

Bearden Brown LLC
Building Leadership | Growing Impact

INTO Sustainable Tourism Project
COVID-19 Impacts Survey | Summary of Results
20 August 2020

“Sustainable tourism is rooted in sustainable development, in the sense that if tourism is to contribute to sustainable development, it must be economically viable, environmentally sensitive, and culturally appropriate.” (Noha Nasser)

Early in 2020, the International National Trusts Organisation (INTO), with the support of American Express, launched a project to examine sustainable tourism efforts at sites operated by National Trusts and related entities. A number of INTO member organizations have long worked to address issues of over-tourism and to support sustainable tourism efforts. The organization also has a lengthy interest in the issue of climate impact on cultural resources, a concern related to sustainable tourism. INTO addressed the topic in depth at its biennial conferences in Dublin, Bali, Cambridge, and Uganda. American Express and its foundation have championed sustainable tourism initiatives through projects at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, Easter Island, the historic district in Mexico City, and at museums and cultural sites along Route 66 in the western United States.

Since the project’s conception, the coronavirus crisis has increased pressure on the organizations which steward historic, cultural, and natural sites around the world. A window of opportunity opened at the beginning of this project to review the impacts of COVID-19 on the work of INTO’s membership. INTO and American Express, working with Bearden Brown LLC and its principal, David J. Brown (a former INTO trustee), adjusted the workplan to include a July 2020 survey of INTO’s 86 member organizations from around the globe to gather basic information on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was a 55% response rate to the survey, with 47 of the 86 INTO members submitting information on the impacts of COVID-19 on their organizations and site visitation. All of the largest members of INTO (by members and number of sites) responded, providing an extensive view into the operations of the world’s National Trusts. The respondents reported individual membership levels ranging from 0 (several are not membership organizations) to approximately 5.8 million (National Trust of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland or NTEWNI). Total membership for the respondents equaled 6.55 million. The average membership size for the responding organizations, excluding NTEWNI, is 17,400.

The following is a summary of the survey’s findings, augmented by comments (*highlighted in italics*) from the responding organizations.

What has been the impact of the pandemic on membership recruitment and retention?

More than half — or 55% — of the respondents reported that their membership recruitment and retention was negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Another 40% described the impact as negligible, while less than 5% reported an increase in membership recruitment.

Several specific commentators considered the impacts of the loss of access to sites in their membership recruitment and retention efforts.

- Loss of access to properties has resulted in loss of opportunity to recruit new members, but retention is holding up for the moment:
 - *We have done well to hold onto many of our members...However, the required closure of our properties has meant we have not been able to recruit new members to off-set the natural churn in existing members leaving.*
 - *Recruitment is down, but retentions are holding.*
- The timing of membership drives comes into play for some organizations as they work to retain existing members:
 - *We gained 600 members in the month of May. However, our largest expire groups are December and January, so when members from those months move out of their 15-month windows (in April and May), we (may) have a noticeable decline in members. But this is a normal process for us and is not unduly tied to the pandemic.*
- The reopening of sites and programs in certain parts of the world has benefitted membership retention and recruitment for some Trusts:
 - *Due to the closure of our properties and the impossibility to organize our main events of fund raising we had a general drop in membership recruitment but we are happy to say that...now we are collecting more memberships than last year (like for like). People seem to be more well-disposed to our mission.*
- Impact of staycations on membership:
 - *We have lost some members...but have had success recruiting new members as our summer educational events programme takes place....staycations have resulted in more interest in our events/activities prompting more people to join the Trust*
- Some donors are turning to other priorities during the pandemic:
 - *Heritage is not a priority for donors; it is hard to talk (to the) public about this subject.*

What is COVID-19's impact on sites' visitation and funding?

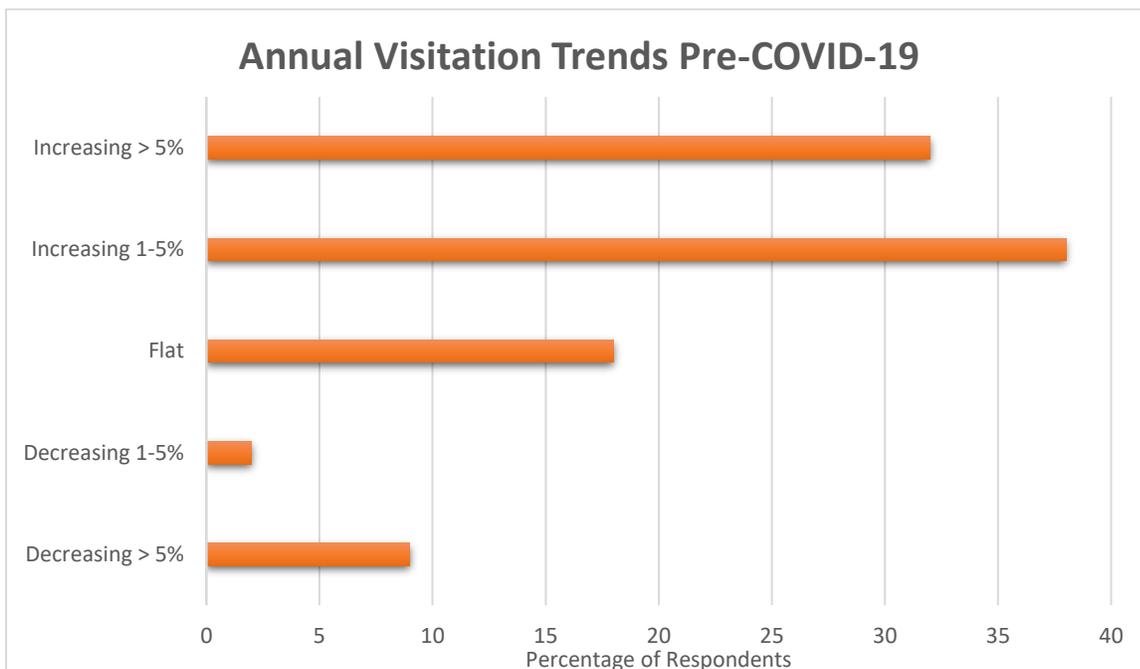
The vast majority of National Trusts own and steward multiple properties. Of the groups responding to the INTO survey, 90% have two or more sites in their portfolio. More than a quarter (or 29%) steward between 11 and 50 sites, while just under a quarter (24%) steward more than 50 sites. Property ownership and sites stewardship is a major part of the National Trust model. The sites are a mix of historic buildings, nature preserves, gardens, island groups, a marine park, commercial buildings, and more. While many are small, a significant amount are large properties, including forested areas and coastlines. Twenty-two percent of these INTO members are responsible for the care and stewardship of World Heritage Sites.

Visitation

Visitation to National Trust sites covers a wide range of activities. Half of the respondents report visitation of less than 10,000 individuals a year (this includes several organizations which do not own

and/or operate historic sites). On the other end of the spectrum, 14% of those responding to the survey report annual visitation numbers in excess of 1 million individuals. Another 20% of these groups report annual visitation numbers between 100,000 and 1 million. Seven organizations, or 15% of those responding, own a single site that welcomes more than 500,000 visitors annually. It should also be noted that some National Trusts have large nature reserves and similar areas that are extremely popular with hikers and bikers. However, most Trusts do not count the number of visitors at those sites, except at special events.

In response to questions about where their visitors live, the Trusts estimated that 35% of those visiting their sites live locally (i.e., within a 20-mile/35-kilometer radius). An estimated 42% of visitors come from outside the local region or are international tourists.



Trends in visitation

Prior to the pandemic, overall visitation trends at National Trust sites were on the rise. Thirty-one percent of the respondents said their trends over the past three years had been increasing at 5% annually. Another 38% put that annual trend line at between 1-5%. Only 11% of the total respondents had been experiencing a decline in visitation trends in recent years. In at least one instance, gaining air access (the island had previously only been accessible by ship) brought an increase in tourists.

Funding

Forty percent of those responding indicated that less than 10% of their annual revenue is sites-related (e.g., admissions, rentals, special events, gift shops). However, for the remaining 60%, many of their budgets are tied to income from their sites. Forty percent of the overall respondents reported that between 10-50% of their total income is site-dependent. Another 9% put that figure between 51-75%, while 12% of all those responding indicated that more than 75% of their total income is derived from

their sites. The comments show the variety of ways National Trusts depend on sites in their business models:

- Operations costs as separate from project funds
 - *Income (is) mainly from gate receipts and venue rental. The percentage applies to our operating cost only - not project funds (which are) received from donors*
- Dependence on a handful of sites
 - *It's about 85% and from two sites particularly*
- Some business models are not directly tied to site visitation
 - *All of our income comes from grants and donations, we do not receive any revenue from visitors to projects and all our events are free*

Returning to pre-pandemic levels

One of the more difficult questions facing National Trusts relates to forecasting the rebound in visitation to their historic sites as the world moves out of the pandemic. Fully one-quarter responded that it was impossible to estimate a timing for return at this moment. Some 18% of the respondents suggested they would be back to pre-pandemic levels of visitation within a year, while 47% suggested it would take between one and three years to reach that level. Eleven percent of the respondents said they would never return to pre-pandemic levels of activity or their sites would never reopen.

The comments to this question indicate the challenges and opportunities in planning for the future.

- There were several comments around elements beyond the control of the National Trust
 - *This is very dependent on externalities, including economic context*
- Some Trusts see domestic travel returning, but their reliance on international travel is more problematic
 - *Domestic visitation may return to normal levels and trends, and may even increase, but overall trends will depend on how overseas markets change - both government restrictions, but also changes in visitor preferences.*
 - *At least, we plan to recover partially our visitors' numbers in 2-3 years. The clue is to have a vaccine available and recover the trust in visiting places abroad.*
 - *All depends on commercial air access and quarantine requirements - we may not see any tourists for a long time.*
- Several Trusts suggested that they are using the pandemic as a time to reassess their tourism programs
 - *We are looking at handling things differently. Our sites did not have great visitor numbers before the pandemic. This has given us the chance to consider changes - such as a museum application, online virtual tours, admission to museums by signed-up tour only, etc.*

- And more than one respondent did not see tourism as recovering to pre-pandemic levels in the near future
 - *We feel that tourism as a whole will not recover to pre-coronavirus levels*

Staying in touch

National Trusts are using a variety of ways to give the public access to some or all of their portfolio of sites when full-scale visitation is not an option. Social media is a major point of contact across the globe. The most common tool used to engage members and visitors with specific sites is online video tours, followed in order by:

- Staff led webinars and video chats;
- Opening of the grounds, but not the buildings, while practicing social distancing; and
- Collaboration with other sites and local tourism agencies/organizations to promote the sites.

The methods of keeping in touch with members and visitors were fleshed out in the comments.

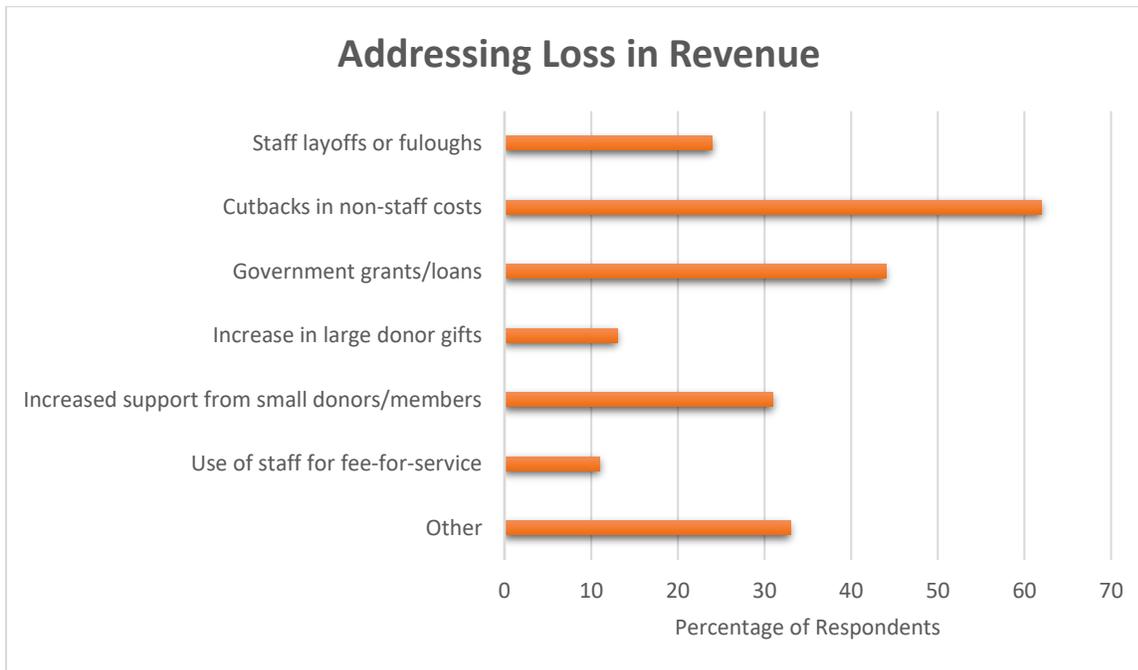
- Virtually every National Trust is using some form of online social media to generate engagement
 - *Creation of an online activity hub, a thank you postcard to all members and regular contact via social media as well as direct emails via campaign monitor*
 - *Both general media and member communications explaining the impact on the Trust and our conservation efforts. In doing this, we have had to be sensitive to timing, as front-line needs and associated charities must take priority.*
 - *We are working on updating our website, embarking on a major new project documenting traditional music throughout the country, and publishing our journal.*
 - *We created a YouTube channel to give free access to our previous lectures, (plus we've used) FACEBOOK feeds and emails.*
 - *Social media, online talks and forums, online classes for children in the public school system, emails, summer camps (reduced numbers) for children*
 - *The local broadcast company has made special programs in museums and on locations that were closed to public during Corona times*

Coping with reduced revenues

Reduced income from both membership revenue and sites-related revenue has affected virtually all National Trusts. To cope with reductions in revenue, the Trusts have responded in a variety of ways. Almost two-thirds have reduced non-staff costs, such as conservation work, marketing, and overhead. More than 44% of the Trusts have called upon government grants and/or loans that help cover staff costs and operational expenses (e.g. paycheck protection plan, furlough scheme, temporary wage subsidy scheme). Almost a third have increased efforts to raise funds from small-level donors and members, while 13% have focused fundraising efforts on large donors.

The most painful actions have involved reduction in staff. As of the close of the survey, one-quarter of the respondents had resorted to staff layoffs and furloughs. There were mentions in the comments of reducing some staff to four-day weeks to contain costs. In late July, the largest organization among the respondents — the National Trust of England, Wales and Northern Ireland — announced upcoming job

losses for some 1,200 full-time staff, or 13% of the current workforce. Part-time staff will see reductions of 30%. The Trust is making these changes as a result of an estimated £200 million loss in revenue this year alone.



Conclusions

As parts of the world enter the eighth month of a global pandemic, the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on the National Trusts — stewards of some of the world’s greatest cultural and natural treasures — is large and ongoing. The survey results show that virtually every aspect of work by National Trusts to save and protect the irreplaceable has been impacted. Fewer funds and smaller staffs have become the norm for many organizational members of INTO, but these National Trusts have adopted creative ways to ensure conservation work continues and the public has access — at least online — to the portfolios of historic places and natural sites entrusted to these groups.

Even before the survey was completed, INTO has been sharing information and supporting its member organizations through newsletters, webinars, blog posts, and videos. This vital network has been important to all National Trusts, but especially to the smaller groups who do not have the robust support and infrastructure of some of the larger and more established organizations. Information from this project will continue to be provided to the INTO membership in anticipation of a full-scale report and presentation at the next International Conference of National Trusts in Antwerp.

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