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**UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL
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**CONVENTION CONCERNING THE PROTECTION OF THE WORLD
CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE**

WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE

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Information document: Report of the Expert Meeting on Desert Landscapes and Oasis Systems (Oasis Kharga, Egypt), 23 - 26 September 2001

The Committee may wish to take note of the summary report of the Expert Meeting on Desert Landscapes and Oases Systems (Oasis of Kharga, Egypt, 23 - 26 September 2001) and the conclusions and recommendations contained in the document. The recommendations are addressed to the Committee, the States Parties, (potential) site managers, to the World Heritage Centre and to the advisory bodies to the Convention.

The Committee may also wish to note that the meeting was considered as a starting point for a broader reflection on desert landscapes, both in the Arab Region and other parts of the world. In the framework of the global strategy other expert meetings and theme studies could be carried out towards the identification, recognition and protection of desert landscapes of outstanding universal value.

Summary report of the Expert Meeting on Desert Landscapes and Oasis Systems (Oasis Kharga, Egypt), 23 - 26 September 2001

The participants were welcomed by the Governor of the New Valley Province, *General Mehat Abdel Rhaman*, who highlighted that he was in charge of the largest province in Egypt, which also covers important desert areas west of the Nile. He emphasized the international collaboration carried out in archaeology and geomorphology of the border areas with Sudan and Libya. He also stated that the New Valley is strategic for Egypt and that news plans to develop it have been finalized, including its tourism development and agricultural plans. It covers a large part of Egypt, but has currently only 14 hotels and a great potential to develop eco-tourism. The protection of both the natural resources and the conservation of cultural heritage are elaborated with the different agencies concerned.

The Director of the UNESCO Cairo Office *Mr Mohamed El Deek* conveyed greetings from the Director General of UNESCO and pointed out that the theme of desert landscapes requires further research. This theme at the same time will promote societies in poor environments based on sound principles of sustainable development. He thanked the Governor for his kind words and all participants for having come to the meeting.

Mr Francesco Bandarin, Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, thanked the Supreme Council and the Cairo Office for having supported this important and innovative initiative, which provided the Centre with the opportunity to also review the situation of World Heritage sites and potential sites in the country, which is not well represented with only 5 sites on the World Heritage List. Egypt was not only at the origins of the World Heritage concept, it is also a custodian of the heritage of a longstanding civilization. The meeting is the first one to address desert landscapes and it is a timely exercise. To choose a country in the Arab region for such a meeting gives a new drive to the global strategy to make the World Heritage List more representative. The long interaction between people and their environment in desert regions of the world is not only an enriching concept to reflect on the preservation of outstanding heritage, but also the question of its protection in a fragile environment. He highlighted that this meeting concludes the first ten-year cycle of cultural landscape meetings in different regions of the world, which underpinned the success and recognition of the landscape concept. He also conveyed greetings from the Chairperson of the World Heritage Committee, Mr Peter King.

Prof. Gaballa A. Gaballa, Secretary General of Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt, welcomed all to Kharga Oasis, a meeting place, which highlights the main feature of the meeting, man and nature. Human beings always aspired to be in an oasis with water and far away from the problems of the world. An oasis is an ideal place to reflect about desert landscapes. Kharga also displays archaeological remains illustrating the wisdom and distinctive knowledge of the people of the New Valley. He encouraged all to reflect and to learn from the oasis people, who live in harmony with nature. Deserts are at the origins of major religions, including Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The prophet Mohammed lived in one of the most arid places on earth and His faith is related to the desert. Deserts give us much more than we expect - they can be seen as a gift from God. He also underlined that heritage cannot stand in isolation - the world's community is called up to

save it, as was the case for the Nubian campaign. He also informed the participants about new nominations such as St. Catherine, which will reflect the desert heritage of the country.

Ms Mechtild Rössler, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, in her keynote speech on cultural landscapes informed the participants of the three categories of cultural landscapes adopted by the World Heritage Committee in 1992: designed, continuous living/relict and associative. She highlighted the results of the previous expert meetings on cultural landscapes, which illustrated different themes such as canals, itineraries or rice terraced landscapes but also reviewed the concept in different cultural contexts and understanding of the notion in general. In applying the categories to deserts and oasis systems, she interpreted these as follows: an oasis could be seen as a designed landscape, which is also displayed in the image of the garden of Eden. The oasis could also be a living continuing landscape illustrated by different agricultural and complex irrigation systems. In many desert regions one can find fossil and relict forms, as the desertification recuperated lands formerly in use, as it is the case in the western desert of Egypt. This is also illustrated by a number of itineraries rediscovered in man desert regions of the world. The associative cultural landscapes is expressed by many spiritual links people have to desert landscapes, expressed also in the history of religious belief systems of the world. Deserts can be also seen as place linked to many stories of scientific discovery and exploration. Finally she highlighted with illustrations from all parts of the world the complex management questions of cultural landscapes sites often managed through customary law and traditional protection mechanisms.

Prof. Rudolph Kuper, Director of the Heinrich Barth Institute (Germany/Egypt), provided a keynote speech on desert landscapes from a prehistoric perspective. Cultural landscapes have been known already in the ancient Egypt and documented by scientific explorers, for example Heinrich Barth, and Arab scholars such as Al Baqqai. Today we do not find any population between the two oasis Siwa and Wadi Howar in the Saharan desert, but the previous occupation is documented by prehistoric remains such as stone artifacts and botanic analysis. The origins of the Egyptian civilization come from the Libyan Desert and Africa. Egypt is thus not only a gift from the Nile, as stated by Herodotus, but also a gift from the Desert. He highlighted that those sites can only be preserved if both the cultural and natural environment can be protected. Archaeological sites in the desert are far more fragile than any stone monument along the Nile. A large-scale public awareness would be necessary to avoid that tourists threaten the integrity of these places. He made a number of specific recommendations such as training of tour operators, fixed routes and a contractual system, to establish large scale protected areas in the region, such as Wadi Howar in Sudan (100.000km²), or the Gifl Kebir National Park at the borders of Libya, Egypt and Sudan. Also the oldest Caravan routes and itineraries on Earth, which preserve the traces of people having lived in the desert are worthy of protection on a world scale.

During the discussion it was pointed out that deserts comprise 20% of the world's surface and offer a great natural and spiritual wealth to humanity. However, very few feature on the World Heritage List (e.g. Tassili n'Ajjer in Algeria or Air and Ténéré in Niger) and in the Sahara only 2,5% of the whole area is protected. The ongoing destruction of desert

sites is going unnoticed by the international community, while huge areas are threatened by the extension of cultivation and other human activities.

Mr Atia Radwan presented the recent discoveries of Nabta Playa, 40km north of Nabta at Gabal El Ramler, a site more than 5000 years old. At this site, some objects have already been damaged such as a stone compass, which should be now transferred to the Nubian museum. He called for the training of young people in preservation and highlighted the long history of humankind displayed at these sites, which could be seen as fossil or relict landscapes.

Mr Faisal A Abu-Izzeddin (Lebanon), speaking on behalf of IUCN, emphasized that cultures originate from oases in the middle of large desert regions where water sources are the main features for life. He illustrated this also referring to the epic of Gilgamesh in the green mountains of Lebanon, a legend which calls, *ante litteram*, for the sustainable use of the natural resources, in particular the sacred cedar trees, and constitutes possibly the first demarcation of a protected area. He then explained that arid lands in general are not very well represented on the World Heritage List. These areas, he continued, are vulnerable to climatic change owing to their low species diversity and, especially near oasis with water sources, are often points of conflict for water access. Concerning desert landscapes he highlighted the analysis of IUCN that traditional land use systems provide a basis for bio-diversity and that they are also guardians for genetic material. Natural values have to be carefully assessed, to ensure the conservation of desert ecosystems, bio-diversity through farming systems, *ex situ* preservation and sites of discoveries. He finally highlighted the notion of integrity, clarifying that it is the integrity of the relationship with nature that matters, not the integrity of nature itself.

Prof. Gaballa A. Gaballa and *Mr Mahamed Abdel Maksoud* presented an overview of the sites in the New Valley, including 5 oases and a vast desert area. Many of the archaeological sites date back to Roman and Persian times and some of the irrigation systems first developed in Egypt are still in use in other regions today. They indicated that specific explanations would be given during the field visits to the sites.

Prof. Mohamed Ayyad informed the participants that he carried out a study on natural heritage in the Arab region, which identified 60 potential properties, some of which could be considered cultural landscapes. He suggested that a training workshop on the concept and the management of cultural landscapes should be organized. He highlighted the traditional knowledge preserved, in particular with regard to water collection systems. He then informed the participants that in the Eastern desert Elba National Park is a place of a rich biodiversity and traditional pastoral cultures. The Wadi Rayan depression contains numerous fossil and archaeological sites and a diverse fauna and flora. In general terms, more has to be done with regard to legal protection and management of sites in the Arab region, both for cultural landscapes and natural sites.

Ms Carla Maurano presented the programme of the International Centre for Mediterranean Landscapes at the World Heritage cultural landscape of Cilento National Park (Italy). To enhance the capacity for site management, an international training

programme has been designed, which covers a 3-5 year period with training modules adjusted to the needs of cultural landscape management. In particular the links between the countries around the Mediterranean basin will be reinforced and site managers and students from the Arab region can obtain grants to participate in this programme. This has already been started with a co-operation with Morocco.

Mr Giovanni Boccardi, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, explained the situation with regard to World Heritage in the Arab Region, where 49 cultural, 3 natural and 1 mixed sites have been included in the World Heritage List so far. Four countries have no sites so far, including Sudan, the largest territory on the continent. He pointed out that awareness building is crucial and that national agencies should also adjust to the evolving notion of heritage, including cultural landscapes. The recent experience with the periodic reporting exercise, which commenced in the Arab Region, has shown serious problems with the state of conservation of the World Heritage sites, the delimitation of properties and legal protection.

The participants, following a lively debate, developed the recommendations enclosed, which were adopted at the closing session.

Two *field visits* were carried out. One site visit covered the archaeological sites of the Hibis Temple and the Necropolis of Bagawat near Kharga oasis. The participants also had the chance to see current agricultural and commercial activities at the oasis, including the production of dates, and the handicrafts industry (carpets, pottery etc.). A one-day field visit covered the vast desert area to the west of Kharga oasis, to Dhakla oasis, and included many archaeological sites and the research center of the Heinrich Barth Institute at Dahkla.

At the closing session, *Mr Francesco Bandarin* thanked the Egyptian authorities and his colleagues from the Cairo office for having organized the expert meeting on such a fascinating subject. The basis was laid out to continue in the future, both in the Arab region and in other parts of the world for an in-depth analysis of the issues related to desert landscapes and oasis systems. He stated that “we are not the collectors, but the protectors of sites” and in discovering the richness of desert sites, a lot more needs to be done to really protect them.

Mr Mohamed El Deek expressed his sincere thanks to all participants for their participation, contributions and sharing of knowledge and his gratitude to the Supreme Council of Antiquities and the people of Kharga.

Prof. Gaballa A. Gaballa thanked UNESCO and the World Heritage Centre for having started the intriguing work for the recognition and protection of desert landscapes. He stated that this is only the beginning of a fundamental reflection and a starting point to learn about the past of this frail heritage. He thanked the Governor of the New Valley for having provided the meeting facilities and invited all participants to assist in the future research about this topic. He commented that the meeting was held in a spirit of great harmony and fruitful collaboration, and expressed his hope that another expert meeting

would provide a broader coverage of the diverse landscapes and rich heritage of the Arab region.



World Heritage Regional Thematic Expert Meeting on “Desert Landscapes and Oasis Systems in the Arab Region”

**Kharga Oasis, Egypt
23 to 26 September 2001**

The World Heritage Regional Thematic Expert Meeting on “Desert Landscapes and Oasis Systems in the Arab Region” was organized by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities of the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the UNESCO Cairo Office and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. The meeting was held at El Kharga Oasis, Egypt, from 23 to 26 September 2001 and was attended by 23 participants. The list of participants is attached as Annex I. The agenda is included as Annex II.

Due to the lack of specialised human resources in this innovative field, and the lack of appropriate representation from the countries of the Arab region, the meeting focussed on a number of general scientific presentations and a few case studies. Based on these presentations and lively discussions, the participants of the meeting recommended the following:

1. Recommendations concerning the identification of desert landscapes

The Kharga meeting underlined that deserts comprise one fifth of the earth’s surface, and contain important natural resources and are since millennia a source of spiritual wealth to humanity. Deserts play a role in the origins of the three monotheistic religious belief systems, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The Kharga meeting confirmed the relevance of the cultural landscape concept in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention and highlighted the potential of desert landscapes for World Heritage listing. The participants noted that the category of organically evolved landscape is relevant for desert landscapes and oases. However, it was particularly pointed out that the fossil or relic landscape category has a great importance in the Sahara desert. Recent archaeological findings and excavations have indicated that civilizations originated in the deserts and not only in the productive river valleys.

The meeting recommended that cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies be carried out in the identification of desert landscapes.

The meeting furthermore encouraged States Parties to include desert sites and oasis systems on their tentative lists and to prepare nominations for potential World Heritage Listing. The participants considered that the concept of trade routes and itineraries is particularly relevant for desert areas and recommended that States Parties collaborate at the regional level to identify and protect such extended linear sites.

2. Recommendations concerning cultural tourism/ecotourism

The Kharga meeting had a lively discussion on the benefits and impacts of tourism to desert sites and considered that desert landscapes have seen in recent years a tremendous development of cultural and eco-tourism industry. While recognizing its potential as a factor for social and economic development, and in spite of the good intentions of most visitors, the participants noted that tourism is causing increasing damage to the cultural and environmental resources of desert landscapes.

These negative impacts are especially affecting non-protected prehistoric sites as well as intangible aspects of heritage related to living traditions of indigenous communities, particularly when local people have become involved in tourism related activities.

Therefore, the participants recommended:

- To designate national focal points within conservation authorities for tourism in desert landscapes and areas;
- To establish mechanisms of national and regional co-operation to enhance co-ordination and control on remote desert areas;
- To promote a code of conduct, specifically conceived for desert landscapes and sites, among foreign and local tour operators and establish a recognition system (by UNESCO, WTO, and conservation agencies of the region) for those adhering to the agreed principles. The participants in particular welcomed the example of flyers produced by the Heinrich-Barth Institute concerning a code of conduct for visiting desert areas “One word before your start into the desert”.

The participants noted the on-going UNESCO Programme entitled “Strategy for sustainable tourism development in the Sahara” and recommended that States Parties consider participation in this programme, as well as in other initiatives, including the International Year of Ecotourism (2002).

3. Recommendations concerning management, protection and integrity of desert sites

The participants considered that cultural landscapes can encompass vast and diverse areas, administered by different territorial and specialized authorities (e.g. the Ministries of Culture, Tourism, Environment, Agriculture, Water Resources etc.). Therefore the participants recommended that the different national and local authorities responsible of land use planning, infrastructure development and environmental management establish effective co-ordination and define appropriate management tools to preserve landscape features.

In this context, the participants noted that water resources and oases often represent points of conflict. Therefore it was recommended to thoroughly document the history and the current use of water sources and oases to avoid excessive use by one party at the expense of another, thereby reducing the possibility of resources conflicts.

The participants noted that nomadism is a main feature of desert landscapes and recommended to respect nomadic tribes, their traditions and their use of natural resources and space without taking into account political boundaries. Herds movements in the past were seasonal and grazing rotated, while at present water and food is brought in to specific locations, thereby resulting in an excessive use of specific areas. The participants recommended that any damage caused by this and other land-uses (wood cutting, road building, irrigation, agriculture, human settlements) be closely monitored and solutions be found for sound environmental management.

The participants considered that the concept of integrity is relevant to cultural landscapes. It is the integrity of the relationship with nature that matters, not the integrity of nature itself.

4. Recommendations concerning training and capacity building

The participants recommended that a World Heritage training seminar be organized either as a part of existing training activities or separate to promote the understanding of the concept of cultural landscapes among managers of cultural resources and protected areas in the Arab region.

The participants noted a number of specialized training programmes to increase regional capacity and enhance professionalism in the planning and management of cultural landscapes such as at the International Centre for Protected Landscapes (ICPL Wales, UK) and the International Centre for Mediterranean Cultural Landscapes (ICMCL, Cilento National Park, Italy), which are available to site managers from the Arab Region.

5. Recommendations following the field visits and presentations on desert heritage in the Arab Region

The participants encouraged the Egyptian authorities to consider revising their tentative lists to include the rich and diverse heritage of the desert regions. In particular, the sites of El Qasr and Bagawat as well as the prehistoric settlement area around Djebel Nabta, the Chepren quarries and the Stalactite cave of Djara, a unique example for the combined natural and cultural heritage. In addition, the ancient routes of the border region between Egypt, Sudan and Libya were noted (Abu Ballas Trail, Darb al Arbain), and Jebel Elba as a transboundary site of the Bisharian culture and its unique biodiversity.

Adequate conservation mechanisms and sound tourism management of these fragile sites could be also ensured through the establishment of large scale protected areas. These

could include Jebel Uweinat, Gerf Kebir and the southern Great Sand Sea with their famous rock art sites (Ain Dua, Wadi Sora), the unique evidence of the environmental and climatic history in Wadi Balcht and the Silica Desert Glass area.

Concerning the potential for trade routes and itineraries in the Sahara region, the participants noted that a project is already under way for the Caravan Itinerary of Sijilmass-Bilad Sudan in which the countries of Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, as well as Italy and Spain are involved. Transboundary consultations were strongly recommended for such initiatives.

The participants noted that the World Heritage concept has to be promoted in the Arab region. Of the 17 States Parties in the region which have ratified the World Heritage Convention, 12 countries have tentative lists or are in the process of finalizing them. Four countries have no sites included on the World Heritage List. In particular, the largest country in the region, Sudan, has no sites nominated so far, despite preparatory assistance provided for a promising desert landscape, the Wadi Howar, a project for a 100.000 km² National Park with a rich biodiversity and numerous archaeological sites illustrating the history of human occupation in the desert.

The meeting furthermore considered that the 52 sites currently included on the World Heritage List are not representative of the rich and diverse heritage of the Arab region with only 48 cultural, 3 natural and one mixed sites inscribed. Of the 48 cultural sites, only one cultural landscape has been recognized, the Quadisha Valley (Lebanon). The mixed site of Tassili N'Ajer (Algeria) was pointed out as an example of a desert landscape illustrating the history of environmental change and human adaptation to the desert environment.

The participants highlighted the two studies carried out in 1997 and 1999 reviewing potential natural and mixed sites in the Arab region and recommended that the conclusions of these studies be reviewed to consider potential cultural landscapes and desert sites in view of the conclusions of the Kharga meeting.

The meeting also recommended that IUCN and ICOMOS include the theme of desert landscapes and oasis systems in their future global studies with a view to include desert ecosystems and cultural resources of desert areas (rock art, desert settlements, irrigation systems etc.).