The synergistic relationship between cultural heritage, the environment, and social and economic development is well established. Heritage conservation contributes to sustainable development in cities, towns and villages throughout the world. Significant benefits include: the conservation of natural resources and building materials by rehabilitation and adaptive re-use of historic structures; the generation of local employment; the economic gain from tourism which also supports diverse local enterprises; the ‘livability’ of an area; and generation of civic pride. The term ‘impact assessment’ connotes the process of evaluating and documenting these and other benefits of cultural heritage conservation, identifying potential negative effects of development actions or other changes on the condition and integrity of heritage resources, and proposing measures to avoid or mitigate such effects.

Since its genesis in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) the term impact assessment has come to be variously interpreted in regard to use, meaning, method and application. The EIS is an investigative and analytical procedure required for agencies of the United States Government as a means of complying with the objectives of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. The concept and methods of the EIS, embodied in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) have spread throughout the world, and at present, most countries have legislation and regulations requiring EIA for major development projects. EIA also is required by major international and bilateral lending and grant-making institutions, as well as by many commercial banks. The World Bank’s policy for the management of cultural property, first issued in 1986 and revised in 2006, stipulates that physical cultural resources be included within the EIA. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) has a similar requirement for its private sector borrowers. Both institutions provide guidance materials for covering cultural heritage, or cultural resources, within the EIA. Under the rubric ‘Equator Principles’ well over 70 commercial banks pledge to follow the IFC’s performance standard for cultural heritage on a voluntary basis.

EIA is designed as a comprehensive multidisciplinary study to evaluate the likely effects of a major development project or other action on the environment. The broad definition of environment to include biophysical, social and cultural heritage features, allows for a synergistic analysis of a proposed project’s likely
effects in order to inform the decision on whether the project should be approved. The EIA process requires consultation with interested parties – the stakeholders – as well as opportunities for public participation and the publication of a detailed report describing the likely significant impacts of a project, as well as alternatives and mitigating measures to avoid or lessen any potentially negative impacts.

A number of recent cultural heritage guidance and doctrinal documents contain concepts and methods from EIA. The draft **Guidance on Heritage Impact Assessments for Cultural World Heritage Properties**, issued in 2010 by ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites), is addressed to managers, developers, consultants and decision-makers involved in evaluating the impact of potential development on the outstanding universal value (OUV) of World Heritage properties. This guidance emphasizes protection of a site’s values by viewing the site holistically as a single entity, but fails to stress the importance of fully analyzing the development project or activity that may threaten or compromise those values. The UNESCO **Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL)** submitted to the General Conference for approval in 2011, does advocate a comprehensive and integrated approach to assessing impacts on cultural heritage. This includes attention to ecologically sensitive policies and practices and the integration of urban heritage into general policy, planning and practice. Proposing the use of innovative knowledge and planning tools, the HUL states that: “Heritage, social and environmental impact assessments should be used to support and facilitate decision-making processes within a framework of sustainable development.”

Since its inception, the EIA model has been adapted for various narrowly focused cultural heritage impact assessments, as well as for assessments on social, economic, health, gender and other topics. These specialized assessments use some of the methods and techniques of EIA but generally lack a holistic, multidisciplinary approach. Impact assessments focusing on cultural heritage alone may be useful in some circumstances, but they do not serve the same purpose as inclusion of cultural heritage as a component of environment in the multidisciplinary context of EIA. Conversely, if cultural heritage is not competitively covered in EIA, the subject is not likely to receive adequate consideration in decisions regarding development projects. The fact that EIA is well established throughout the world with national legislation and regulations, and generally includes a cultural heritage component, provides the opportunity to integrate the subject into comprehensive impact assessments. Hence, cultural heritage authorities and proponents may be well advised to emphasize improved collaboration with other sectors through participation in EIA in order to ensure that their interests and values are represented in decisions that affect cultural heritage resources.

The advent of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) offers even greater potential for protecting and managing cultural heritage. SEA is developing to fulfill the need for a broader version of impact assessment than the project-specific EIA by investigating and evaluating the environmental, social, cultural and economic consequences of strategies, policies and plans that involve several sectors and
numerous potential projects or activities. There is no standard definition or prescribed methodology for SEA. The process may draw on concepts and methods of EIA and may range from integration with policy making to a more distant assessment intended to identify mitigation measures for possible negative impacts or suggestions for maximizing positive outcomes.

The potential benefits of participating in SEA are obvious for cultural heritage proponents, but to date the culture sector has rarely been involved. A notable exception is the SEA issued in 2007 for tourism development in China’s Guizhou province. Although the topic is rural development, it relates to urban issues by addressing the national priority of stemming migration from the countryside to cities by fostering economic development a largely agricultural province. The World Bank sponsored and directed the Strategic Environmental Assessment Study: Tourism Development in the Province of Guizhou, China as part of preparation for financing the Guizhou Cultural and Natural Heritage Protection and Development project. This project began in September 2009 to assist in bringing economic benefits to impoverished local communities, including those with minority groups, by increasing domestic and foreign tourism featuring cultural and natural heritage while improving heritage protection and management.

The SEA, conducted by Environmental Resources Management (ERM), assesses the Guizhou provincial government’s tourism development policies, plans and programs with emphasis on the Provincial Tourism Development Master Plan approved in 2003. The Master Plan is complemented by several related planning documents, including: the Guizhou Rural Tourism Development Plan (2006); the Guizhou Provincial Proposal for a World Bank Loan to Construct Infrastructure to Protect Cultural and Natural Heritage (2005); the Guizhou Provincial Eleventh Five Year Environmental Plan (Draft 2006); and the Guizhou Provincial Eleventh Five Year Socio-economic Plan (Draft 2006). The plans describe nature-based tourism as passive (including sightseeing, relaxation and walking) and active (hiking, camping, caving, climbing, and water-based activities). Cultural tourism is defined as ethnic culture immersion (visiting or staying in remote ethnic villages, watching ethnic performances, purchase of handicrafts, and visiting cultural heritage sites) as well as short homestay vacations in rural households and visits to farms. Despite the intentions of the Government and provisions in its various plans and programs, an unexpectedly rapid increase in tourism since 2000 has had some negative environmental, socio-economic and cultural effects. Rural tourism is growing rapidly in China as domestic tourists seek novelty in the countryside and relief from the pressures of urban life.

The comprehensive analytical and participatory approach of SEA is useful for evaluating environmental, socio-economic and cultural consequences of plans, policies and programs involving diverse public agencies, private investors, and requiring numerous types of infrastructure, occupations and skills. The Guizhou Tourism Administration (GTA), as the lead provincial government agency for implementation of the Master Plan, must liaise with the Chinese National Tourism
Administration (CNTA) and with a host of provincial agencies responsible for construction and operation of the infrastructure required for tourism. These include the Guizhou Development and Reform Committee and the provincial agencies for Construction, Cultural Heritage, Environmental Protection, Land Resources and Transport. In addition, the GTA must establish working relationships with authorities at provincial and local levels, with private entrepreneurs, and with rural inhabitants.

Guizhou is located in southwest China, with an area of 176,000 square kilometers and, as of 2005, a population of approximately 39 million. Nearly 87 percent of the area is mountainous; with the remaining 10 percent hills and three percent river valleys. A widespread cover of limestone karst – over 70 percent of the province – is the outstanding physical characteristic of the landscape. Guizhou is one of the most pristine environments in China, due to a long history of isolation. There are numerous protected or endangered species of flora and fauna. In 2005, 130 nature reserves occupied roughly five percent of the province. In addition, there were 50 forest parks, eight geo-parks, and 69 designated scenic sites. There are some 980 rivers more than 10 kilometers in length, notably within two main river systems: the Yangtze and Pearl River basins. Surface water quality is a serious environmental issue; water is polluted in numerous urban and natural scenic areas, particularly in lakes and downstream from industrial facilities and mines. Disposal of solid waste is another problem, particularly in rural areas.

Most of Guizhou’s population is rural. With numerous distinct ethnic minority groups, the province is one of four in China with an ethnic population of over 10 million. Groups exceeding 100,000 in Guizhou include the Miao, Buyi, Dong, Tujia, Yi, Gelao, Shui, Hui and Bai. Some ethnic groups are dispersed throughout the province and others are concentrated in small areas. Their individual differences and unique cultural expression provide significant opportunities for tourism in combination with the province’s natural resources. The ethnic minorities tend to be agricultural, living in poverty or at subsistence level in rural and mountainous areas. Each minority group has a characteristic tangible and intangible culture; traditional celebrations number approximately 1,000 annually.

Economic development in Guizhou has typically featured state investment in heavy industry, in mining for coal and non-ferrous metals, and more recently, in communication and transport infrastructure. The failure of these strategies to raise the general standard of living, to stem migration to urban areas, and to prevent stress on the natural environment, influenced the government’s decision to emphasize tourism as an economic development strategy. However, past and continuing investment in transportation and communication infrastructure, as well as improvements in water quality and solid waste disposal are essential for building tourism, and thus collaboration between these sectors and the tourism initiative is crucial.
SEA is relatively new in China, and the assessment for Guizhou is the first undertaken for the tourism sector. It followed a series of steps well established within the Chinese regulatory EIA system, beginning with a review of the Master Plan and other plans relevant to tourism development in Guizhou. This allowed for identification of policy objectives against which predicted impacts were assessed. The following scoping stage determined interactions between the proposed tourism development and environmental or social conditions, with a focus on issues especially important for design and decision-making. These issues were discussed with provincial government representatives for verification.

The SEA pays particular attention to links between tourism and other sectors of the economy, as well as to indirect, cumulative and synergistic effects of decisions and actions. Consultation with stakeholders, including policy makers, which is essential for an effective SEA, continued throughout the process. The task of impact assessment was conducted at two levels: first, the activities called for in the Master Plan and the Rural Tourism Development Plan were assessed and mitigation measures proposed where necessary. Then four alternative development scenarios were created for consideration in consultation with policymakers to determine the relative effectiveness of each in regard to environmental and social outcomes. Finally, after consultation with stakeholders, the SEA provided recommendations for minimizing, mitigating and managing potential adverse impacts from tourism development and increasing the benefits to local communities.

The four scenarios and the findings for each are as follows.

(1) The Guizhou Provincial Tourism Development Master Plan. The SEA concluded that this plan, with its related policies, plans and programs, including the Rural Tourism Development Plan, represents the most balanced approach between natural and cultural heritage conservation and the use of these resources to benefit the rural economy. This plan would most likely provide a sustainable tourism strategy while yielding optimal socio-economic benefits in local communities, consistent with the national policy to stem migration from rural to urban areas. The SEA contains recommendations for mitigating possible negative environmental impacts from provisions of Guizhou’s plans for tourism development.

(2) Business-as-usual. This scenario assumes that the Master Plan will not be implemented and that tourism will not be an important objective, thus making it likely that other industries such as mining, with greater negative environmental impacts, would be prioritized. Economic benefits to rural areas would be insignificant and the rural to urban migration would continue. The natural environment and cultural heritage would receive little protection. The SEA considers this the least favorable of the four scenarios.

(3) High growth. The projections for numbers of tourists in this scenario were actually realized in Guizhou by 2006, only three years after the Master Plan was approved, a fact that supports careful assessment of the high growth option. In the short term, as is currently the case, tourists are sacrificing high standards for an
authentic experience in the rural countryside, and they are providing local inhabitants with additional income. However, substantial growth in tourism without necessary planning and preparation strains the carrying capacity of the most popular sites, and encourages an influx of uncontrolled investment providing economic benefits to private investors rather than to local populations. Tension is likely between developers and tourists, threatening the quality and viability of the rural tourism sector.

(4) Controlled / Low growth. Under this scenario, the government would strictly monitor the number of tourists allowed at ecologically and culturally sensitive sites, thus preserving these assets in the short term. But as there would be fewer job opportunities, the objective of rural poverty reduction would not be realized. The current agricultural dependence and urban migration would continue, counter to Guizhou’s economic development objectives and to national policy.

Having concluded that the Master Plan and its related policies, plans and programs represent the optimal course for Guizhou, the SEA offers several recommendations for minimizing possible negative impacts and enhancing benefits. Surface and groundwater pollution should be avoided by ensuring a minimum standard of wastewater treatment at restaurants and guesthouses in rural areas. The projected number of low-capacity solid waste disposal sites should be replaced by fewer regional landfills with adequate environmental controls served by waste transfer stations. The carrying capacity at popular cultural and natural sites should be assessed and visitor flow controlled accordingly. Private investment in rural tourism should be regulated to ensure equitable distribution of financial gain from community assets. Policies and programs for generating employment in rural areas should include community training to allow residents to realize potential economic benefits. In this regard, tourism-related micro and small enterprises should be encouraged and supported in rural areas.

A Cultural Heritage Management Observatory should be established for comprehensive management of Guizhou’s material and intangible heritage and to guard against inappropriate commercial exploitation. In collaboration with a range of institutional and private stakeholders, the Observatory should develop a Code of Ethics for responsible tourism in Guizhou. Considering the importance of tourism to the provincial economy, the SEA recommends that provincial EIA procedures address the impact on tourism of any proposed construction projects, including those in protected and unprotected areas. This would include landscape and visual impact assessment. The State Environmental Protection Law empowers the provincial Environmental Protection Board to create and enforce such procedures.

The SEA for tourism in Guizhou is part of an analytical and planning process that treats cultural heritage as a vehicle for social and economic development while focusing attention on the need to conserve and protect the integrity of the heritage. Cultural and natural heritage tourism are central to plans in Guizhou for rural economic development as a strategy for stemming migration to cities and thus for
fostering demographic and economic balance between urban and rural areas in China. The planning process for the Guizhou tourism initiative acknowledges the inextricable linkage of cultural heritage with other sectors such as transport, communication, infrastructure development and water and waste management. The need to consider cultural heritage within the context of strategic planning and in conjunction with development in other sectors is paramount for heritage conservation. The existence and wide acceptance of EIA and SEA as methods to assist in planning and assessment of development options, and the inclusion of cultural heritage as a factor to be considered, provide an invitation for participation by cultural heritage authorities and proponents: an invitation awaiting acceptance.

References:


Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape.


