



Threads of Conservation

Social fabric • Fabric and place • Conserving fabric

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The Invisible Army: A study of a World Heritage site volunteer program

Paper Abstract

While there is a long tradition of volunteering across a wide cross-section of activities at historic sites, research to date has tended to focus around two relatively narrow streams of inquiry. The more pragmatic stream has concentrated on the socio-demographic and motivational factors that influence individual volunteer participation. Interwoven with this stream is a limited literature on the management practices of organisations that benefit from volunteer participation. The more theoretical stream has developed around several related concepts that influence public policy – social capital, social inclusion and social cohesion. This stream stems from Putnam's central thesis that increased civic engagement leads to greater social capital, which in turn provides the basis for effective government, economic development and community stability. While criticised as overly simplistic and largely unproven, these concepts continue to have influence, particularly in the developed world.

This paper aims to contribute to existing research on volunteers at heritage sites. Specifically, the paper reports on a study aimed at developing a better understanding of the practices used to manage volunteers. The study also addressed the impact of those practices on volunteer retention, and the engagement and identification of volunteers with a broader community. The paper initially provides a review of the literature on volunteering, social capital, and community heritage and identity. Then, using data from archival research, manager interviews, a volunteer questionnaire and focus group, the paper provides new insights into volunteer motivations and the practices employed to manage volunteers at the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site, a complex and financially successful industrial World Heritage site in the United Kingdom. The paper concludes with a framework that links volunteer characteristics with specific management practices, and provides an analysis of the benefits of those practices for the wider engagement of communities in heritage.