

**Multidisciplinary Workshop
on the Strategic Framework for the Conservation and Management of
the Mount Athos Cultural and Natural Heritage
Thessaloniki, Greece, 29 – 30 August 2013**

First session

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Dear participants,

As the only intergovernmental organization with an explicit mandate in the field of culture, UNESCO strives to safeguard heritage in the broadest sense of the term, which has evolved over recent decades to encompass not only monuments and sites, but also traditions, lifestyles, value systems and beliefs. The Organization fulfils this noble mission through its programmes in the field but also in its capacity as Secretariat for a unique set of international legal instruments and conventions.

The World Heritage Convention is considered to be one of the most successful international instruments for the conservation of heritage sites. Its success is demonstrated by its nearly universal membership (190 States Parties have ratified the World Heritage Convention) and the large number of listed properties under its protection (981 properties in 160 countries).

In recent years UNESCO played a leading role in the development and promotion of powerful actions related to the protection of cultural and natural heritage in all its forms.

A case on this point is the initiative on heritage of religious interest which serves the objectives of the World Heritage Convention.

World Heritage properties such as living religious and sacred sites, constitute to this day the largest thematic category on the World Heritage List, and require specific policies for protection and management that takes in account their distinct associated sacred value as a key factor for their conservation.

It is in this spirit that the World Heritage Committee, during its 35th session in 2010, requested the World Heritage Centre, in collaboration with the Advisory Bodies, to elaborate a thematic paper proposing to State Parties general guidance regarding the management of their cultural and natural heritage of religious interest, and in compliance with the national specificities.

The role of UNESCO in this process consists of coordinating the implementation of this decision. A strategy for the development of general guidance is currently being prepared by a steering group, which includes representatives of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre and its Advisory Bodies. This group focuses mainly on the definition of core problems facing managers of properties of religious interest and on the collection of necessary proposals and information for the preparation of the document.

The establishment of a constructive dialogue with all stakeholders concerned is essential for developing a general guidance towards deeper understanding of associated sacred values and their link with Outstanding Universal Value.

The first step in the safeguarding of World Heritage is the full and common understanding of the Outstanding Universal Value of properties by all interested parties, as well as an understanding of the significance of this term. The term “Outstanding Universal Value” is a core concept of processes linked to the safeguarding of World Heritage. Explaining and conveying this term is often difficult, but this concept retains key significance for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention by State Parties.

It must be noted that the analysis and study of all elements justifying value, as well as their interactions, determines the nature of the management and protection plan for the property in question.

Legal protection is not sufficient for the preservation of living religious and sacred sites and their transmission to future generations, as their survival depends on the custodial role played daily by the religious communities in caring for these as living heritage.

Therefore management of living sacred sites is a broad concept which requires the mutual acceptance and respect between stakeholders, as well as adapted operational measures of conservation crucial for enhancing the integrity, sustaining spiritual identity, associated sacred values and the survival of a site's outstanding universal value.

It should be noted that nowadays, within the context of discussions on the criterion defining a property's direct or indirect link to events or living traditions, ideas or beliefs, the question of regarding associated values has arisen. This concerns, in particular, sacred values, which can be associated with both cultural and natural properties.

The role of religious communities is crucial in making progress in the development of appropriate measures and in defining the links between OUV and associated sacred and religious values.

Meetings with religious communities such as this one can provide crucial inputs in generating mutual understanding and in developing the most appropriate approaches in tackling challenging problems of sacred sites protection.

Sustainable management and use of properties of religious interests could be supported, in particular:

- by realising that the religious, spiritual and ritual use in the context of prayer, worship and remembrance distinguishes heritage of religious interest from other types of heritage;
- by adopting a more integrated approach to the conservation of the heritage and by strengthening the spiritual-cultural-natural links in the management of the sites;
- by respecting that in many spiritual traditions the built and/or natural heritage is composed of multi-dimensional layers and values, be this built or natural;

- by recognising that some spiritual traditions will have sites and management processes that require secrecy and that such a need is to be respected and supported;
- by reaffirming that culture has national, regional as well as local particularities within various natural, historical, cultural and religious backgrounds and that these may only be fully comprehensible within their specific local contexts;
- by giving priority to the particular communities for which such heritage was created and by taking into consideration the fact that certain traditional knowledge systems attached to the heritage exist and may be relevant for conservation and management;
- by recognising that values and traditions attached to heritage of religious interest as well as use requirements may contradict the views and standard working practices of the conservation community;
- by considering religious communities as key partners in managing heritage and in the creation of new approaches to joint management strategies.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of the International Seminar on the Role of Religious Communities in the Management of World Heritage properties, organized in Kiev, Ukraine, in November 2010, resulting in the adoption by the participants of a Kyiv Statement on the Protection of Religious Properties within the Framework of the World Heritage Convention.

The role played by religious communities in the creation, maintenance, and continuous shaping of sacred places was recognised and underlined. It was stressed that culturally and environmentally sustainable management of heritage and of religious interest should be the responsibility of all stakeholders concerned, and that mutual acceptance and respect will bring different and complementary perspectives to shared cultural and spiritual values.

Our meeting today, prepared in close cooperation with the UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS and IUCN, provides a great opportunity to launch **Thematic Consultations for addressing sustainable management and use of properties of religious interest** with the goal to bring together a broad range of stakeholders and to facilitate an open dialogue and begin to generate consensus around how to best improve all necessary mechanisms to safeguard our common values.

I thank of you all for contributing to UNESCO's longstanding efforts to reinforce global World Heritage conservation policy through constructive collaboration and joint action. I wish you every success in your deliberations at this workshop and excellent results for the next session of the World Heritage Committee.

Thank you.