

ICOMOS

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES
CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ ПО ВОПРОСАМ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕСТ

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Charenton-le-Pont, 24 January 2018

H. E. Mr Ibrahim Youssef S. Albalawi
Permanent Delegation of the Kingdom of
Saudi Arabia to UNESCO
Maison de l'UNESCO
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World Heritage List 2018

Al-Ahsa Oasis, an evolving Cultural Landscape (Saudi Arabia) – Interim report

Dear Sir,

As prescribed by the revised Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention and its Annex 6, the Advisory Bodies have been requested to submit a short interim report for each nomination by 31 January 2018. We are therefore pleased to provide you with the relevant information outlining issues related to the evaluation process.

The ICOMOS technical evaluation mission to "Al-Ahsa Oasis, an evolving Cultural Landscape" was carried out by Alaa Elwi El-Habashi (Egypt) from 15 to 23 September 2017. The mission expert highly appreciated the availabilities and support provided by the experts in your country for the organisation and implementation of the mission.

On 25 September 2017, a letter requesting additional information was sent by ICOMOS on the following issues: boundaries, conservation, authenticity, factors affecting the property and management. Please convey our thanks to all the officials and experts for the additional information you provided on 31 October 2017 and for their continued cooperation in this process.

At the end of November 2017, the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel evaluated the cultural and mixed properties nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List in 2018. The nomination dossier, together with mission and desk review reports were carefully examined by the Panel members.

We thank you for the availability of your Delegation to the meeting held on Thursday 23 November 2017 with some representatives of the ICOMOS Panel. During its last part of meeting, the ICOMOS Panel discussed this nomination and came to the conclusion that the property does not fulfil the requirements set out in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention.

Therefore, ICOMOS will recommend to the World Heritage Committee that the property should not be inscribed on the World Heritage List. Unlike in past years, ICOMOS has opted for a new policy to notify States Parties of these particular decisions as early as possible.

ICOMOS would like to share a summary of the considerations that led the ICOMOS Panel to adopt such a recommendation.

ICOMOS Panel appreciated that Al-Ahsa Oasis, is one of the world's largest oasis, with more than 2.5 million palm trees, with its unique sample of desert oasis history, since its origins in the Neolithic to the present spanning over 5000 years, and its natural environment within and surrounding the oasis components especially the ones with more natural state, such as Al Asfar Lake, which are of importance to biodiversity, wildlife and local communities' livelihoods. However, the ICOMOS Panel also noted that the present nomination raises some crucial questions with regard to the justification of Outstanding Universal Value for the property, its authenticity and integrity as well as more general aspects of protection, conservation and management. The ICOMOS Panel members did not consider that the component parts of the property as grouped and presented in the nomination dossier fulfill the concept of cultural landscape in terms of the relationships between these parts and the relationships between them and their immediate surroundings, as well as the relationship of the property as a whole with the surrounding desert landscape.

In terms of authenticity, the ICOMOS Panel noted that the notion of the "evolving oasis" is an interesting concept, especially that the comparative analyses indicate that Al-Ahsa oasis is unique in sustaining quite a long history of subsequent human existence and settlements. This notion, however, needs representation and interpretive means, and here lies the challenge of conserving the attributes while promoting the evolution to take place. The ICOMOS Panel thus expressed concerns regarding the use of the concept of 'evolving landscape', as applied in the nomination dossier, proposing equal assessment and treatment of traditional and modern typologies, methods, techniques and materials for buildings, farms and water management networks.

The ICOMOS Panel further noted that widespread practice of heavy-handed restoration and/or reconstruction impacts the authenticity and the state of conservation of the historic buildings and urban fabric components of the property. While most of the said practices were observed in the recent past, the nomination dossier does not include clear indications that major change of approach and philosophy of conservation have been adopted by the State Party.

The ICOMOS Panel has found that no adequate records or reports of conservation state exist of the different component parts of the nominated property. Although the additional information submitted by the State Party as per ICOMOS' request includes some records, the available records remain either outdated or not conforming with international best practices for documentation of cultural heritage.

Likewise, the ICOMOS Panel considered the condition of integrity affected by the large scale modern water system which was introduced in the 1960s and later. The ICOMOS Panel further noted that the regulations for the farms do permit for developments on the edges of roads and highways as well as up to 30% inside the plantations. In addition, future plans for both urban development and water irrigation networks may impact the integrity of the property. For example, urban conservation approaches required for the Al'Oyun Village (NP-010) are of conflict with the plan adopted for the village. Also, the al-Asfar lake (NP-012) would certainly be affected with the crawl of urbanism towards its southern border. Such threats reduce the ability of the property to be considered complete and free of current development threats.

In addition, the ICOMOS Panel considered that the different component parts of the nominated property are too fragmented, some of which are completely isolated from their immediate surroundings. The visual relationships of the different component parts, as well as the visual relationships between the different components and their natural environment do not consistently fulfill the conditions of integrity

of a cultural landscape. The ICOMOS Panel concluded that also the qualifying condition of integrity is not demonstrated.

The ICOMOS Panel considered that for the above combination of reasons the property could not be said to have the capacity to demonstrate Outstanding Universal Value. In the spirit of fostering dialogue, should the State Party consider that further explanations are required in relation to this conclusion, we would kindly request you to contact the ICOMOS Evaluation Unit to arrange a meeting.

In closing, please be assured that ICOMOS well understands that the issues identified by the ICOMOS Panel will be met with deep disappointment by the many experts and local and national authorities that have been working closely together for some years already.

We thank you for your support of the World Heritage Convention and the evaluation process.

Yours faithfully,



Gwenaëlle Bourdin
Director
ICOMOS Evaluation Unit

Copy to Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH)
 UNESCO World Heritage Centre