



Navigating Ethical Dilemmas in Dark Heritage Tourism: The Titanic Shipwreck and the OceanGate Expedition

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Abstract. The essay explores the ethical issues surrounding Dark Heritage and its intersection with tourism, using the Titanic shipwreck and the OceanGate Expedition as primary case studies. Dark heritage refers to sites and narratives of disasters, trauma, and loss, while dark tourism focuses on public fascination with such tragic histories. The essay delves into key ethical dilemmas, such as the potential disrespect towards victims, the exclusivity of such tourism experiences, and the commercialization of these sites. The OceanGate Expedition, which led to the deaths of five people during a submarine tour of the Titanic wreck in 2023, exemplifies the tension between the commercialization of dark heritage and the respect for its historical and cultural significance. The essay critiques the profit-driven nature of such expeditions, which often cater to the wealthy, and highlights the imbalance in accessibility and revenue distribution. The essay also argues that heritage professionals should play a central role in addressing these challenges by ensuring that the management of Dark Heritage sites respects both the historical integrity and the memory of the victims. Additionally, it suggests that dark heritage should be more widely shared with the public in a suitable manner, rather than being monopolized by a privileged few.

Keywords: Dark Heritage, HeritageTourism, Cultural Preservation, Trauma.

1 Introduction

“It would be a great wreck.” Stockton Rush (the CEO of OceanGate Expedition)'s comment on the USS *Indianapolis*, torpedoed in World War II and resting 5,500 meters below in the Philippine Sea, exemplifies an orientation towards shipwrecks as potential tourism attractions, rather than valuing heritage and environmental conservation [6]. Terrible disaster is the reason why these shipwrecks became part of the seabed, have been repurposed as a gimmick for his marine tours. This stresses the ethical conflict between the dark tourism market's profit-seeking capability and cultural interpretation in the dark heritage realm.

Dark heritage is like a complex pattern woven into the very fabric of human life. This concept revolves around talking about disasters, trauma, and loss, both at a personal and societal level. Using the Titanic's tragic legacy and the contemporary problem of the OceanGate Expedition, I will delve into the ethical intricacies occurred when

balancing historical preservation against the evolving demands of public tourism needs. In this journey through the corridors of dark heritage, I peel back the ethical considerations that underscore its complex interplay with dark heritage and tourism, including considerations of respect to victims, heritage exclusiveness, and revenue distribution. Then propose cultural heritage professionals' potential engagement and interpretation solution when dealing with corresponding issues.

Before further illustrate the ethical problems of dark heritage encountering tourism, is critical to give the definition of dark heritage and dark tourism, and identification of who are cultural heritage professionals.

2 The Concepts of Dark Heritage Tourism

Dark heritage contains a discussion of all kinds of disasters, trauma, and loss in both personal and collective ways. As explicated by Thomas [21], this term serves as an overarching framework encompassing related notions such as dissonant [24] or negative heritage [13], thereby firmly establishing itself within scholarly discourse. I think dark heritage can be as important and famous as Auschwitz Camp and can be as small and personal as a relative's funeral because negative feelings and sorrow do not only take place at political or nation-level events but when dealing with negative memories in everyday life using a collective imaginary way [13]. While the expansive definition of heritage may lend itself to a broad classification, wherein nearly anything may be construed as "heritage" [8], it remains imperative to acknowledge that the essence of heritage and its foundation is rooted in personal experiences and emotions. Consequently, its essential to consider subjective individual emotions and collective sentiments in the realm of dark heritage.

Similarly, in the aspect of tourism, a concept about experiencing a difficult past from tourist's perspective named dark tourism. According to Light [12], dark tourism has evolved into a comprehensive term encompassing any tourism associated with themes of death, disaster, suffering, or discomfort. Despite its close ties to heritage, dark tourism differs from dark heritage mainly by focusing on consumer motivations and psychological elements [21]. Not only considering its heritage and historical significance, but a tourist site also needs to consider monetary operation and customer interest. However, it is precisely these considerations that lead to many ethical issues, especially from the perspective of heritage preservation.

Some dark tourism sites have well-managed organizations behind their daily operations, some do not and even are in the wilderness or deep in the mountains. Inadequate oversight might cause further damage to the tourists and the site itself. For example, lots of Youtubers are exploring the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and posting videos to gain viewers, disregarding the potential risk of over-radiation [27]. Therefore, it becomes imperative to incorporate dark heritage sites lacking effective management into ethical discussions.

Before defining how cultural heritage professionals should react to the ethical dilemma derived from dark heritage and tourism, a classification of who is heritage experts and what they do needs to be addressed. Historically, heritage professionals were

predominantly centralized within the tangible domain, focusing on disciplines such as Archaeology, Architecture, and related fields [9]. However, a transformative discourse emerged in the 1990s, scholars tended to expand the heritage from tangible to intangible, comprising social and political ideas [7]. Accordingly, the definition of experts within this domain underwent a shift.

Schofield [19] then points out heritage is for everyone and that we are all heritage experts, because experts sometime neglect or mislead other parts of the value from different groups of stakeholders. Opposition proposed by Holst and Molander [10], stated that considering everyone an expert is an act of dissolving the very notion of the expert. In this sense, formulating an equilibrium and fostering collaboration between acknowledged experts and other stakeholders becomes imperative. As Jones [11] discussed, the heritage conservation approach should be people-based conservation, since heritage values are defined by contemporary communities, not in an elective and authorised way. Heritage conservation and interpretation, therefore, necessitate active engagement with diverse stakeholders, avoiding unilateral decision-making by any party. Therefore, I will talk about what should professionals do, considering various stakeholders, when encountering ethical issues of dark heritage and tourism.

3 The OceanGate Expedition and Renewed Ethical Debate

One of the examples of dark heritage is the Titanic shipwreck, which attained global attention due to the tragic incident of colliding with an iceberg, resulting in the loss of over 1500 lives in the North Atlantic Ocean on 15 April 1912 [22]. The Titanic wreck was discovered under a collaborative discovery almost 70 years later, in 1985. What further vivid the image of this mysterious cruise is the Titanic film directed by James Cameron in 1997, recounting the tragic love story of Rose and Jack. What puts another shade on this disastrous ship is the recent OceanGate Expedition's underwater sightseeing tour incident, which resulted in 5 additional casualties on the Titanic after almost a century [16]. Enjoying widespread recognition and global fascination, multiple museums and sites have been established to depict the story behind this vessel. It became a fascinating topic for considering the interconnection of dark heritage and dark tourism, especially when its authentic site located on the seabed.

Someone manages to break the obstruct between audience's curiosity and the barrier of ocean. In June 2023, a 5-meter-long submarine, *Titanis*, set off with Stockton Rush and four other passengers, to discover the Titanic shipwreck under the sea [26]. Shortly after its departure, the submarine lost contact with the mother ship, then the tragic ending of this ship was revealed with four days of joint rescue efforts by American and Canadian forces. This uncertified small "tube" [5], owing to the low hardness of its material, was crushed by great underwater pressure before reaching its intended depth. It seems like the tragic Titanic transformed from a shipwreck to a sightseeing spot, and this is an extreme case occurred when dark heritage site turning into a tourism destination.

I will explore the moral issues of Whether the site itself should be visited that might cause possible offense to the victim; Whether an exclusive dark travel experience is

justified; and where should its profits go? Then conclude on the suggestions of heritage professionals in navigating the delicate balance between preserving the historical integrity of such sites and catering to the entertainment demands of the public, drawing on the OceanGate Expedition shipwreck case.

First of all, central to this discourse is the intriguing aspect of what draws individuals to engage in dark tourism and the consequential ethical dilemmas that arise. Unlike the glamorous and well-built modern museum, the Titanic wreck holds a definite authenticity and integrity, constituting a pivotal attraction within the domain of heritage tourism [1]. Noteworthy duplicate examples, such as the Belfast Titanic Museum or The Titanic Museum Attraction in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, United States, despite its various decorations to enhance audience's immersive experience, fall short of capturing the genuine essence of the actual Titanic ship. The authenticity of the Titanic's historical narrative derives in part from this cruel reality. John Locascio, whose relatives died in the Titanic said [3], "... if my soul was there, I wouldn't want people coming down to take a look at me... I don't feel that it would be a very comfortable situation, to have people just looking, ogling. It makes no sense". The nature of such expeditions is not from a commemoration of the deceased; rather, it transforms into a romanticized adventure fuelled by the tragic endings of victims on the Titanic. "If you're going to go down there, just revere the Titanic as a grave," Is it inappropriate to hold a mindset of adventure and treasure hunt towards a grave of "fantasy"?

Secondly, the entrance fee of 250,000 US dollars for participation in the OceanGate Expedition raises ethical concerns, particularly as the generated revenue flows directly into a private company's coffers [5]. Although Rush stated that the oceanic adventure has scientific value, "For the Titanic expedition, the value is in collecting images, data and expanding knowledge of the ocean in general." However, there is no direct evidence showing that they contributed to building Titanic memory or helping related society. The OceanGate Expedition, if operating within the realm of dark heritage, should consider contributing to Titanic memorials and augmenting societal understanding of the historical significance of the ship [20].

Other than that, this underwater tourism only serves wealthy audiences. Similar to the First-Class passengers on Titanic who have priority on-boarding onto the rescue ship, OceanGate Expedition's expensive entrance fee restricts who can get aboard. Going all the way down to the seabed is their privilege compared to a normal visiting day to a museum. Face this special and elitist experience of heritage. Should this experience be limited to only wealthy people? On one hand, this is a high-cost trip due to its prime cost of technology, personnel, and equipment. On the other hand, the exclusiveness and monopolising opportunity raised the question of whose heritage? Should it be experienced and gained by those who have the power to enjoy it, or should it be shared among all human beings as a collective memory of the past tragedy?

Confronting the first ethical concern, namely ensuring the comfort and acceptance of the victims and their relatives, prompts a question of the necessity of physically visiting dark heritage sites. Based on existing documentaries, films and museums, audiences can completely understand details through channels other than accessing the site deep under the sea. Dark heritage sites are not the only or best way to achieve this goal of understanding it [4]. According to the UNESCO, Titanic Agreement and relevant

professional principles, the activities directed to underwater cultural heritage should “endorsed the nondisturbance and full respect of human remains, and the noncommerce with recovered objects and the nondissemination of the collection [2].” In the extreme case of OceanGate Expedition, the submarine does not have direct contact with the wreck itself, and the whole tour does not have a relation with commercializing artefacts as well. Hence, it is inadequate in regulating and managing in extreme cases. Other than that, according to Miller’s [14] research, when it comes to the practical implementation of the Titanic itself, sovereign states and UNESCO have varied opinions. United States did not implement UNESCO’s underwater cultural heritage regulations [25], “the first option before allowing or engaging in any activities directed at this heritage”, which supports the archaeological facet of acknowledgement. Whereas the Titanic Treaty [15], which the U.S. adopted, claims that in situ preservation shall be used unless otherwise justified by educational, scientific, or cultural interests, which can justify salvage efforts for financial revenue. Therefore, there is still a lack of regulations and laws in this specific realm of tourism [14].

Experts should lead the process of making decisions in underwater cultural heritage and tourism, humanistic care should be considered by protecting special dark heritage under existing structure of UNESCO. As Perez-Alvaro [17] proposed, if the shipwrecks contained human remains that cannot be conserved, and vanished in the watery grave, it should maintain its status of “sacred places” as intangible heritage. In proposing ethical concepts and addressing practical challenges related to dark heritage, it is imperative to consider UNESCO’s framework for protecting the Titanic as an intangible heritage.

Indeed, the distribution of revenue issue necessitates comprehensive consultation and collaboration among diverse stakeholders in the development of a dark heritage site. As delineated in the research of Light [12], these stakeholders may encompass the manager or executor responsible for providing the travel experience related to death or pain, the local community, and local government experts overseeing tourism and brand development. Achieving a balance and consensus among these entities is paramount to ensuring ethical and sustainable practices in the management and commercialization of dark heritage sites, especially for victims and their families. A positive example of distributing revenue is the Titanic Museum Attractions Give Back Through Two-Year Partnership with Samaritan’s Feet International activity formulated by the Titanic Museum, Pigeon Forge. In order to remember the 135 children who lost their lives [23], this museum will host “The Year of the Titanic Children” campaign and collaborate with Samaritan’s Feet to provide shoes to children throughout two states in the U.S. (Tennessee and Missouri). Therefore, the central issue lies not in whether a tourism company remembering dark heritage should or should not profit, but rather in how they utilize the generated revenue. Profitability should align with a commitment to social responsibility, heritage preservation, and community development. Professionals can guide and lead companies conducting their social responsibility and supervise from an outsider perspective.

Confronted with ethical and moral quandary arising from proprietary dark tourism experience, I contend that the exclusive engagement with dark heritage, such as the artefacts and wreckage of the Titanic, should be restricted to specialized researchers in

the purpose of civil education and research. The Titanic's last band's violin was transferred from individual to individual as a private property as early as it was found, was on an auction. But, according to Perez-Alvaro and Manders [18], if the violin may also be considered of “public interest” and public importance, it should be visible and enjoyable for all. This public ownership, particularly for education and outreach, is underpinned by the inherent educational value encapsulated within dark heritage commemoration. The exclusivity ought to be directed towards serving the interests of society, not the benefit of individuals. Proposing a shift in ownership, professionals should encourage the items associated with the Titanic, including its wreckage and experience of viewing it, should be held in the public domain.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, to navigate the ethical intricacies presented by dark tourism, cultural heritage experts should play a central role in fostering an understanding that respects the past, acknowledges the present, and shapes a responsible future narrative. The tragic legacy of the Titanic and the contemporary challenges posed by the OceanGate Expedition serves as a great starting point to consider regulation for dark tourism. These cases not only showcase the evolving demands of public fascination but also bring forth the ethical dilemmas heritage professionals face. Balancing the preservation of historical integrity with the entertainment-seeking desires of the public is a delicate tightrope walk.

However, much more ethical problems occur when cultural heritage clashes with tourism. For example, in the case of OceanGate Expedition, I haven't addressed the conflict between Authorised Heritage Discourse and different communities' narratives. Additionally, this essay portrait mainly using one case, the submarine tragedy, but not other Titanic museums or the famous film. Intriguing reasons for how the notion of it transfers from tragic history to a romantic image can be discussed in future studies. Whether this transformation itself is ethical or not, and whether the shift of impression is a remembrance or amnesia deserves to be critically dealt with.

Also, since Rush himself now lies down under the sea with Titanic, we don't have an opportunity for the tourists to justify their actions, so this study might not be able to delve deeper into understanding the tourists' emotions and motivations directly. May them all rest in peace.

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