

Visitors at risk and heritage in peril? A case-study of Paris forbidden “catacombs”.

In Paris, some people like to go into the forbidden “catacombs”, which are an underground network of quarries. One of the reasons is that this network reflects a part of Paris’ history, and can be considered as a heritage site due to the presence of historical and contemporary imprints. However, they put themselves in danger by doing so: the forbidden “catacombs” are not secured and it is illegal to go there. This thesis aims at better understanding the risks taken by those people as well as the reasons why they take such risks. It also aims at identifying the risks that this heritage is exposed to. The links between the risks for the visitors and for the heritage are investigated, and lead to the identification of solutions that could reduce risks for both visitors and the heritage.

This research is based on Paris forbidden catacombs. It primarily focuses on the risks undertaken by illegal visitors, whose activity to go in the quarries can be considered as urban exploration. Urban exploration consists of going illegally into abandoned and disused areas or buildings. The thesis also looks at the heritage value of Paris forbidden catacombs: although they are abandoned, some considered that they have a heritage value.

This research finds that natural processes combined with the actions (and inactions) of the authorities and illegal visitors are threatening the heritage. For example, graffiti on historical imprints are major risks for the heritage. Concerning the dangers for visitors, getting lost and falling are identified as the most important risks for illegal visitors.

The academic literature on risk perception shows that experts identify risks differently from the general public. In this research, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with both the authorities and illegal visitors. Surprisingly, illegal visitors identified risks similarly to the authorities.

The findings of this research also illustrate how considering both risks for illegal visitors and for the heritage can be useful: indeed, it helped to come up with solutions which take into consideration both visitors safety and damages to the heritage. For example, one suggested solution is to engage the different stakeholders into a discussion about the heritage value of the catacombs, and how it can be valorised. Adopting this dual approach could be useful in other urban exploration sites’ contexts, and even for heritage sites in general.