

Towards a Holistic Vision of World Heritage

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Only in recent decades has the world begun to become aware of the dangers threatening our planet due to the lack of concrete actions to resolve the rising environmental problems and ensure the protection of cultural heritage. 1972 was a decisive moment. It laid the foundation for what was to become, in the succeeding years, an in-depth discussion destined to establish practical mechanisms of management and protection of the common heritage on which the future of our planet depends.

A Kogui village, near the higher San Miguel River in Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Colombia), a MAB Reserve and 'The Heart of the World' to local cultures.

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Arhuaco girls, near the indigenous village of Bunkwámake (Colombia). The links between cultural heritage and biological diversity hold important clues to sustainable development.

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The year 1972 was marked by two important conferences: the 17th session of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris and the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. These conferences, along with programmes such as UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), established fundamental reference points for the present and future development of humanity.

The UNESCO General Conference of 1972 adopted the World Heritage Convention, thus acknowledging that the evolution of social and economic life was threatening to destroy cultural and natural heritage, and that this destruction would impoverish heritage worldwide. Considering the scope and gravity of the situation, the Convention appealed to the international community to ensure



The cultural landscape of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Colombia).

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the protection of the cultural and natural heritage of the world.

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was intended to define various principles that would inspire and guide the world in the preservation of the human environment. The Final Declaration of this Conference recognized that our species is both the product and architect of its environment, which provides it with the opportunity to grow intellectually, morally, socially and spiritually. This also suggests that humankind has reached the point where it can fundamentally transform its surroundings through the swift development of science and technology. The Final Declaration acknowledged that this new ability might result in the development of a world culture and the opportunity to improve life. However, it also warned that the improper use of this ability could cause incalculable damage to humankind and its environment. This

assertion was based on considerable evidence of damage caused by humankind worldwide and on the massive disruption of the ecological balance of the biosphere through the contamination of water, air and soil, the destruction and exhaustion of fossil fuels, and other conditions harmful to the physical, social and mental well-being of people.

The Stockholm Declaration of 1972 asserted that most environmental problems are a consequence of underdevelopment in many countries, noting that millions of people live below minimum acceptable levels and are deprived of food, clothing, decent housing and education. It also declared the population explosion a major challenge to the preservation of the environment.

One of the consequences of these conferences was the report on "The Limits of Growth", presented that same year by the Club of Rome. This organization brought together some of the most important economists of the day, with the aim of stimulating a form of economic growth that was both stable and sustainable for humanity. The report, which provoked considerable controversy at the time, called attention to issues of population and economic growth as well as to the increase of the so-called 'ecological impact' of populations on the Earth, and its effects. The report holds that continuous economic growth is impossible in a limited world and suggests that limitations be imposed in matters of natural resources, the planet's capacity for endless population growth and the problem of environmental pollution. This hypothesis clearly has great relevance today.

Meanwhile, the Man and the Biosphere programme (MAB) sought to promote a rational use of fossil fuels and awareness of the need for conservation in order to improve the global relationship between people and the environment.

Cultural diversity and sacred sites as part of World Heritage

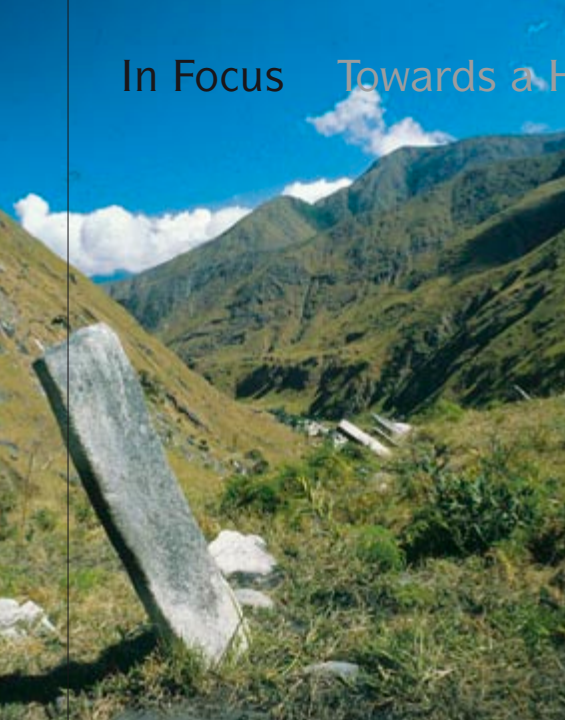
All these programmes, conferences and declarations became a basis for reflection and the development of a new approach. Acknowledging a close link between



Gathering places for rituals and other community activities can be found in most villages within the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras World Heritage site.

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In Focus Towards a Holistic Vision of World Heritage



humanity's cultural and natural heritage and the need to act to ensure their conservation, a series of debates were initiated to integrate this focus with the concepts of cultural diversity, traditions, knowledge, and spiritual and sacred values rooted in the population. Thus, it was acknowledged that humanity's heritage comprises not only material elements, but also intangible values and practices. A new dimension was therefore added to the equation, recognizing an inseparable relationship between the natural and the cultural world that, along with traditional knowledge, shaped the cultural landscapes and their sacred sites.

The incorporation of these new ideas was reinforced by a series of declarations and multilateral agreements leading to broad debates in different forums. The

most outstanding of these are Convention (No.169) by the International Labour Organization (ILO) concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries; the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Earth Summit, Rio de Janeiro (1992); the Seville Strategy for Biosphere Reserves(1996); the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, established in 2000; the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2006); the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001); the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003); Globally Important Ingenious Agricultural Heritage Systems; and the World Parks Congress 2003, Durban, South Africa.

A'tinkuna – a sacred stone near Sheyzhua (Columbia), where rituals for protecting the 'Heart of the World' are celebrated.

© Ricardo Rey

In the Xishuangbanna region of China, which includes the Old Town of Lijiang World Heritage site, the Dai ethnic group is reputed for the ornate temples and festivals that are dedicated to this beautiful land.

© Adam Lane



The importance of traditional knowledge

Due to their isolation or ability constantly to adapt to adverse conditions, countless cultures have been able to maintain their history, language and culture in this age of growing globalization. This has been made possible through deeply complex connections and cultural interactions with their natural environment. Many of these cultures inhabit territories characterized by a high level of biodiversity, while others are faced with limited access to such resources. In both cases, however, traditional knowledge has allowed cultures to develop forms of sustainable adaptation. These are beginning to be threatened today, as never before, by the impact of the predominant models of development. This situation

endangers one of humanity's principal assets in its confrontation with current and future challenges, including climate change, the rapid extinction of certain species, the draining of fossil fuels and water and, in many cases, the sustainability of local and regional economies.

The mountainous region of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, included on Colombia's Tentative List, has maintained a cultural continuum reaching into the past, beyond the Spanish Conquest of the 16th century. The adaptation of the native *Kogui*, *Arhuaco* and *Wiwa* to this territory represents a perfect example of environmental and cultural sustainability. With a population of less than 50,000, the ancestral territory is a very vulnerable mountainous formation that, from the Caribbean coast, rises



A *Kogui* elder.

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The indigenous knowledge of traditional communities such as the *Masai* of Kenya and their sustainable management of natural resources are threatened by modern development.

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Sacred natural sites and cultural diversity

Societies around the world have given special status to natural areas and set them aside as sacred – either by acknowledging residing deities and spirits, or by consecrating them as shrines dedicated to their ancestors. In many cases, access to these sacred sites has been restricted. As a result, sacred groves, mountains, rivers and other sacred places have become important reservoirs of biological diversity, preserving unique and/or rare plant and animal species.

Can sacred natural sites and cultural landscapes effectively contribute to biodiversity conservation? An international symposium devoted to this subject was held in Tokyo in 2005, leading to the adoption of the 'Tokyo Declaration'. This Declaration encouraged organizations and scientists to pursue their collaboration with a view to safeguarding biological and cultural diversity embodied in natural sacred sites and cultural landscapes. It further called on governments and protected area managers to consider the IUCN/ UNESCO working guidelines for the conservation and management of sacred natural sites.

UNESCO World Heritage sites Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa National Park in Australia (Ayers Rock-Mount Olga Biosphere Reserve) and Mount Kenya National Park/Natural Forest are both important sacred natural sites. Sacred sites are also found among such UNESCO's Biosphere Reserves as Bogd Khan Uul in Mongolia, Nilgiri in India, and Dinghushan and Xishuangbanna in China. These areas encompass such features as woodlands, mountains, islets, caves and rivers, which the local people have for centuries held sacred. UNESCO sees these sites as proof of a strong link between cultural diversity and biodiversity, since they demonstrate the capacity of



Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa National Park (Australia).

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Tongariro National Park (New Zealand)

© Rich Childs

local societies and their symbiotic systems to conserve biodiversity *in situ*.

The inscription of Tongariro National Park (New Zealand) on the World Heritage List in 1993 as the first cultural landscape, selected in view of the spiritual links of the Maori people with their environment, proved that UNESCO's World Heritage Convention is pioneering new approaches to the protection of the planet's cultural and natural diversity.

Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa National Park features spectacular geological formations that dominate the vast red sandy plain of central Australia. Uluru, an immense monolith, and Kata Tjuṯa, the rock domes located west of Uluru, form part of the traditional belief system of one of the oldest human societies in the world. The traditional owners of Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa are the Anangu Aboriginal people.

Sacred sites contain important reservoirs of genetic and species diversity and can help to protect ecosystems against environmental degradation. In this way, the transdisciplinary nature of the interface between cultural perceptions and scientific rationale in the effective protection of biological and cultural diversity found in sacred sites provides compelling models for the elaboration of integrated conservation and development programmes undertaken by environmental and development organizations.

In order to secure and maintain the support and involvement of indigenous and local people in the conservation of biodiversity, examples of the traditional conservation of sacred sites and cultural landscapes need to be increasingly recognized and disseminated as alternative models of land use and sustainable development that build upon traditional foundations.



A meeting of Kogui spiritual leaders, called *Mamas*, near the San Miguel River. The Kogui are very sensitive to ecological imbalances that may affect future generations.

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abruptly to an altitude of 5,775 metres above sea level. This sacred mountain embodies all the climatic levels and offers a representative sample of the ecosystems of tropical America.

The indigenous land, or 'Heart of the World', as the inhabitants of this area call it, is bounded with a series of interconnected sacred sites. Each of these sites is subject to the customary law that governs the social, cultural and environmental behaviour of the community. These sacred sites – including lakes and rivers that surround vast agricultural lands and flow into the Caribbean Sea, mountain peaks that dominate the landscape and stone constructions of ancestral settlements – are astronomically orientated in places where the memory of the fathers and mothers of all cultural and natural elements has been faithfully preserved since the dawn of time. At the same time, they are considered points of origin for the community's different family lines, and serve as meeting places where all decisions regarding the protection and management of land are taken. There, too, offerings are made and seasonal rituals performed. The cultural rituals, directed by spiritual leaders or *Mamas*, ensure the balance between society and nature. Today,

however, the territory is threatened not only by the arrival of displaced farmers, but also by giant construction projects that assail this cultural entity and its sacred sites.

These two threats represent a significant danger to the cultural survival of a population that has survived here for thousands of years,

but also to the sustainability of development in a great part of the Columbian-Caribbean region. With more than 1,500,000 inhabitants, this region is dependant on the resources of this great 'water factory', of which the indigenous villages are the best guardians.

For further reading:

World Heritage Series No 13 - *Linking Universal and Local Values: Managing a Sustainable Future for World Heritage*.
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/series/13/>

Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes. Proceedings of the International Symposium, Tokyo 30 May to 2 June 2005. UNESCO, Paris, 2006.
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001478/147863e.pdf>

Rössler, M.: Enhancing Global Heritage Conservation: Links Between the Tangible and Intangible. *World Heritage*, No 32, 2003, 64-67.

Landscape linkages without boundaries? In: *World Heritage at the Vth IUCN World Parks Congress*. Durban South Africa, 8-17 September 2003. World Heritage Reports No 16. UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2005, 23-26.
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/series/16/>

Biodiversity in UNESCO
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001514/151402e.pdf>



CONABIO

*The National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity
Mexico*



CONABIO was founded 16 years ago to integrate, systematize and bring up to date the existent knowledge surrounding Mexico's biodiversity, and consequently, to contribute towards scientific study of the subject by making this information available to the public.

When CONABIO began it was solely dedicated to the creation of the 'National Biodiversity Information System' (SNIB) which had a database containing information about Mexican species housed in national and international scientific institutions. Data processors were able to make the information available via Internet, integrated in a system about geographic information together with satellite cartographic information and climatic, geographic and socio-economic data.

CONABIO provided SNIB with a wide range of information about species, populations and ecosystems, and developed biotechnology tools to perform complex analyses and to generate improved knowledge capable of responding to specific questions raised by the social and governmental sectors. This way, CONABIO began to provide products and services which consequently allowed users to make decisions on an intellectual and scientific basis. The official website of CONABIO receives, on average, 68,000 daily visits.

CONABIO is an institution which forms a bridge between education, government and civil society. Information about Mexican biodiversity produced by scientists is made available to users, in the language required. Based on the work done and the final results, CONABIO is known as one of the best institutions of its type in the world and SNIB as the model of its success around the world.

Cultural and biological diversity: a guarantee for the sustainability of the planet

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, included by UNESCO in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, is but one example. Every continent has sites, landscapes and cultures with similar characteristics, in which cultural diversity and systems of belief maintain an intrinsic relationship with biological diversity and represent a source of exchange, creativity and innovation that are essential to stability and survival. This becomes even more apparent when we realize that agriculture is one of the principal interfaces between culture and biodiversity. Respect for cultural diversity remains the most effective way of ensuring both biological diversity and food safety, and vice versa.

The way of life of most indigenous villages depends on the biological diversity of their lands and, of course, on the respect with which the majority treats these lands. Cultural diversity is far more complex than it may appear to most people. Behind each culture is a way of life and an adaptation to the conditions imposed by its natural environment, history, ethical and moral codes, thought systems and beliefs, technological and institutional development.

Today, even as we draw benefits from globalization, there are clear indications of the gradual decline of the natural systems that maintain both life and the economy. All this should alert us to the overwhelming environmental crisis that now confronts us. There are also indications that the cultural diversity of our planet is faced with unprecedented threats, one of these being the extinction of about 2500 of the 5000-7000 languages still in use around the world. These threats to cultural diversity and traditional knowledge also threaten sustainable development.

Throughout human history, dominant powers have imposed their language and their cultural vision on other territories and cultures. It is time to make a pause in the present process of globalization while we consider ways of overcoming the problems confronting our civilization. Territories like the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta justify the efforts made by the international community to date. We must pursue these efforts in order to protect the heritage of humankind. 🌍



The environmental and cultural heritage of indigenous tribes such as the *Arhuaco* must be protected.

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