

## ***Key Note Address***

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Heritage Interpretation for the Future of Europe Conference***

HRH Prince Lorenz of Belgium

The Honorable Mr Bart Sommers, Mayor of the City of Mechelen

Friends, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking the organizers of this timely and important conference – Herita, Interpret Europe, and our sister organization: the Flemish Commission for UNESCO.

I will be reflecting in my remarks what makes Europe unique in terms of its heritage and how through creativity and innovation, tourism can play a role in strengthening the identity of Europe without reducing it into a stereotype.

Interpretation at all levels will be essential to ensure that the storytelling reflected in tourism products is authentic and reinforces the European narrative thus enhancing the experience of visitors from both in and outside of the continent.

So what is heritage?

When we think of Heritage we often think about preservation, excavation, restoration of old things.

But it is much more than that.

Heritage is the full range of our inherited traditions, monuments, objects, and culture. It is reflected in the natural world that surrounds us.

Most important, it is the range of contemporary activities, meanings, and behaviors that shapes us into who we are.

And what does it mean to be European?

The European concept at its core is about integration.

The Preamble to the Treaty on European Union states that the signatories draw 'inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe'. Article 3.3 requires to 'ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced'.

We often talk about European lifestyles or European values outside Europe.

As an American I consider myself in many ways European. You may notice that my name is of Dutch origin. My father's family came to US from a small village near the Belgium border at the end of the 19th century.

My mother descends from a Spanish family who back in the 18th century were surveyors for the King of Spain in what is now New Mexico in the United States.

We are very proud of what we refer to as our European heritage. It has shaped us and continues to shape us.

Throughout history Europe's sons and daughters have impacted every continent in the world.

Ancient Greece is the birthplace of Western civilization. The fall of the Western Roman Empire, marked the end of ancient history and the beginning of an era known as the "Middle Ages". The Renaissance humanism, exploration, art, and science led the "old continent", and the rest of the world, to the modern era that was ignited by the industrial revolution.

This is Europe. You, me we are reflections of this Europe.

And while research and humanistic study of the past is and will always remain the foundation of heritage activities, a change to a more holistic vision of heritage is emerging and reflected in how heritage is interpreted.

This is a welcome evolution and will help shape the future of establishing a European identity where the issues of cultural heritage, social identity, and collective memory will continue to be essential elements of larger social programs.

But this will require cooperation amongst European countries and a far-reaching interdisciplinary approach.

Heritage needs to be the subject of active public reflection, debate, and discussion. What is worth saving? What can we, or should we, forget? What memories can we enjoy, regret, or learn from? Who owns "The Past" and who is entitled to speak for past generations?

Active public discussion about material and intangible heritage--of individuals, groups, communities, and nations--is a valuable facet of public life in our multicultural world.

Interpreting heritage is at the centre of all of this.

Our songs, dances, food, language are how we identify ourselves and are as important as historical buildings and archaeological sites. Heritage therefore is a contemporary activity with far-reaching effects.

It is simultaneously local and global when shared. It can be the platform for political recognition, a medium for intercultural dialogue, a means of ethical reflection, and the potential basis for local economic development.

This brings me to the other theme of my keynote - tourism.

Across Europe widespread community participation in heritage activities and increased awareness of a common cultural and natural heritage has demonstrated the power of heritage in stimulating innovation, creativity, and small and medium size business creation.

More and more these trends are reflected in the transnational tourism products offered by the tourism industry. It makes Europe a truly unique tourism destination.

Tourists' trends indicate an increasing demand for authentic experiences where the tourist can experience other people and other cultures.

Tourism policies will need to adapt to these trends and develop a quality offering promoting local cultures and traditions that include sustainable aspects: preservation of the heritage, of the landscape, of the local culture.

Cultural tourism in particular is one of the largest and fastest-growing global tourism markets.

Culture and creative industries are increasingly being used to promote destinations and enhance their competitiveness and attractiveness.

Many destinations are now actively developing their tangible and intangible cultural assets as a means of developing comparative advantages in an increasingly competitive tourism marketplace and in the face of globalisation.

Transnational cultural tourism products represent shared values and heritage. They contribute to the presentation and promotion of the Europe as a unique tourism destination. Therefore the transnational tourism products based on specific themes have a great potential for growth.

Through the World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme, UNESCO is advocating an approach that contributes to the overall visitor management and tourism planning. It provides policy guidance and strategies for site presentation and promotion based on best practice that takes a sustainable approach by involving both conservation and tourism stakeholders in the planning and management of the destinations.

But our starting point is conservation.

UNESCO believes that linking heritage through transnational routes for the promotion of tourism will help establish a European identity that builds on the uniqueness and authenticity of destinations, local knowledge, skills, and traditions, without turning them into a stereotype.

Interpretation and how heritage is reflected in tourism to ensure authenticity and quality is paramount if we are to achieve this vision and prevent the Disneyfication of the destinations.

To safeguard against this we need better management and tourism promotion and development to encourage:

- More transnational connectivity of networks;
- co-ordination at European level of the development and promotional strategies;
- brand image and marketing strategies that reflect authenticity;
- quality and sustainable tourism standards development/implementation;
- human and financial resources;
- expertise in the management of the networks;
- exchange of good practices;
- network management and performance evaluation tools.

Creating a cohesive stakeholder engagement strategy and establishing strong partnerships with different authorities and stakeholders – financial, educational and governmental institutions, tourism organizations, market agents, at the European, regional, national and local levels – will be important to produce a more stable long-term impact and to ensure increased economic and cultural benefits from tourism activities.

In terms of World Heritage, the concept of serial World Heritage properties has gained much popularity during recent years and can be seen as analogous to this concept.

This is reflected in the increasing number of nominations and inscriptions of serial properties on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The fact that serial World Heritage properties present a growing trend in the last decade's inscriptions suggests that they offer benefits to the World Heritage Convention and its implementation. They also provide opportunities for sustainable tourism development.

With over 400 World Heritage sites, Europe is rich in outstanding cultural heritage and is well placed to attract the growing demand for cultural tourism from key outbound markets.

Europe's World Heritage sites are not only important as marketing drawcards, but also spectacularly showcase the continent's extensive and exceptional cultural diversity and history.

UNESCO, with the support of the European Commission, has recently embarked on a new project to create unique heritage experiences through the development of thematic transnational touring routes.

With a special focus on some of the lesser known World Heritage sites, this pilot project aims to stimulate investment in culture and creative industries while enhancing the quality of product along the routes.

To make the routes accessible globally, the project will utilise web and mobile based technologies, providing extensive real time information and travel planning tools available in multiple languages.

Capacity building initiatives to enhance product development, service and quality standards along the routes will be a key feature of the project.

With an underlying emphasis on heritage interpretation, authenticity, innovation and sustainability the project will seek to:

- Raise the global profile of Europe as a cultural heritage destination
- Improve transnational connectivity
- Increase and enhance Europe's cultural tourism product through heritage interpretation
- Promote visitation to Europe's lesser known World Heritage sites
- Support the growth of Europe's regional tourism development and SMEs

- Promote the development of public private-sector partnerships at international, national and regional levels
- Raise awareness and generate incentives to safeguard Europe's cultural heritage
- Improve the overall visitor experience in Europe and encourage repeat visitation

The project, which was made possible through an adhoc grant from the European Commission (DG-GROWTH) to UNESCO, will be carried out over an 18 month period, concluding in August 2017.

It will engage a number of stakeholders including the European Travel Commission (ETC), national tourism administrations, heritage management authorities and organisations, tourism boards, hospitality industry stakeholders and local communities. Where possible, synergies will be identified with the Council of Europe and UN World Tourism Organization to add value to ongoing initiatives.

It is an exciting new endeavour.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are at a critical inflection point in European history.

How we interpret our heritage will impact critical decision making in terms of promoting peace and prosperity, sustainability and human rights, all fundamental values of UNESCO.

Tourism itself can play a catalytic role in the future of Europe. It is up to all of us to come together to harness the potential to achieve our common vision.

Thank you very much and I wish everyone a very successful conference.