

World heritage sites in Croatia, Montenegro and Macedonia risk losing their UNESCO status due to mass tourism that is damaging both the sites and the surrounding environment.

UNESCO heritage sites in Croatia, Montenegro and Macedonia are suffering unprecedented damage from uncontrolled mass tourism that is putting their heritage status into question. Besides pollution of the surrounding environment, the uncontrolled number of tourists is said to be completely overwhelming some of the sites, which could even result in them losing their prized status altogether.

Those sites most in peril in the Western Balkans include the Croatian coastal city of Dubrovnik, Byron's famed "Pearl of the Adriatic", and the Plitvice Lakes national park in the interior of Croatia, as well as the ancient seaside town of Kotor in Montenegro and Macedonia's most historic city, Ohrid, as well as the nearby lake.

Cruisers pose threat to Byron's pearl:

Concerns about Dubrovnik centre on the growing number of cruise ships docking near the city in recent years, drawing parallels with Venice, which has also been at risk of losing its UNESCO status.

Dubrovnik's Renaissance-era old town - a popular TV and film set - is a globally known symbol of European culture and was included on UNESCO's list back in 1979.

But, with a population of only about 40,000, it is struggling to deal with over one million tourists a year in 2016, who stayed for a total of 3.4 million nights, according to data that Dubrovnik's tourist bureau gave BIRN.

Moreover, these overnighting numbers do not include all the visitors coming for the day on cruisers.

According to the Dubrovnik Port Authority, just under 800,000 tourists came to the city on cruisers, sometimes reaching over 10,000 visits a day.

Since there are no reliable data about how much money Dubrovnik earns from brief cruise passengers, many question the profitability of such tourism.

The Croatian Institute for Tourism calculated in 2010 that Croatia earned 53 million euros a year from cruise liners - more than 80 per cent of which was in Dubrovnik.

However, the same data said the total costs amounted to a far higher figure of 338 million euros, when damage to the environment was factored in.

"It's a pure catastrophe what's happening there," Vjeran Pirsic, a veteran ecological activist from Croatia, told BIRN.

He also mentioned the UNESCO site of the Plitvice Lakes, a series of lakes embedded in a national park known also for its natural dams that have created a series of lakes, caves and

waterfalls.

Last year, this was also said to be in danger of losing UNESCO heritage status due to the high number of visitors - around 1.3 million a year - reaching around 15,000 a day in the peak season in July and August.

Pirsic said that both UNESCO sites need to be run according to a management plan that includes "capacity carrying" - including how many people visit Plitvice a day and how many cruisers dock in Dubrovnik.

"This way leads to doom. Firstly, natural phenomena are being destroyed; the Plitvice Lakes are surely not benefiting from these hordes of tourists. Secondly, the touristic destination itself is being destroyed, which should benefit from UNESCO status," Pirsic concluded.

Parties trade blame over threat to Kotor:

In neighbouring Montenegro, measures adopted by the government to ensure Kotor keeps its place on the UNESCO list, including a ban on construction in the old centre, have caused controversy.

Local authorities in the town, now run by opposition parties for the first time in three decades, claim the ban is a form of political pressure on the local government.

They say the national authorities did nothing to stop illegal construction in Kotor over the past two decades.

"The status of Kotor on the UNESCO list is compromised by the action and construction activities of powerful individuals and families interacting with the national administration," Kotor Mayor Vladimir Jokic claimed on April 6.

The decision to ban construction in the town for six months followed the issue of a sharp warning from the UNESCO Committee meeting last July in Istanbul, Turkey.

This said Kotor risked being removed from the World Heritage List, which it joined in 1979. Since 2013, UNESCO has been warning of a dire situation in the medieval Old Town area owing to excessive construction and urbanisation and uncontrolled tourism and, as in Dubrovnik, a large number of cruise ships coming to the small port.

Montenegro has been given until mid-March to remove those obstacles if it wishes Kotor to remain on the UNESCO list.

The action plan adopted by the government in February, which BIRN has seen, ordered the imposition of a construction moratorium at least temporarily.

The opposition, however, revealed that just before the introduction of the new protection measures on April 5, the government had issued several construction permits for large tourist complexes in the town. They only imposed the building ban after the opposition took over the town hall.

Highway spells trouble for Ohrid:

In Macedonia, on the border with Albania, the deepest and oldest lake in the Balkan semi-peninsula, Lake Ohrid, is one of only 28 sites across the world that UNESCO has named a World Heritage site in both culture and nature categories.

Along with its natural beauty - it is home to many endemic species such as Ohrid trout - what makes Ohrid special is its rich cultural heritage. The town is full of old churches, picturesque houses and monuments dating back centuries.

Both the lake and the city are Macedonia's main tourist hotspots.

However, the site came under the UNESCO spotlight due to the planned state-funded construction of an express road along the shore of Lake Ohrid that would link the town with the ancient monastery of St Naum. The planned road is also set to pass through Mt Galicica, which is home to many rare species.

Starting this week, a UNESCO team of experts is visiting Ohrid to inspect whether the extensive construction plans endanger its status as heritage site.

In addition, UNESCO also aims to check out the planned construction of a ski centre at Galicica and three new tourism development zones along the lake shoreline.

Environmental experts have previously pointed out that their construction might result in Ohrid being designated an "endangered" area, which is just one step away from losing the UNESCO protected status.

Source: [balkaninsight](#)