

Elche (Spain)

No 930

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Palmeral of Elche: A Cultural Landscape Inherited from Al-Andalus
<i>Location</i>	Autonomous Community of Valencia
<i>State Party</i>	Spain
<i>Date</i>	30 June 1998

Justification by State Party

This is the only palm grove of its type anywhere on the European continent, which makes it an exceptional landscape in this geographical context. Arab geographers and European travellers have testified to this exceptional quality throughout history.

In addition to the authentic wild forest, many palm trees are cultivated in gardens, the remains of Arab agriculture established over eight centuries ago on the Iberian peninsula. Archaeological data from the Iberian and Roman periods indicate that these plantations are in fact much older than the Arab palm grove.

There is also what survives of a settlement or an urban plan, which can be seen from the cartography of the region. The central core of the town is surrounded by a series of palm gardens before reaching the rural area proper, where these are more widely scattered, even appearing to be natural woods, without human involvement.

Palms also form an essential component of the culture of Elche, manifesting itself in many ways – the processions on Palm Sunday, the Night of the Kings (Twelfth Night), even the town's coat of arms.

[**Note** The State Party does not make any proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers this property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List.]

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*. The Palm Grove may also be considered to conform with the continuing organic cultural landscape defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

History and Description

History

The origins of the Elche palm grove are traditionally attributed to the Phoenicians and Carthaginians in the 1st millennium BC, since dates formed part of their traditional diet. It was with the Arab invasion in the 8th century AD that they began to be cultivated; a network of irrigation canals enabled the brackish waters of the Vinalopó river to be used. The town was moved northwards to a new location and surrounded by many palm groves, so as to recreate a landscape reminiscent of that of North Africa, from whence the new settlers came.

Elche was recaptured in 1265 during the reign of Jaime I and its lands were redistributed. The fertile lands on the left bank, irrigated by the main canal (*Sequia Major*) were granted to those who assisted in the reconquest; this area contained many groves of date palms, some of which survive to the present day. There were no groves on the right bank (the *Magram*), where the lands were assigned to Moslem vassals (*moriscos*); however, despite the lower fertility of this area, its farmers achieved a high degree of productivity, which was to degenerate sadly when the *moriscos* were expelled in 1606.

The area of palm groves went on producing large crops of dates, but these diminished as the town spread in this direction during the second half of the 17th century and the palm trees were cut down. This process was exacerbated with industrialization and the arrival of the railway in the 19th century. It was not until the 1920s that the danger to the palm groves was recognized, and in the 1930s legislative measures were put in place to ensure the continuance of what remained, a process that was completed with the passage of the Law on the Protection of the Elche Palm Grove by the Regional Parliament of Valencia in 1986.

Description

The date palm trees of Elche are *Phoenix dactylifera* L., a dioecious species which is native to western Asia and North Africa. They can grow to a height of more than 30m and live for over 300 years.

The palm groves that are the subject of this nomination form a compact group in the eastern part of the town of Elche. The boundaries of the plots (*huertos*) are rectilinear, so that they are mostly square or rectangular, but some triangular, in plan. They are bounded by *cascabots* (fences made of plaited dried palm leaves) or plastered walls of undressed stone 1-2m high. The plots contain the houses of the tenants or owners of the land, though these are mostly in a ruinous condition in the plots nearest to the centre of the town. The palm trees are planted in single or double rows, following the lines of the irrigation canals. They produce both dates for human consumption and the "White Palm" leaves, which are widely exported for use all over the Iberian peninsula for decoration and processional use on Palm Sunday.

The area proposed for inscription is clearly defined by a natural feature (the Vinalopó river), the historic centre of Elche, and recently developed perimeter areas zoned for non-residential use, largely not built.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The palm groves in public and private ownership that make up this nomination are protected by the 1986 Regional Law on the Protection of the Palm Grove of Elche. Any actions, such as felling of trees, change of agricultural practice, deliberate neglect, or removal of boundaries, which may adversely affect the quality or appearance of the groves require authorization, and the groves are subject to a systematic monitoring procedure.

Management

A total of 67 individual palm groves make up the nomination, all within the urban area. Fifty of these are owned by the Municipality and the remainder by private individuals. They contain 45,000 individual trees and cover an area of 144ha.

A foundation to oversee the Elche palm groves was first set up in 1933, and this role is confirmed in the 1986 provincial law. It is composed of representatives of departments of the Provincial Government (*Generalitat Valenciana*) responsible for culture, planning, and agricultural development, two municipal councillors, and one representative of those who run the groves. This body, which is presided over by the Cultural Counsellor of the Province with the Mayor of Elche as his deputy, is responsible for policy and delegates its administrative functions, in accordance with the 1986 Law, to the local management committee (*Junta Local Gestora*).

The 1997 General Urban Plan for Elche has a number of provisions relating to the groves within the municipal boundaries. Among its policies are the acquisition by the Municipality of further properties, restocking of groves with new trees, which the Municipality has been growing, and increasing productivity. So far as the nominated areas is concerned, these are core areas, within which no activities may take place which might damage the natural environmental balance.

The palm groves are also protected by Law No 1/1986 of the Government of Valencia, under the terms of which no construction or non-agricultural development may take place in and around the palm groves.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Conservation of the palm landscape of Elche has been in progress since the 1920s, but only with the promulgation of the 1986 Provincial Law can it be deemed to be effective.

Authenticity

The plots in which the groves are planted conform with the original land-allotment system, which is integral with the ancient irrigation system installed during the Arab period.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Elche in February 1999. ICOMOS also benefited from the advice of its International

Committee on Historic Gardens and Sites and of the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA).

Qualities

The landscape of palm groves in and around Elche is a remarkable example of the deliberate implantation of a form of agriculture and a single economic species from one region to another, which also reflects a significant episode in history.

Comparative analysis

There are, of course, countless palm groves in North Africa and the Near East. However, the exceptional character of Elche stems from the fact that this was a deliberate implantation by an invading culture of a form of agriculture imported from its homeland in another continent, and which has preserved its original form to the present day. ICOMOS is unaware of any comparable concentration of an economic crop species transported from one region to another that has survived unchanged in its techniques and distribution at a single site over so many centuries.

Many important food crops, such as rice and olives, are known to have been transferred from one region to another in prehistory and classical antiquity, but it is impossible to point to a single example of continuity of place and technique comparable with Elche. Similarly, economic crops have been imported into Europe from other continents (eg tobacco, potatoes, maize), but this took place much later than the introduction of the palm into the Iberian peninsula. Once again, no specific locations can be identified with certainty.

ICOMOS comments

There are nearly 300 palm groves in and around Elche – 102 within the town's boundaries, 180 in the surrounding rural area. They cover over 440ha and contain more than 11,000 individual trees. The original nomination dossier went on to report that there are 1046 properties in seven out of 34 neighbouring communes that contain isolated palm trees or small groups or lines of them, which suggests that there must be some 20,000 properties of this kind in total.

These figures are confirmed the information given in supplementary documentation supplied by the Municipality of Elche. This shows additionally that the area of palm groves within ten rural communes to the south of the town is 9362ha. Reference is made in the same document to a buffer zone for the groves in the town covering 810ha.

The original nomination related to both the palm groves and the Elche Mystery Play (*Misteri*); the latter was subsequently withdrawn. A revised nomination dossier was supplied by the State Party in 1999, covering a smaller number of palm groves (287) containing 181,000 individual trees and covering 440ha, but ICOMOS was of the opinion that the proposal was still too extensive and that the nominated area should be a smaller, discrete, and compact group of palm groves as being representative of the totality.

Following discussions between representatives of the State Party and ICOMOS in February 2000, the present second revised nomination was submitted. The 67 individual palm groves are closely associated with one another, forming a compact landscape. They coincide, moreover, more exactly with the original palm plantations, increasing the cultural significance of the nominated property.

ICOMOS is grateful to the State Party for having consulted it closely in arriving at the present proposal, which conforms exactly with what it had proposed.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and v*:

Criterion ii The Palmeral (palm groves) of Elche represent a remarkable example of the transference of a characteristic landscape from one culture and continent to another, in this case from North Africa to Europe.

Criterion v The palm grove or garden is a typical feature of the North African landscape which was brought to Europe during the Islamic occupation of much of the Iberian peninsula and has survived to the present day. The ancient irrigation system, which is still functioning, is of special interest.

ICOMOS, September 2000