

CHAPTER 9

VISITOR MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1997, RIM has experienced exponential growth in visitor numbers. This poses special challenges of having to balance the need to optimise the economic benefits of tourism, and to manage and conserve a WHS in a sustainable manner. With the ever-growing number of visitors since the Island's inception as a National Museum and its opening to the public in 1997, the threats to the fragile cultural and natural environment have been noted and taken into account. Measures to mitigate any potential threats are being put in place through the development of the ICMP and the Visitor Management Plan, which can be found in Addendum 5. This chapter provides a framework for visitor management that has been developed for RIM.



Tourists arriving on Robben Island

The Visitor Management Plan will enable efficient management of the growing visitors' demands in a way that does not compromise the sustainability of the cultural and natural environment in the long term. The Plan therefore takes cognisance of the impact of visitors on the cultural and natural environment, as well as the carrying-capacity that the environment can endure. While various studies have been conducted at Robben Island relating to the impact of tourism, as yet detailed site-specific impact assessments and the carrying-capacity of the environment have not been established. A rigorous assessment of the visitor impact is crucial in the formulation of efficient and effective strategies for mitigation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE VISITOR MANAGEMENT PLAN

Given the challenges outlined above, it has been imperative to develop a Visitor Management Plan for RIM which has the following objectives:

- Fulfil the obligations of RIM to manage the site, conserve it and make it accessible to the public in a sustainable manner;
- Ensure that the state of conservation of the site is not negatively affected due to ever-increasing visitor needs and demands;
- Maintain the integrity and the universal symbolism of RIM as a WHS;
- Ensure that the challenges arising from visitor needs are managed effectively as the Museum moves from the introduction to the consolidation phase that would also include appropriate development in line with the current mission and vision of the site;
- Manage visitors and visitor impacts by anticipating

and preventing any arising negative impacts so as to ensure the cultural and natural integrity of RIM;

- Preserve the integrity of the range of experiences that the site offers to its diverse visitors;
- Mitigate the threats of congestion and overcrowding that faces any site with enormous and ever-growing demands, so as to ensure that visitor experience is not compromised;
- Cater for visitor needs within the constraints of the fragile nature of both the cultural and natural environment, from both a physical and metaphysical (tangible and intangible) point of view.

The Visitor Management Plan has been developed as a management tool that is underpinned by a precautionary approach to the management and development of the Island in order to protect the integrity of the Island's cultural and natural heritage.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED IN DEVELOPING RIM'S VISITOR MANAGEMENT PLAN

The following activities that constituted some of the prerequisite work that was critical in developing an effective and viable long-term Visitor Management Plan.

- The identification and analysis of existing and potential visitors of RIM;
- The need to analyse and understand the global and regional patterns and trends relating to tourism at RIM;
- The analysis of existing and potential visitor attractions and activities, with a view to develop exciting, unique and sustainable visitor experiences at RIM
- Knowledge and understanding of existing or potential 'competing' destinations that offer similar products as RIM and that attract much the same visitor markets;
- The analysis of existing and already planned facilities including accommodation and conferencing, transport and other facilities and services, and their suitability and ability to enhance the RIM experience;
- Knowledge of projected future visitor numbers, as well as the potential of the abovementioned facilities and infrastructure to accommodate and service the projected visitor numbers;
- A more rigorous determination and understanding of the impacts of tourism on Robben Island based on current and proposed offerings of visitor experience (bearing in mind both tangible and intangible heritage);
- The establishment of the carrying-capacity of the Island to deal with the current and projected demand;
- The need to analyse and determine the efficiency of the current organisational structure (particularly the Tours Department) and its appropriateness to deal with the broader challenges of visitor demands and tourism in general.

METHODOLOGY USED TO DEVELOP THE VISITOR MANAGEMENT PLAN

The methodology used to develop the Visitor Management Plan is discussed in detail in the Visitor Management Plan (See Addendum 5). An inter-departmental team¹ of RIM staff was constituted to evaluate each site that is impacted by visitors on the Island. The issues raised and recommendations made included: identification of issues;

problems or challenges; current strategies of managing visitors on the specific site; adequacy or lack thereof regarding current strategy; average number of visitors impacting on the site on a daily basis; transportation and other facilities being utilised during the visits; potential impacts of the visits to the sites; current mitigating strategies for dealing with visitor impacts; ideal / proposed mitigating strategies; operations / logistical implications; and finally, recommendations for each specific site.

Another key and essential part of the methodology was the use of the Visitor Feedback Surveys that are conducted daily by the Tours Department of RIM. Key issues raised in these surveys were identified and strategies developed to address issues or concerns.

PRINCIPLES THAT INFORM THE VISITOR MANAGEMENT PLAN

Given the challenges involved, in developing a Visitor Management Plan, it is important that broad principles are established that fit within RIM's wider principles and objectives. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- Conserving heritage is RIM's core function;
- The need for a precautionary approach to any intervention to accommodate visitor needs;
- Striving to retain integrity and authenticity of the WHS;
- Application of the principle of universal access.

MECHANISMS FOR THE VISITOR MANAGEMENT PLAN PROCESS

RIM requires appropriate internal structures to successfully implement the Visitor Management Plan. Structural issues have been raised on various occasions, including discussions on the adequacy of the Tours Department to deal with the broader tourism challenges.² However, for the overall setting up and ongoing monitoring of the Visitor Management Plan, a multi-disciplinary committee, comprising RIM senior management, has been constituted. The committee's role has been defined as follows:

- To evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of RIM's strategies and policies to manage visitors against the Statement of Significance, and the principles and objectives of the Visitor Management Plan;
- To evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of the visitor experience against RIM's Statement of Significance, mission and vision;
- To evaluate and monitor the impacts of events and visitor activities against the Visitor Management Plan;
- To develop an Implementation Plan for the terms of reference and to monitor visitor management strategies against recommendations made in the various studies, for example, carrying-capacities, impacts, and visitor projections;
- To develop terms of reference for the various studies;
- To oversee stakeholder consultation processes pertaining to RIM's visitor management issues;
- To monitor policy implementation regarding visitor management issues, for example, universal access;
- To ensure effective implementation of RIM's interpretation policy in managing visitors.

NEW VISITOR EXPERIENCE

RIM is currently exploring opportunities to offer a variety of new options to visitors – both as a way of enriching the visitor experience and also as a strategy to mitigate the impacts of visitors. One of the challenges in the development of RIM's Visitor Management Plan has been the need to cater for the current visitor activities, in conjunction with any envisaged future options. It was important to ensure that visitor management issues that may emerge from the new visitor options were adequately addressed in the Visitor Management Plan. This called for a precautionary approach, as articulated in the principles above. The Visitor Management Plan in Addendum 5 speaks to the visitor management strategies which would support the Interpretation Plan.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS

The Visitor Management Plan caters for universal access. In this regard, the Visitor Management Committee will work in close co-operation with the Interpretation Committee, which also has a clear mandate regarding universal access. RIM's interpretation principles emphasise the need to ensure that the variety and forms of interpretation tools create cultural, physical, linguistic and social access to the legacy of Robben Island.³ The Visitor Management Plan developed for the WHS, will serve together with the ICMP as a management tool for good practice.

CONCLUSION

A key issue faced by RIM in developing a Visitor Management Plan was the lack of sufficient conceptualisation and planning time between the period when the space was used as a prison to the time it was open to the public as a heritage and tourism destination. Another key issue was the definition of a visitor, as the ferries to Robben Island carry various categories of people on a daily basis, including, tourists, residents, staff members and contractors. This was further complicated by the various types of visitors to the Island and their varying needs, for example, researchers, school groups, protocol visitors, and corporate visitors. The Visitor Management Plan needed to categorise and account for the various types of visitors and their needs. A recent Market Segmentation Study helped to shed some light on this.⁴

The Visitor Management Plan that has been developed assists in managing the visitor experience, through improving access and interpretation of the Island; enabling the equitable and safe access of a range of visitors to a variety of experiences; minimising adverse impact; making new routes available for new visitor experiences; and establishing improved information facilities, among others.

ENDNOTES

- 1 - The team comprised staff members from the Heritage, Education, Marketing and Tours Departments of Robben Island Museum.
- 2 - Khangala, S., 'From Tours to Tourism', Proposal presented to RIM Council, 2005.
- 3 - Prins-Solani, D., 'Interpretation Strategy Framework', March, 2006.
- 4 - RIM's Marketing Department recently commissioned a study to provide an understanding of the perceptions and the needs of the diverse visitors to Robben Island Museum. Cf. AskAfrica study.