

Observations on some Chinese Natural World Heritage sites

By John Sinclair OA

During October 2016 with other Australians I got a chance to see five natural and one mixed World Heritage site in Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces of western China. I also visited three Cultural sites. All were in high altitude areas near the edge of the Tibetan Plateau where the basic height was 2,000 metres but reaching much higher. The sites all justify their inclusion on the prestigious World Heritage List.

Jiuzhaigou Valley Scenic and Historic Interest Area. This was inscribed in 1992 and now attracts 7million visitors annually with the numbers growing and predicted to grow more as a new rail line from Chengdu is targeted at feeding more visitors into that beautiful National Park. Our tickets cost \$Au40 each for seniors and full adult price was \$Au80.00. Based on the average daily attendance, that produces an income of \$2Au million per day for at least 8 months of the year. In addition there was the other income generated by the businesses that capitalize on the tourist industry drawn to the park. This has grown from 5,000 in 1984 to 170,000 in 1991 just before World Heritage listing. Numbers increased to 1,190,000 in 2002. There was a proposal to enforce a maximum quota of 12,000 but this obviously hasn't happened as the crowd now averages 30,000 daily. It was an amazing experience to be part of a crowd of 30,000 bustling to get access to a National Park and even more interesting to see how this park was able to cater for such daily numbers as well as the indigenous communities that still live within the park.

Huanglong Scenic and Historic Interest Area (inscribed 1992), I have waited in a short queue to get on the chair lift to Kuranda in Queensland's Wet Tropics World Heritage area but I never imagined the kilometre long queue and the hour plus shuffle that tested patience just to get on a 3 minute chair lift ride into this National Park. The same rail line going to Jiuzhaigou will also increase visitation to Huanglong. Its historic links with the Mao Tse Tung's Long March make it of greater interest to Chinese but it is the home of wild pandas. It also features a series of travertine lakes, waterfalls, forests and mountain scenery. It rises from a base of 1,700 m up to by permanently snow-capped peak of 5,588 m and includes the easternmost glacier in China.

Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries (2006) No visit to this region would be complete without seeing the legendary pandas on their home territory even if not in their natural habitat. We were aware of the strict quarantine measures enforced even on volunteers who want to work with the pandas that include a full medical including an HIV test. Even to have one's photo taken with a panda costs \$Au440 which aims to quarantine pandas from humans as much as possible.

South China Karst This is part of a serial site of many amazing karst formations and geological features that was inscribed in 2007. I had previously seen a different sort of formation in the South China Karst near Guilin about 1000 kms to the east. However there the limestone pinnacles stood above the landscape whereas at Wulong the features were incised deep into the landscape and in a magnificent cave. What was most impressive was how the volume of visitors were handled so efficiently so that everyone moved through this site in a one-way direction without becoming bunched up. There are significant lessons to be learnt here.

Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas (2003), Three of the largest rivers in the world flow through this enormous 1.7 million hectare site inscribed in 2003 with each separated by only a single row of mountains rising to 6,000 metre high glaciated peaks. It dwarfs Fraser Island for size but it includes a large human population in the valleys. All rivers rise on the high Tibetan Plateau. The Salween discharges south through Burma into the Andaman Sea. The middle River, the Mekhong flows through five South East Asian countries before discharging into the South China Sea while the largest is the Yangtze is to the north and that flows into the China Sea. Being located in the convergent regions of the three world's major biogeographic realms, the property is in an epicentre of Chinese biodiversity. It may also harbour the richest biodiversity among the temperate areas of the world. Although 2003 some 315,000 people lived inside the property, with 36,500 residing inside the core zone this World Heritage site meets all four natural criteria World Heritage.

Mount Emei Scenic Area is a mixed cultural and natural site inscribed in 1996 principally associated with the development of Taoism. However the monks chose to build monasteries high up on steep mountains fringing the Sichuan plains thus preserving significant natural values. We deliberately avoided Mt Emei itself knowing the crowding and pressure on that site and focussed on Mt Qingcheng that offers a chair lift up the mountain and a boat ride across the lake near the top.



The writer at the largest of many waterfalls in Jiuzhaigou World Heritage site. — 320 metres wide, 23 metres in height

Management

The management of the large crowds in these natural World Heritage sites was a most informative. The only serious crowd control I saw exerted was by a small, unarmed contingent from the Red Army stopping a crush at the entry gates to Jiuzhaigou. The rest was managed by logistics. For example, entry to Wulong Karst was by elevators releasing about 12 people at about 3 minute intervals. This helped spread the crowd out. There were shuttle bus services in every park and chair lifts in some and these had the effect of dispersing the crowds relatively quickly inside the World Heritage sites. Also although there was no sign directing pedestrian traffic, almost all of the pedestrian traffic followed in the same direction, which helped eliminate the bustling of

crowds. Another measure was that all of the pathways were wide and slightly raised. Most were made of wood, grooved to be non-slip and well maintained. The boardwalks needed to be wide because of the extraordinary number of Chinese stopping in optimum positions to pose for selfies. This slowed up the traffic. Selfies need to be banned in parks.

The paths had the effect of stopping people straying. Only once in Wulong Cave did I see a person leave any path and they were quickly admonished by other visitors and returned to the path without any formal enforcement. The only prominent “don’t do” signs were in sites that were very vulnerable to fire where there were reminders not to smoke. The rest of the signs bore positive messages.



Over 100 shuttle buses were used in Juizhaigou National Park to allow people to hop on and hop off to explore the attractions of the park as far as 30 kilometres up each of the two valleys. Pedestrian overpasses in safety interests have recently replaced zebra crossings. There is a toilet at every bus station.

The use of shuttle buses has necessitated a good road network within the parks Juizhaigou may have had about 100 buses but they allowed people on day visits to go deep (30 kilometres) into the park and hop-on and hop-off at no extra cost to explore specially attractive features. The Chinese are great walkers but the buses help spread the visitors to the park. While Juizhaigou and Wulong used large 60 passenger buses smaller 15 passenger buses like larger golf buggies were widely used in all other parks visited but these were optional extras to be paid for. All buses appeared to be operated by the Park Service. The larger busses had TV screens inside that provided interpretation in Chinese and English.



Plastic litter (especially shopping bags) is washed downstream and is left as thick debris along the stream banks.

Another admirable feature of the parks was the lack of litter. Litter bins were everywhere and always with a general rubbish and recyclable bins side by side. The appeared to be very careful observation of the category of rubbish put into the respective bins. Another element is that aged pensions are no paid in China but old people are paid to pick up rubbish and litter.

While there was little litter on the ground every riverbank was crowded with plastic debris (mainly shopping bags) washed downstream in floods. It is an appalling indictment of the way plastic finds its way into the environment.

Infrastructure

Enormous strategic planning must have gone into the planning of the infrastructure. Within the national parks because there were no obvious rangers visible and the only visible staff personnel were bus and elevator attendants and maintenance staff and cleaners. However the infrastructure allowed the enormous crowds to experience all of the main features of the park with minimum impact. I personally found myself really enjoying the day and the main pressure I felt under was getting to experience as much of the parks as possible within the time available. However the infrastructure of good internal transport made this possible within all cases.

Commercial Activity within the Parks

I had expected to see more commercial activity within the parks than I did. When these parks were created they already included a lot of residents mainly from ethnic minority groups. They were allowed to continue living inside the parks although some villages have disappeared as people voluntarily moved away. One of the first impacts was that they were stopped from cropping the land. Instead they were encouraged to find places in the tourist industry that has boomed since the parks were created. There was one hotel within Juizhaigou but I never saw others. There were also a lot of food stalls and souvenir shops inside the park especially at bus interchanges. However the enormous accommodation and retail infrastructure was unfortunately located just outside the park and close to the entrances.

Badging

The most obvious aspect of a visit to these sites is just how prominently and how proudly these sites are badged with the World Heritage logo. Whereas it is hard to find a World Heritage logo on Fraser Island unless one looks towards the fine print and the certificate of inscription has been lost, in each of these Chinese World Heritage sites the logo was not only extremely prominent at the entrance to the sites but was shown throughout the site without being overdone. This had the effect of making people aware of the very special value of the site but it influenced their attitudes and they seemed more respectful of the sites as a result. In the cultural sites the World Heritage Logo was on every street corner sign and on the safety signs such as warning on fire risks etc. I made a point of attempting to photograph a comprehensive sample of these signs in the Ancient village of Lijiang but unfortunately these images were lost. However I have included examples of many of the signs featuring the World Heritage.

This isn't the first time that I had noted the prominence given to World Heritage by other countries. I have visited more than 100 foreign World Heritage sites and every one gives more prominence to the World Heritage status than Queensland gives to Fraser Island (K'Gari).

The next two pages show samples of the badging.





The World Heritage logo is engraved in wood, stone and marble at appropriate places. It makes the public aware that these are special places to be especially respectful towards. Most World Heritage sites also have logos for the particular site but these don't receive the same prominence



The World Heritage logo appears on maps on littering signs, street signs and general notices. The Chinese regard World Heritage as a badge of honour and proudly display it

