

CHAPTER 10

SOME KEY ISSUES AFFECTING ROB BEN ISLAND



INTRODUCTION

Conserving heritage is not an easy task and throughout the ICMP document a number of key issues have been raised that impact either positively or negatively on the WHS. These challenges may pose a threat to the WHS if not adequately addressed and managed. The present chapter discusses some of these challenges – some have already been addressed by RIM, while others will be addressed under the ICMP.

OPPORTUNITIES

Domestic and International Support

Robben Island enjoys considerable political support from all spheres of government, the corporate sector, and international organisations such as ICOMOS, ICCROM and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, among others. Within the continent of Africa itself, the Island, through its joint training programme with University of Cape Town (UCT) and UWC in Heritage Studies, has produced African heritage professionals across the English speaking sub-Saharan Africa that today feel a sense of responsibility to the WHS. This has contributed further to it developing goodwill with many heritage institutions in the continent.

The Alumni group of the African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies (APMHS) is an important part of the Robben Island landscape and some of these professionals have come to occupy positions of responsibility in their countries and are willing to participate in any programmes that will enhance the position of the WHS, contribute to the maintenance of its significance and values, and ensure the realisation of its mission and vision. Robben Island will take advantage of the favourable domestic and international environment to build capacity in the key areas of conservation, research, public programming and visitor management.

Tourism

Robben Island is a major tourist attraction with up to 1 500 visitors a day during the peak tourist season. It is also one of the prime visitor attractions in and around Cape Town, including Table Mountain National Park, Cape Point and the Wine Routes. Together they form a package presenting both local and international visitors with an exciting and enriching experience that does not only talk to the visitor about the history of the region, but also its geology and geomorphology, as well as human-to-human and human-to-environmental relations, over a long period of time.

The engagement of some of the ex-political prisoners who are employed at Robben Island as tour guides adds an important learning dimension to the visitor experience. It is also a good example of the sharing of responsibility with local communities and other stakeholders that is so essential for a living site and a site of symbolism such as Robben Island.

Isolation

As a site separated from Cape Town on the mainland by the sea, the Island is protected from urban encroachment. Due to its place in the South African political and social psyche its sound protection from any irresponsible developments should especially be ensured.

Research

Robben Island is a learning centre affording many research opportunities in the fields of archaeology, environmental studies, disease and the history of medicinal practices, maritime history, and democracy. Research into prison history and prisoner experiences can contribute immensely to Robben Island's role in fostering critical debate about governance, human rights, a just society and development. Furthermore, its history as a colony, for those suffering from leprosy and mental disorders, provides researchers on the Island with an opportunity to partake in the discourses concerning those areas.

The high density of endemic birds nesting on Robben Island and the Island's easy accessibility provides a good opportunity for researchers, including ornithologists locally and internationally, to carry out informed research activities within reasonable budgets and time.

Another rich field of study is further provided by its unique nature as an island close to the mainland but also only recently separated, and yet having within it some unique vertebrates not found within the immediate mainland, such as the Legless Skink, tortoises, and Cape Chameleon, that may point to ongoing evolutionary processes within the Island.

Education

There are many educational opportunities provided by Robben Island, including the following:

- The Knowledge Hunt / specialised RIM tour experience offers an opportunity to integrate heritage education and environmental education – two fields that have developed independently of each other;
- The conservation programme of the RIM ICMP provides an excellent opportunity for the development of a textbook on best practice conservation models for the APMHS/RITP;
- The significance of Robben Island provides an opportunity for RIM to conceive and implement a Centre for Leadership with a global audience, focusing on peace initiatives;
- RIM and its legacy present an opportunity to create exciting, dynamic youth programmes that use learning methodologies similar to those used by political prisoners;
- With the pre-school and primary school on the Island, RIM has an opportunity to lead the integration of heritage education across the school curriculum.

CHALLENGES

Legislation

Robben Island has been officially conferred National Heritage status in terms of the National Heritage Resources Act 1999.

As discussed in Chapter 6, there are several key laws with respect to the management and protection of the Island, and it is necessary to integrate and harmonise them, in particular the National Heritage Resources Act, the Cultural Institutions Act and the National Environmental Management Act. This is already taking place through a process of legislative review and the Ministry of Arts and Culture has identified it as an area of immediate action. Major advances have already taken place in addressing the issue through the collective participation of all concerned.

There have been some shortfalls within the governance of the WHS, however these are being addressed through the internal restructuring / reorganisation currently in place at RIM. These include the following areas: governance, conservation, infrastructure, compatible use, visitor management and experiences, capacity building, funding and environmental constraints.

Governance

The following key issues have been identified:

- The mandate of the DAC is delegated through the South African Heritage Resources Act to SAHRA, which monitors the conservation and use of the National Estate. However, contested interpretations of the Act and overlapping roles and responsibilities of the management of the WHS has caused some confusion. This is being addressed through the harmonisation of various legal frameworks by the DAC.
- All World Heritage Sites are of outstanding universal value, and should be managed on a professional basis with a Board and Management that ensures that all management regimes are in place. The management of such World Heritage Sites should be divorced from any outside pressures irrespective of their historical past.
- A proposal has been put forward to have a site-based administrator on the Island, acting as an administrative link between the Service Departments operating on the Island and the Chief Operation Officer. This, when implemented, will improve the maintenance and care of the site and enhance the communication between the various departments using this facility, as well as ensure its care and properly co-ordinated use. This position will be filled by latest May 2007.
- It has been observed that the responsibilities of RIM with its mandate to conserve the site, and the responsibilities of the DPW, which carries out maintenance and infrastructural work, tend to overlap. Because the two entities are independent of each other with different reporting structures, it has been difficult to find a common approach, particularly on conservation issues. To address this anomaly, Robben Island Management has taken a number of decisions,

including setting up a Built Heritage Conservation Unit with a conservation architect whose office would advise on the appropriate decision on any interventions. The two organisations have also drawn up a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) of service delivery. There is another MOU between RIM and SAHRA which has led to the establishment of a joint committee to ensure that there is a body responsible for making sound and responsible decisions on the maintenance of the WHS.

Conservation

The following conservation issues have been identified:

- Robben Island has not been able to develop and sustain capacity to deal with an increasing number of conservation challenges. Staffing levels are inadequate and there has been a relatively high rate of staff turnover in conservation, exacerbated by the absence of a clear policy around staff development and training.
- Robben Island's heritage is fragile due to ongoing processes of deterioration and in some instances due to original construction methods. These need to be addressed if the site is to retain its significance and integrity.
- There have been some past irreversible conservation and repair works carried out by the DPW. This is, however, not only unique to the Island but is a common phenomenon in many World Heritage Sites that in the past have required some intervention. While such actions may restrict future options for alternative conservation and treatments, this does not impact on the significance that has already been identified and used for listing. There is however a need to develop a sound maintenance schedule for the site.

Infrastructure

The following infrastructure issues have been identified:

- Robben Island is facing development pressures especially the urge to introduce modern infrastructure to augment the existing roads, electricity, water supply and sewage disposal. Groundwater resources are limited and risk the intrusion of salty water. Measures to control development must be taken to retain the integrity of the site.
- There is potential risk of damage and depreciation of the built heritage and its setting, arising from the fact that the site is in current usage as a residential settlement and some of the buildings are used as offices, for storage, conferencing, food catering, and retail outlets. The vacant buildings will also depreciate as a result of neglect if this is not addressed.

Compatible Use

Robben Island is facing increasing pressure from the public and private sectors who want to carry out activities and functions that may not be compatible with the values and essence of the place. Activities, such as brand product launching and boat racing, for example, bear no relationship with the Island's heritage significance. However, it is important to acknowledge that more and more heritage

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resources and places, including World Heritage Sites are being used to promote commerce and leisure. This, in turn, is generating resources that are used to conserve World Heritage Sites. It is therefore important that Robben Island does not close its doors to all activities with a commercial connotation, but chooses what fits within the World Heritage Site's vision and mission, and that respects its significance, history and integrity.

Visitor Management and Experiences

The following issues have been identified:

- Presently there are limited facilities or trained personnel to provide access for visitors with physical constraints, such as those impaired of speech, hearing, sight, or mobility and are wheelchair-bound.
- The highlight of a visit to Robben Island so far appears to be a tour of the B-Section of the MSP with Mandela's cell marking the climax of the tour to the majority of visitors. Unfortunately as a result of this, and probably due to lack of alternatives, visitor groups often congest the narrow passage through B-Section.
- The length of time that visitors spend on the Island, and ultimately their experience, seems to be determined mainly by the timetable of the ferry shuttles between the Island and the mainland. There seems therefore to be a conflict between the desire to provide the visitor with a satisfying experience and the requirement to complete tours in time to keep within the ferry schedules. This area is being addressed. The Museum has ordered its own ferries which will commence work in February 2007 and it is planned that visitors will spend more time on the Island. This however is bound to bring other challenges, such as opening new areas of interest to avoid congestion, the need for more tour guides, and the need for other visitor facilities.
- Robben Island has not been able to offer other tour options, such as walking tours, apart from the current standard guided tour conducted in a bus to selected sites. There is however a genuine need for such tours to further enrich the visitor experience (for further information refer to the Interpretation Plan).
- The number of visitors to Robben Island is set to increase considerably, particularly in the run-up to 2010 when South Africa will host the Soccer World Cup. Large visitor inflows, if allowed, will bring with it a number of pressures, such as congestion, litter and possibly the need to upgrade visitor infrastructure. Such developments, if they were to take place, would need to be evaluated against the principle to retain the value and integrity of the place.

Capacity Building

The following issues have been identified:

- Robben Island by its designation as a WHS makes it one of the 'elite' heritage places. By its nature, it requires a multi-disciplinary approach to understand, use and manage it. Relevant human capacity is absolutely essential for the long-term conservation,

use and continued relevance of the heritage site. Its importance and relevance can only be attained through the safe-guarding of its significance. It is imperative that the WHS does not only try to retain its very knowledgeable and committed staff, but that there is long-term planning for the retention of staff as well as ongoing education, training and professional upward mobility within the organisation.

- The lack of clear staff development programmes in heritage, education, tours and marketing will result in an untenable high staff turnover. Currently, it would appear that the financial resources being generated by the heritage site are much more valued than the core business of the property, namely its conservation of its significance. It is however imperative to note that RIWHS will remain important to humanity as long as it retains its core business, that is, maintaining its significance through proper conservation, research, and education and public programming. It will however not be judged by how much money it makes a day and therefore, as a priority, RIM will put in place an urgent staff development and training policy.

Funding

- RIWHS is funded mainly through the government Treasury. This means that it must compete with other equally demanding competitors, including other heritage organisations. Although Robben Island holds a very special place in the making of a free South Africa through the sacrifices by some leaders who graduated from the Institution and are currently in political authority, it must be acknowledged that the government is confronted on a daily basis with other challenges and faced with other funding priorities, such as for poverty alleviation programmes, provision of education, addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic, provision of affordable housing, among others. Entrance fees to Robben Island are an important source of supplementary income, but the revenue sharing ratio with the ferry companies that was the primary source of funding, was structured largely in favour of the latter with the site not getting what it deserves. This has now been corrected and RIM now runs its own ferries with an ultra modern ferry scheduled to be introduced in February 2007. However this state of affairs also poses a challenge, as RIM's core business is not management of transport, let alone maritime transportation with its many difficulties. This development therefore calls upon the WHS to review and develop its transport policy and strategy. It is however also important to note that Robben Island has a tradition of running its boats, even during the prison era. The property has well-qualified staff in this area who have recently undergone more training on how to operate the new boats.
- Due to the fact that RIM now owns and runs its own ferry transport, it now generates extra income to be able to plough back into the site conservation, including the implementation of the maintenance schedule. The management has already put aside a figure of R3,6 million a year, equivalent to \$500 000, for maintenance annually.

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Environmental Issues

Robben Island is surrounded by the ocean that brings along with it environmental challenges. Proximity of the sea creates a salty environment leading to rapid deterioration of metal structures and objects. Maritime storms induced by strong winds often lead to the suspension of ferry shuttles between the mainland and the Island, resulting in the disruption of visitor schedules and lost revenue.

THREATS TO THE CONSERVATION RESOURCES

RIWHS has a rich and extensive collection of both built heritage as well as places of memory and tangible manifestations. The vulnerability of the built fabric and landscape to deterioration and change has been identified as an important reason for a planned maintenance and conservation regime on the Island. In addition, a number of threats to the conservation of the heritage resources of Robben Island have been identified. These include: changes to the fabric and landscape; inadvertent damage; potential loss of visual amenity; past (and potential future) loss of landscape features; tourism impact; and material decay.

Changes to Fabric and Landscape of the Island

All changes, including small changes, to the fabric of the Island (by all Departments, but in particular by DPW interventions) and ad hoc maintenance processes, contribute to the small, but cumulative loss of the fabric and landscape of the Island. Minimum changes to the fabric are all subject to statutory control that must be adhered to.

Inadvertent Damage

Although there have been many attempts at documentation of the heritage and all the heritage features, the full extent of features has not been established, therefore inadvertent damage could be caused during maintenance work and / or the upgrading of infrastructure. Thus a lot of care needs to be taken during any intervention and documentation has to be continuous.

Potential Loss of Visual Amenity

The imposing profile, or silhouette, of the Island from the mainland and from passing ships is a memorable feature from different distant viewpoints. This silhouette is vulnerable to the intrusion of developments of large bulk or high features. Equally within the Island itself, large-scale developments and visual intrusions may have a negative impact on particular vistas and views. It is however important to note that as a heritage site of both cultural and natural significance, including the one-nautical-mile surrounding the Island being a maritime zone, the Island is protected by a number of legal instruments and any development must first get the approval of SAHRA. This provides it with legal protection from any unwarranted developments, and it is therefore important to ensure that the legal frameworks are enforced and followed accordingly.

Past (and Potential Future) Loss of Landscape Features

Over the years important natural and physical features of the Island have undergone some changes due to human actions. A number of aspects of the visual landscape of the Island have been altered and even destroyed at times. In addition there has also been an increase in invasive alien vegetation that has at some places had erosive effects on features, such as cemeteries and individual graves. It is however important to note that the management has put in place some actions to eliminate or reduce the invasive alien vegetation. There is currently an ongoing programme that involves the hiring of members of the local community to carry out an elimination exercise through cutting. This is an area where RIWHS has met one of the recommendations of the World Heritage Committee that World Heritage Sites should provide economic well-being to the people around the site, as noted in the 'New Operational Guidelines' of 2002. Through this activity, the site has engaged its community through creation of job opportunities and as such is contributing to poverty alleviation.

Tourism Impact

The growth in numbers of people visiting the Island and the consequent increase in vehicular movement is a cause for alarm, and there is a possibility of a negative impact on the ethos, experience and fabric of the heritage if the challenges posed are not addressed. Already RIM management is considering carrying out a study on the impact of the current transportation system. The Estates Department has been tasked with this study.

Material Decay

As noted above, the WHS is faced with various challenges emanating mostly from natural causes. The natural process of decay of sites, elements and materials can impact negatively on the interpretation and understanding of significance of the WHS, such as in places like the Limestone Quarry, Bluestone Quarry, the stone / slate cladding work in general, and the rusting of steel elements. While the natural decay does not necessarily impact on significance as much as environmental (decaying) processes, it can enhance the patina of elements. Thus, where possible, preventive conservation should be employed to preserve elements.

CONCLUSION

While key issues have emerged throughout the body of this document, this chapter has further elaborated on these issues, including: the need for the continuation of research, education and public programming; review of legislation and governance policies; the need for conservation of both the tangible and intangible heritage; the need for proper infrastructure; the need for visitor management and new visitor experiences; the need for capacity building and staff development; the need for environmental management of the Island; and the need for adequate funding.