandings. Here, collaboration between the tourism sector and the bearers of intangible cultural heritage is key and to make them co-creators of the experiences you develop. This is especially important in contexts where indigenous cultural heritage is being used. The community need to have control over how their cultural heritage is being represented.

During the project, we have experienced that it is the effects that climate change has on intangible cultural heritage that makes people really connect with the issue. Of course, people care about buildings or landscapes as physical traces of the past as well, but it is when we start to talk about how traditions and ways of life will change that people really relate.

Key questions to ask yourself

- Which intangible heritage are important in my community?
- Who are the knowledge bearers in my community? What steps can I take to engage in a collaboration with them?
- How can I communicate the intangible cultural heritage to visitors?

Resources

The previous NPA project [ARCTISEN](#) has developed toolkits for enhancing cultural sensitivity in tourism in the Arctic, including Sámi perspectives. Much is relevant when working with intangible cultural heritage as well.

The [ICHNGO Forum](#) has created a web dossier on sustainable tourism and intangible cultural heritage. See for example the First Steps section with checklists.

Use heritage to create slow and sustainable experiences

Beyond raising visitors’ awareness of sustainability issues, the experience itself must also be delivered in a sustainable way. Significant efforts are currently underway across the tourism sector at all levels to enable more sustainable travel, including investments in fossil-free transportation, sustainable accommodation options, and related initiatives.

Cultural heritage can provide a foundation for *slow tourism* - a form of tourism based on a slower, more mindful approach to travel that seeks to create stronger connections between tourists and the local context. Slow tourism emerged as a response to mass tourism and unsustainable travel practices and has its roots in the Slow Food movement.

Slow Food developed as a reaction to the growing consumption of fast food produced without adequate consideration for people and the environment. In the same way, slow tourism is grounded in sustainability, encompassing ecological, social, and economic dimensions.

The Interreg Europe project *SLOWDOWN* has defined slow tourism as follows:

Slow tourism (travelling and developing) requires adopting a slow mindset, which means moving and experiencing at a slower pace. From the travellers' perspective, slowness facilitates fewer, but deeper, more meaningful, and authentic experiences and interactions with the local communities and landscapes, while respecting their ethical boundaries. From the perspective of the businesses, slowness goes beyond quality over quantity; it means changing the orientation from completely for-profit to more-people-than-profit-oriented. It enhances the companies' mission and purpose and allows the companies to align their business activities with values they want to be aligned with, while also earning a living.

Slow Tourism is a sustainable form of tourism that respects cultural heritage, cuisine, traditions, localities and nature. Slow tourism enables the destinations to focus on cooperation with the local stakeholders in order to create those policy changes, which place the protection of the local environments, communities and cultural heritage at their centre, as it considers these strategic, product-building offerings.

This perspective has been consistently reflected in the feedback we have gathered from the tourism sector in Jämtland and Trøndelag. The focus is not on attracting as many tourists as possible, but rather on attracting visitors who wish to experience the landscape in a way that respects both local communities and the environment. There is also a substantial potential target group seeking precisely this type of experience and looking for more sustainable ways to travel.

In a cultural heritage context, slow tourism may include activities such as:

- Walking or biking along historic routes and pilgrimage trails with or without guides.
- Participating in courses on traditional crafts and skills.
- Staying at a traditional summer mountain farm (*fäbod*) and taking part in daily activities.
- Contributing to the restoration and conservation of cultural heritage sites and historic environments.
- Attending folk music festivals or storytelling evenings.
- Enjoying locally produced food or taking part in cooking courses focused on local culinary traditions.

- Many of these activities can also be arranged in a Sámi context, focusing for example on different aspects of traditional knowledge.

These types of activities require collaboration with the local community and the knowledge bearers as mentioned in the section about intangible cultural heritage.

Key questions to ask yourself

- What could slow tourism mean in my local context?
- Can I cater for alternative means of transport, interactions between visitors and local community members, or learning activities (see more below)?
- Can I cater for activities with a slower pace and longer timespan? What is then needed in terms of infrastructure and marketing?

Resources

The ongoing Interreg Europe project [SLOWDOWN](#) focuses on promoting slow tourism in Europe and enhancing regional policies to support and develop slow tourism. On their website you can find good practices from all over Europe.

Use heritage and the landscape to create learning experiences

There is a growing trend among visitors who want to learn something new during their travels and, ideally, contribute positively to the places they visit. In this context, both cultural heritage and sustainability topics can serve as valuable resources for developing new tourism products.

Knowledge tourism is a term used to describe tourism with learning and knowledge acquisition as its primary purpose. This type of tourism is offered by a wide range of actors, including museums, knowledge and visitor centres, zoos, and individual entrepreneurs working in areas such as nature and heritage guiding.

A specific form of knowledge tourism is science tourism, where science and/or participation in research forms the core of the visitor experience. Examples include guided tours of research stations or opportunities for visitors to take part in research activities through citizen science initiatives. Citizen science involves members of the public assisting researchers in investigating various questions. A common approach is for individuals to contribute to large-scale data collection efforts that researchers would not be able to undertake on their own. This may involve reporting observations of plants and animals, record temperatures, or collecting other types of environmental data.

Citizen science has become particularly well established within the natural sciences, but there are also examples within the humanities and social sciences. However, its application within the cultural heritage sector - including fields such as archaeology, building conservation, and cultural landscape management - is still in its early stages.

Offering experiences that incorporate elements of citizen science can help create a sense of meaning and purpose for visitors while also supporting learning and personal development. Research projects have, for example, tested activities involving the collection and documentation of litter on beaches or encouraging visitors to document and reflect on their own visitor experiences. The focus has been on simple and enjoyable tasks that visitors can engage with spontaneously while on site.

Within the DACCHE project, we explored the feasibility of establishing a simple photographic monitoring station at McSwyne's Castle in Donegal, Ireland, where visitors could take photographs of the castle ruins to help collect data on the impacts of coastal erosion. However, we realised that such an initiative would require a dedicated organisation capable of receiving, managing, and processing the data, which was not possible within the scope of the project.

Consequently, it may be easier as a first step to build visitor experiences around existing citizen science projects. In Sweden, for example, [Naturens kalender](#) enables people to report signs of spring and summer to monitor how climate change is affecting seasonal cycles and vegetation. In the longer term, we see citizen science related to cultural heritage sites and historic environments as an important area for future development. However, this will require closer collaboration between public authorities, researchers, the cultural heritage sector, and the tourism industry.

Key questions to ask yourself

- What could learning mean in the context of my organisation or business?
- Which organisations connected to learning and research are present in my local area? For example, government agencies, museums, universities, or research and development centres.
- Are there any areas of knowledge in which visitors could contribute to data collection and knowledge generation in my region?

Resources

The research project **Knowledge Tourism as Attraction and Resource** (Kunskapsturism som attraktion och resurs) investigated new development processes for knowledge tourism products. The insights of the projects are concluded in a [project report in Swedish](#) and an [English scientific publication](#).

Use heritage and the landscape as a basis for collaboration

We believe that additional partnerships are essential for developing new tourism products based on cultural heritage and sustainability. This involves connecting knowledge bearers with the actors who have the capacity to package, market, and deliver tourism experiences to visitors. It may also involve creating stronger links between

nature-based and cultural tourism, enabling more holistic experiences in which visitors gain a deeper understanding of a place through both its natural and cultural values.

One lesson we have learned from the project - although it is by no means a new insight - is that building collaboration across disciplinary and professional boundaries takes time. Different actors and organisations enter partnerships with their own objectives, needs, professional languages, and prior understandings. For this reason, it is important to allow sufficient time for dialogue and discussion at the outset of a collaboration in order to develop a shared understanding of each party's circumstances and to establish common goals.

This can, of course, be challenging when working with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often have limited time and resources to devote to exploratory development work of this kind. It therefore becomes important to identify project structures and funding models that make it possible to recognise and compensate their expertise and time, for example by involving them on a consultancy basis.

Key questions to ask yourself

- Which stakeholders are relevant in my local context to collaborate with? Which ones do I already collaborate with, and which ones are still outside of my network? You may use the Knowledge holder and Stakeholder map worksheet found in the DACCHE Climate Change Communication Toolkit to summarise stakeholders from different sectors.
- What do I think that others need to know about my work and field of expertise to collaborate with me? What are common misconceptions about my work? This could both relate to what topics you work with as well as how you work.
- What do I need from a collaboration to make it successful?
- How can I make my expertise relevant to others? What is it that I can offer to others in a collaboration?