

Integrating intangible cultural heritage into tourism: balancing preservation and development

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Article info

Review paper

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.71159/icemit2515L>

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in sustainable tourism with the aim of identifying both opportunities for revitalization and risks of over commodification. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of existing literature, analysis of heritage management frameworks, and examples of good practice, combined with opinions from the principles of sustainable tourism. Findings indicate that ICH, when responsibly presented as a part of the tourism, can generate truly authentic cultural experiences, strengthen identity of the community, and provide economic incentives for safeguarding local craftsmanship. However, it also faces threats of over-commercialization and loss of authenticity if altered excessively and without limitations to external demands. The conclusions emphasize the importance of participatory management, stakeholder collaboration, and long-term strategies that respect cultural values. Overall, the paper contributes to the academic debate by offering guidelines for balancing tourism development with cultural continuity and sustainable heritage protection.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, sustainable tourism, cultural tourism, community participation, heritage management

1. Introduction

Tourism has increasingly been recognized as a powerful driver of cultural exchange, community development, and economic growth. Within this framework, intangible cultural heritage plays a pivotal role in shaping authentic tourist experiences while contributing to the safeguarding of living traditions. Unlike tangible heritage, which is often preserved in monuments or artefacts, ICH encompasses practices, rituals, oral traditions, and craftsmanship that are dynamic, living, and transmitted across generations (Ahmad, 2006; Vecco, 2010). Its integration into tourism is therefore particularly complex, as it requires balancing the dual goals of cultural preservation and tourism development. Over the past two decades, scholarly and policy attention towards ICH has intensified, largely due to the adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). The convention highlighted the importance of safeguarding intangible practices, providing sufficient importance to be detached from the tangible cultural heritage. It also has opened prospects for integrating ICH into tourism as a means of revitalization, education, and sustainable development (Kurin, 2007; Aikawa-Faure, 2008). Simultaneously, tourism-driven commodification of traditions and other intangible heritage performances has raised concerns about true authenticity, real ownership, and community benefit (George, 2010; Richards, 2014). A key issue in the literature on ICH and tourism is the concept of authenticity. Authenticity is not a fixed and unchangeable attribute but is often understood as result of negotiations between hosts and visitors. Furthermore, UNESCO's 2003 Convention, while groundbreaking in safeguarding ICH, has been criticized for "freezing" traditions in specific forms once they are inscribed (Kurin, 2004; Hafstein, 2013). By institutionalizing heritage, some argue that the convention risks privileging preservation over the natural evolution of living practices. These tensions are particularly relevant when tourism is involved, since it both revitalizes traditions and exerts pressure to standardize them for wider audiences.

This paper explores how intangible cultural heritage can be integrated into tourism in ways that enhance destination competitiveness, strengthen cultural identity, and ensure sustainability. The contribution of this study is twofold: first, to systematize processes of valorization of ICH within tourism; and second, to identify opportunities and risks associated

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with these processes. By critically analyzing positive and negative impacts, the paper aims to provide guidelines for sustainable management practices that balance preservation with tourism development.

2. Tourism valorization of intangible cultural heritage

ICH is commonly understood as “living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants” (UNESCO, 2003). It encompasses oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge, and traditional craftsmanship. Scholars often stress its dynamic and adaptive nature, which differentiates it from static heritage objects (Lenzerini, 2011; Vecco, 2010). This fluidity not only that strengthens its role in cultural identity and social cohesion but simultaneously increases its vulnerability to external not controlled influences such as globalization and tourism (Brown, 2005; Hafstein, 2013).

Two dominant perspectives are identified in the academic discourse on ICH in tourism. In one perspective, tourism is viewed as a mechanism for safeguarding heritage through revitalization and transmission to wider audiences (Nechita et al., 2018; Hsu et al., 2022). On the other, critics highlight risks of over commodification, potential loss of authenticity, and unequal distribution of benefits in the community (Richards, 2014; Olalere, 2019). This duality forms the central tension in cultural tourism research on intangible cultural heritage.

Tourism valorization of intangible cultural heritage refers to the processes through which living traditions are transformed into tourism resources and products. This transformation is multidimensional, combining cultural, social, and economic dynamics, and requires sensitive management to avoid negative consequences such as loss of authenticity or excessive commodification (Lovrentjev, 2025).

The commodification of intangible cultural heritage is a process in its transformation into tourism resources and later tourism products. While diverse modalities of ICH—such as festivals, oral traditions, rituals, gastronomy, craftsmanship or performing arts—may all enter the tourism domain, their impacts vary in scope and sustainability of the ICH itself.

Among these practices, craftsmanship shows a particularly effective pathway of valorization. Traditional craft production embodies continuity of skills, transfers knowledge across generations, and allows for direct and open interaction between hosts and visitors (Lovrentjev, 2025). Workshops, demonstrations, and collaborative making sessions create opportunities for experiential learning and while doing so, generate a physical product as a byproduct that could serve as a souvenir. In this way, craftsmanship simultaneously preserves cultural identity and contributes to local economic development (Meissner, 2017; Vitić-Četković et al., 2015).

Craft-based tourism products also support sustainable entrepreneurship. They strengthen the position of small producers, connect heritage with contemporary markets, and maintain authenticity when embedded in community-led initiatives (Ubertazzi, 2020). Moreover, unlike staged performances, crafts retain a strong material and symbolic link to everyday life, which helps mitigate the risks of superficial commodification.

Other modalities of ICH—festivals, storytelling, gastronomy—also play roles in tourism, yet they often generate more immediate and short-lived impacts. By contrast, craftsmanship provides a more stable and sustainable framework for aligning commodification with safeguarding. Its capacity to balance adaptation with preservation underscores its centrality in the processes of tourism valorization of intangible cultural heritage.

Governance and regulation are essential in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in tourism. Earlier, the paper stated that guidelines for sustainable management would be offered. Building on UNESCO (2003), ICOMOS (2008), and GSTC principles, sustainable governance requires: participatory decision-making, protection of intellectual property, transparent legal frameworks, and integration of community priorities. Brooks et al. (2023) emphasize community-based governance as a condition for authenticity and long-term viability. Importance of cooperation between local authorities, heritage registers, and community organizations lies in ensuring that tourism valorization avoids over-commercialization. In this context, governance is not limited to rules but includes guidelines for sustainable practice that balance preservation with tourism development. Valorization requires appropriate governance structures. Partnerships among communities, tourism operators, and public authorities ensure quality interpretation, safeguard intellectual property rights, and prevent illegal exploitation of heritage resources (Krasojević & Djordjević, 2017). Regulatory frameworks also set boundaries for carrying capacity, ecological sensitivity, and community priorities, thereby aligning heritage use with sustainable tourism goals.

3. Impacts of intangible cultural heritage valorization in tourism: opportunities and risks

Tourism valorization of intangible cultural heritage generates a wide spectrum of impacts that can be grouped into effects on tourists and tourism development, local communities, and the heritage itself. These impacts are ambivalent—while they can contribute to cultural safeguarding, economic growth, and enriched visitor experiences, they may also lead to over commodification, social tensions, and loss of authenticity (Lovrentjev, 2025).

Impacts on tourists and tourism development are predominantly positive. ICH enhances destination appeal, deepens cultural encounters, and enriches the overall travel experience. Visitors perceive ICH as a marker of destination distinctiveness, which strengthens competitiveness in global markets (Starčević et al., 2022). Participation in rituals, music, and traditional practices provides authentic, engaging, and memorable experiences that foster satisfaction, loyalty, and repeat visits (Nechita et al., 2018; Tian et al., 2020). Interpretative activities enable deeper insights into cultural identity and continuity, enriching the sense of place (Filipović, 2018). Integration of traditional music, cuisine, and crafts into tourism products—particularly in rural destinations—creates unique experiences and strengthens the overall offer (Šimundić et al., 2022). Workshops and demonstrations of craftsmanship, such as pottery, weaving, or woodcarving, allow tourists to actively engage with local skills, supporting intergenerational transmission while generating economic value (Vitić-Četković et al., 2015; Meissner, 2017). In this way, ICH tourism serves as a bridge between past and present, positioning destinations as distinctive and meaningful cultural spaces.

Impacts on local communities are diverse and multifaceted. Short-term benefits are primarily economic—employment growth, income generation, and the development of local businesses based on heritage resources (Meissner, 2017; Brooks et al., 2023). Long-term impacts are socio-cultural: revitalization of traditions, strengthened community identity, and enhanced intergenerational transfer (Richards, 2021). Participation in heritage tourism fosters pride and empowerment, as communities share their knowledge and practices with outsiders, promoting intercultural exchange and dialogue (Thullah & Jalloh, 2021). Beyond these, ICH valorization often stimulates infrastructural improvements, such as eco-museums, community centers, and performance venues, reshaping social cohesion and cultural identification (Brooks et al., 2023).

Impacts on the heritage itself are reciprocal. Tourism increases the visibility of ICH, raises awareness, and provides resources for safeguarding. Audiences offer incentives for practitioners to continue performing rituals, producing crafts, and maintaining knowledge systems (Farah & Tremolada, 2015; Hsu et al., 2022). By embedding traditions within tourism, continuity and intergenerational transmission are supported. ICH tourism also creates opportunities for intercultural dialogue and situates heritage within a global context, contributing to cultural diversity and linking heritage practices with sustainable development agendas (Kreps, 2008; Yao et al., 2020).

Negative impacts and risks accompany these opportunities. The most cited risk is over commodification, where cultural expressions are adapted to tourist expectations rather than community values, resulting in staged authenticity and diluted meanings (Sousa, 2018; Richards, 2018; Yaşar & Yayla, 2023). Benefits are often unequally distributed, with profits captured by external actors, which can weaken community support for tourism (George, 2010). Intensified tourist flows may trigger gentrification, rising living costs, and displacement, as seen in Dubrovnik (Žuvela & Portolan, 2021). They also create externalities such as congestion, noise, and environmental strain that reduce residents' quality of life and undermine cultural landscapes (Lan et al., 2021). Misrepresentation of ICH is another risk: heritage may be presented out of context, simplified, or stereotyped, leading to cultural erosion (Chen & Chen, 2010). Intellectual property concerns emerge when traditional knowledge is exploited without recognition or compensation, undermining cultural identity and intergenerational transmission (Eichler, 2020; Hu et al., 2015; Braber & Howard, 2023).

Table 1. Impacts of ICH tourism valorisation

Category	Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts
Tourists & Tourism	Enhanced destination appeal; authentic and memorable experiences; deeper cultural understanding; active engagement through workshops and crafts	Commodification and loss of authenticity; congestion and environmental strain; folklorisation
Local Communities	Economic growth and employment; revitalisation of traditions; strengthened identity and pride; improved cultural infrastructure	Unequal distribution of benefits; gentrification and displacement; cultural misrepresentation
Heritage Itself	Increased visibility and safeguarding; continuity and intergenerational transmission; contribution to cultural diversity and sustainable development	Exploitation of traditional knowledge; weakening of identity and intergenerational transfer; alienation and erosion of meaning

Source: Author's elaboration based on reviewed literature

The valorization of intangible cultural heritage in tourism reflects a double-edged dynamic. On the one hand, tourism enriches visitor experiences, strengthens community identity, generates economic opportunities, and supports the transmission of traditions. On the other, without careful governance, it can foster commodification, cultural erosion, and social inequalities. The critical challenge is therefore not whether ICH should be integrated into tourism, but how it can be managed responsibly to preserve its cultural and social values while enabling sustainable tourism development (Lovrentjev, 2025).

4. Sustainable management and good practices

To demonstrate the practical integration of intangible cultural heritage into tourism, three selected examples of good practice are considered: the Batana Ecomuseum in Rovinj, Croatia, pilgrimage traditions on Tinos (Greece), and the Sinjska Alka in Croatia. Each example is reframed as a focused case study with a clear link to the broader discussion.

4.1. Batana Ecomuseum, Rovinj

The Batana Ecomuseum is widely recognised as one of the most successful models of community-based safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in Europe. Established in Rovinj, Croatia, it is dedicated to preserving the batana, a traditional wooden fishing boat, together with the cultural practices, songs, stories, and gastronomy linked to maritime life. What makes the Batana Ecomuseum distinctive is its living heritage approach: instead of treating heritage as static category, it integrates local traditional knowledge into contemporary community life and tourism.

The ecomuseum functions as a platform where locals and visitors can directly participate together in the process of heritage-making. Visitors are not passive observers but are invited to engage in boatbuilding workshops, storytelling evenings (spacio), traditional music performances, and culinary events based on various local fishing traditions (Jelinčić & Senkić, 2017). These activities are organized and led by community members, ensuring authenticity and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, while providing the option to local community to set the boundary where needed.

This creative initiative has been formally recognised by UNESCO through inscription in the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices, which underscores its international significance. At the same time, the Batana model has had tangible local impacts: tourism revenues are reinvested in cultural activities, supporting sustainability, while community cohesion has been strengthened through shared ownership of the project (Ubertazzi, 2020). Unlike many top-down heritage initiatives, Batana demonstrates that bottom-up governance, rooted in local participation, can generate both cultural safeguarding and socio-economic benefits.

This example is particularly valuable because it illustrates how tourism can be aligned with safeguarding objectives to both ICH and local community, without leading to folklorisation, over commodification or cultural dilution. By combining cultural authenticity, economic reinvestment, and community pride, the Batana Ecomuseum can be seen as a benchmark of sustainable valorization of intangible cultural heritage.

4.2. Tinos, Greece

Another example of good practice is the marble craftsmanship of Tinos that was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2015. It represents a distinctive form of artisanal knowledge and cultural stability. Rooted in the village of Pyrgos, this tradition blends unique technical expertise in stone carving with a strong artistic identity that has shaped both the built environment and the cultural landscape of the island. The practice is transmitted through the master-apprentice model, ensuring the intergenerational transfer of skills. This model also contributes to safeguarding local heritage (Fotopoulou, 2017; Korka, 2018).

The Tinian marble craftsmanship is present within tourism in multiple forms. Workshops, demonstrations, and the sale of marble products allow visitors to engage directly with the craft, while the Museum of Marble Crafts provides educational interpretation of techniques, tools, and works of local artisans (Chatzigrigoriou et al., 2021). These experiences strengthen destination distinctiveness among the competitors on the tourism market, such as similar destinations. This model provides participatory learning opportunities for tourists interested in traditional arts and cultural sustainability.

As one of the strong pillars of sustainability, economic benefits to the community, marble craftsmanship contributes to the resilience of local communities by generating employment, supporting small businesses, and stimulating cultural industries. The preservation of Pyrgos as a living artistic center based on the ICH illustrates how heritage can sustain local identity while simultaneously supporting sustainable tourism development. Recent initiatives, such as thematic cultural routes and digital interpretation tools, further broaden access to this tradition and highlight its role in contemporary cultural tourism based on the intangible cultural heritage (Koutsabasis et al., 2021; Zoannos et al., 2023).

The case of Tinos demonstrates how traditional craftsmanship, when carefully safeguarded and integrated into tourism, can foster sustainable development by preserving artisanal skills, enhancing cultural identity, and generating long-term socio-economic benefits for both community and tourism.

4.3. Sinjska Alka, Croatia

The example of Sinjska Alka shows how ritual authenticity is preserved while attracting large visitor flows. Inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List, it strengthens intergenerational knowledge transfer and generates tourism benefits (Richards, 2018; Brooks et al., 2023). By maintaining strict adherence to ceremonial rules, the Alka demonstrates that authenticity can coexist with tourism spectacle, reinforcing both heritage safeguarding and destination branding.

Sustainable integration of intangible cultural heritage into tourism is most effectively illustrated through case studies that demonstrate how communities balance cultural safeguarding with tourism development. The following examples

highlight the diversity of contexts in which ICH has been successfully valorized, each offering valuable insights into community participation, authenticity, and the role of heritage in strengthening destination identity.

5. Discussion

Building on the selected examples of good practice analyzed above, three cross-cutting insights emerge that align the paper's empirical observations with established theoretical debates.

(1) Authenticity as process, not a static property.

The findings affirm the shift from objectified/staged authenticity towards negotiated and experiential forms of authenticity. Rather than treating heritage as a fixed spectacle, successful initiatives enact authenticity through participation, learning and co-creation—consistent with critiques of “staged authenticity” and subsequent reconceptualization's that view authenticity as performed and relational (Richards, 2021).

(2) Governance and community centrality.

Across the examples, durable outcomes coincide with participatory governance consistent with the UNESCO (2003) safeguarding paradigm and critical appraisals that emphasize inclusive, locally anchored management (Kurin, 2004). Community ownership, transparent decision-making and reinvestment of returns into cultural transmission support social wellbeing and resilience, echoing recent syntheses on heritage tourism and community health (Brooks et al., 2023).

(3) Managing commodification through practice-based valorization.

Where commodification is tethered to living practice—particularly craftsmanship—market linkages can be aligned with safeguarding objectives. Practice-centred development sustains intergenerational transfer, strengthens destination identity and mitigates risks of folklorisation when embedded in community-led arrangements and appropriate regulatory support (Meissner, 2017; Ubertaini, 2020; Du Cros & McKercher, 2020).

Positioning these insights within the UN 2030 Agenda clarifies wider policy relevance. Heritage-based livelihoods and cultural industries contribute to SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth); place-based safeguarding that sustains cultural identity advances SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities); authentic, locally rooted products and circular value chains support SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production); and participatory governance that fosters dialogue and trust resonates with SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) (Mason et al., 2023; UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). Rather than an add-on, the SDGs provide a normative frame that links micro-level practices to macro-level development goals.

Bringing these strands together, the analysis can be summarized in a conceptual framework for sustainable integration of ICH in tourism. The framework is structured around three core dimensions—authenticity as process, participatory community governance, and practice-based market valorization—while recognizing their resonance with the wider goals of the 2030 Agenda (SDGs 8, 11, 12, and 16). At the core of this triangular framework are the operational mechanisms identified across the case studies, including participatory experiences, educational interpretation, and ritual safeguarding. Figure 1 illustrates this framework, which serves less as a prescriptive model than as a heuristic tool for comparing practices and guiding future policy and research.

By synthesizing case study insights, the framework highlights areas where safeguarding practices intersect with tourism development. This opens the way for discussing policy priorities and research needs.

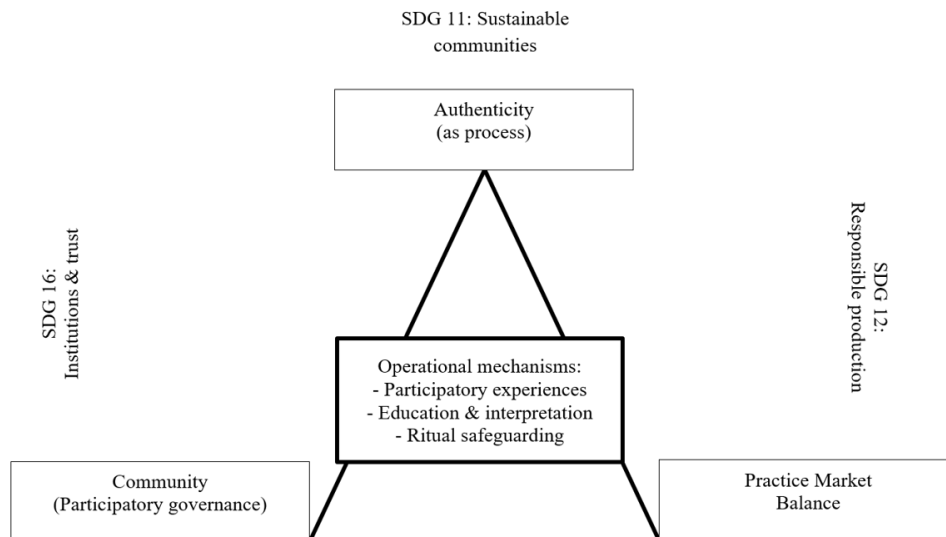
For policy and management, the evidence underscores:

- (i) prioritizing community co-governance within safeguarding plans;
- (ii) channeling visitor demand into practice-based, learning-oriented experiences; and
- (iii) embedding monitoring frameworks that track cultural vitality alongside economic indicators (Miller & Torres-Delgado, 2023).

For research, future work should refine metrics for cultural transmission and community wellbeing, and examine how co-creation shapes authenticity perceptions over time.

When governed inclusively and grounded in living practice, the integration of intangible cultural heritage into tourism can deliver cultural continuity and socio-economic value while aligning with global sustainability agendas.

Figure 1. Sustainable integration of ICH in tourism



Source: Authors' elaboration

6. Conclusion

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a vital resource for tourism, capable of enriching visitor experiences, strengthening destination identity, and fostering community well-being. However, its sustainable integration into tourism depends on governance and management choices. The cases discussed in this paper illustrate that when communities retain ownership, when authenticity is safeguarded, and when participatory frameworks are adopted, ICH and tourism can reinforce one another rather than stand in conflict.

For tourism managers and policymakers, the key takeaway is the need to design strategies that align cultural safeguarding with tourism development. This entails empowering local actors through inclusive governance, fostering experiential rather than consumptive tourism products, and ensuring that financial gains are reinvested into cultural continuity. Strengthening the link between cultural policy and tourism planning is not only a matter of competitiveness but also of resilience, helping communities sustain their heritage in the long term.

From an academic perspective, these findings confirm that ICH tourism is not inherently protective or exploitative—it is context-dependent. Future research should refine monitoring tools for cultural vitality and examine how ICH-based tourism can contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to cultural diversity, inclusive growth, and community resilience.

Ultimately, intangible heritage and tourism need not be opposing forces. With careful and responsible management, they can form a mutually beneficial relationship: tourism offering resources and visibility, and heritage providing meaning, identity, and continuity.

Acknowledgements

To detect and correct the grammatical mistakes in this paper, the AI tool has been used.

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