

Conclusions and Recommendations¹

Thematic Expert Consultation meeting on sustainable management of World Heritage properties of religious interest with focus on South-Eastern and Mediterranean Europe

UNESCO Headquarters, 16 to 18 February, 2016

These conclusions and recommendations were agreed by the participants at the *Thematic Expert Consultation meeting on sustainable management of World Heritage properties of religious interest² with focus on South-Eastern and Mediterranean Europe* (UNESCO Headquarters, 16 - 18 February, 2016). The meeting was attended by representatives from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, the Holy See, Israel, Italy, Malta, Montenegro, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Spain and Turkey, the Permanent Observer Mission of the Sovereign Order of Malta, members of the Steering Group on Heritage of Religious Interest from the World Heritage Centre, ICCROM, ICOMOS and IUCN, representatives of UNESCO Field Offices, UNWTO, invited experts and researchers, and representative of religious communities. The programme of the meeting, the list of participants, as well as the abstracts and papers can be downloaded from the webpage of the meeting: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage/>.

PREAMBLE

1. The participants warmly thanked the Bulgarian authorities for supporting the meeting, and the World Heritage Centre and Steering Group for their planning of the meeting.
2. The expert meeting brought together States Parties' representatives and experts as part of the preparatory activities to implement the World Heritage Committee's Decision to develop a *thematic paper proposing to States Parties general guidance regarding the management of their cultural and natural heritage of religious interest, and in compliance with the national specificities* (35 COM 5A, paragraph 7). This was the first of a series of regional and sub-regional thematic meetings.

¹ Original text is in English

² The term 'religious interest' is to be understood broadly to cover both religion and spiritual traditions.

3. The participants of the meeting welcomed the launch of a Cycle of Regional Thematic Consultations, as a valuable tool for the mutual exchange of experiences and dialogue between all stakeholders concerned aiming to develop a thematic paper proposing to States Parties general guidance regarding the management of their cultural and natural heritage of religious interest.
4. Within the framework of the World Heritage Convention and taking into account research, studies and analyses of religious heritage carried out by the Advisory Bodies of the World Heritage Committee (ICCROM, ICOMOS and IUCN) and noting the conclusions and recommendations of previous meetings and activities on religious heritage such as the ICCROM 2003 Forum on the Conservation of Living Religious Heritage, UNESCO/ICCROM capacity-building activities for religious representatives, contributions from the IUCN task force on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas and UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, the UNWTO Congress and Conference on Religious Tourism, and the Statement on the Protection of Religious Properties within the Framework of the World Heritage Convention, the participants of the meeting presented the case studies and discussed the issues of identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission of outstanding religious heritage to future generations.
5. Recognising that, in the long-term, this UNESCO initiative is intended to assist integrating a number of guiding principles into policies at the local, national, regional and international levels so as to contribute to the rapprochement of cultures and harmonious relations among peoples, participants acknowledged that there is indeed a need to find forms of action to safeguard social cohesion and in order to contribute to peaceful interactions among different cultures. They underlined that this first consultation meeting established a platform for dialogue and knowledge sharing among all communities involved in the preservation of our common heritage.
6. The development of such guidance, in close involvement, collaboration, and mutual agreement with all communities, represents one of the main actions aiming to promote and increase understanding and respect between all communities and cultures of the world.
7. The meeting was a stimulating mix of contributions from a wide range of experts, including Advisory Bodies, academics and heritage professionals, and of national case studies from South-Eastern and Mediterranean Europe. These provided deep insights into the general context of understanding and managing the religious interest in heritage properties, and into the need for case-specific solutions.
8. The main purpose of the meeting was to contribute to the development by the Steering Group on Heritage of Religious Interest of the thematic paper requested by the World Heritage Committee on the management of properties of religious interest, and also for the improvement of our understanding of heritage of religious interest through consolidation of a database and a case-study approach.

9. The need to improve exchange and cooperation between all relevant stakeholders, including particularly heritage professionals and religious groups, was very clear. This is essential to achieve effective and equitable recognition and the sustaining of religious interest in heritage properties.
10. The Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest also provides a platform for establishing approaches towards the implementation of recently adopted Policies and Recommendations, such as a Policy on World Heritage and Sustainable Development, the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL), the Policy on the Impacts of Climate Change on World Heritage properties, Strategy for Reducing Risks from Disasters at World Heritage properties and others.
11. It is hoped that this meeting will provide a model for a series of regional thematic expert consultations around the world, and for fostering research on the better understanding of properties of religious interest and on governance and management issues affecting them. Together these will support the Steering Group in developing the thematic paper requested by the World Heritage Committee.

CONCLUSIONS:

Data Sources

12. The participants welcomed the work being carried out to identify World Heritage properties of religious interest on the World Heritage List through the database and through the case-study approach which is being trialled in South-Eastern and Mediterranean Europe. Participants noted the importance of this work as a basis to improve the understanding of religious interest in World Heritage properties. The need to improve documentary deficiencies was noted. Participants recognised the importance of improving the information through completing the case study Questionnaire, and that the development of an approach based on case studies would greatly reinforce the knowledge and application of religious values. The work should be coordinated with Advisory Body *Gap Analysis*, with the forthcoming Third Cycle of Periodic Reporting and other initiatives.

The International Context

13. The participants considered that the rich range of international experience presented indicated the wider context for understanding the significance and management needs of World Heritage properties with religious interest. They recognized the essential need for dialogue, interchange, exchange, and networking between different groups of stakeholders as a basis for management and safeguarding heritage, particularly between religious groups and heritage professionals, along with a helpful three-fold definition of interest in properties of religious interest as being aesthetic, ethical and/or spiritual. Participants believed that both these insights are significant in the management and sustainable use of properties of religious interest.

Understanding World Heritage of religious interest

14. Participants noted that the principal category of properties with religious interest was of places with living religious heritage and use. For these properties, the principal criteria for identification are the relevance for religious purposes, evolving tangible and intangible expression of religious values, and the presence of an established or traditional management system by connected communities.
15. Participants also recognized that many other properties with sacred or spiritual interests will need to be treated in a similar way to properties with living religious use.

Linking Outstanding Universal Value and associated sacred value

16. Heritage of religious interest cannot be reduced to its material expressions, without reference to its particular ontology or a cosmology. The intangible dimensions of the heritage have to be taken into consideration in the narrative, so that their significance can be fully understood outside its religious and cultural context.
17. Participants noted that the inscription is sometimes based on Statements of Outstanding Universal Value which do not explicitly or at all consider the religious interests, resulting in governance, planning and management problems.
18. The analysis of the last Periodic Reporting reveals that the impact of the religious interests is clearly positive in maintaining the Outstanding Universal Value of most properties. In cases where this impact is not positive, usually it is only one among several other more significant factors affecting the integrity and/or authenticity of the property. This fact provides solid evidence of the opportunities to improve management effectiveness especially by integrating proper consideration of religious interests.
19. Heritage of religious interest may not always be universally valued in terms of its content, often being of national, regional or local significance. Nonetheless, heritage of religious interest is better suited than other heritage contexts in contributing to UNESCO's overall aim of inspiring dialogue and providing intercultural learning opportunities for both visitors and local populations.

Challenges in the governance, management and use of World Heritage properties of religious interest

20. The relevant results from the Periodic Reporting identified the fact that 64% of the properties in the sub-region were of religious interest, being 10% greater than for the world as a whole.
21. Identifying the varied national structures of responsibilities between the State and the religious bodies highlighted the diverse structures of governance and the need to formulate general principles only, by which each State Party might apply their management systems based on local practice and precedent.

22. Management issues focused on the need to balance the activities of worship and pilgrimage, responding to religious interests. The participants noted that while most of the properties were well cared for, there was a greater need to focus on visitor and disaster risk management.
23. The participants recognised the desirability of reaching decisions by consensus, involving all relevant stakeholders, and that religious and spiritual traditions evolve slowly over time.
24. Protection of the context and setting of properties, including buffer zones, requires a more integrated approach into comprehensive planning programmes. This should also recognize the function of these properties in the life of the community.
25. The importance of spirituality and the sacred emphasized the need in many instances of linking the cultural and natural values, whether universal or local, and integrating these into the management framework.
26. Participants recognised that a wide range of financing arrangements existed for maintaining properties.
27. Participants recognised the importance of the contents of properties in maintaining their character and religious interest.
28. The participants recognised that the management of access was an inherent factor in maintaining both the tangible and intangible values and that this should be explained in the management documentation.

Next steps and follow up from meeting

29. The participants considered the draft Guidance Recommendation, recognising that it will be an essential part of the thematic paper requested by the World Heritage Committee and also that this is work in progress to be further developed. Following a further opportunity to comment on the draft, they agree that it should go forward for consideration by regional thematic meetings in other parts of the world.
30. Participants welcomed the offer of Turkey to organize a follow-up meeting in Turkey under the patronage of the Directorate General of Foundations within the framework of the Cycle of the Regional Thematic Consultation launched during this meeting in coordination with the World Heritage Centre.
31. Participants welcomed the news that the Sovereign Order of Malta plans to organize an international meeting on access to sacred places.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Data Sources

32. Participants invite States Parties to comment on the format of the draft Questionnaire by 29 February, 2016; after the revised Questionnaire has been developed, it will be trialled before the end of 2016 to test its effectiveness and the need for any further modification.

Understanding World Heritage of religious interest

33. Participants recommend that attributes of values should be identified for properties of religious interest in order better to define and understand that interest.

Linking Outstanding Universal Value and associated sacred value

34. Participants recommend that other, more adequate frameworks should be explored, by means of negotiation and participatory procedures, so that religious interest is adequately integrated into the governance, planning and management at site level, fostering respectful cooperation between public powers, heritage professionals, religious groups and traditional custodians when they exist.

Challenges in the governance, management and use of World Heritage properties of religious interest

35. Greater effort should be made to integrate other Conventions, Recommendations and programmes such as the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Ramsar Convention, the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape and the Man and the Biosphere Programme. Special reference should be given to developing indicators for the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, and the Resolution on World Heritage and Sustainable Development, highlighting the role of these properties for understanding cultural diversity, traditional knowledge and governance systems, creative industries together with properties that are safe, inclusive, resilient and sustainable. Within the regional context the attention of States Parties is drawn to the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (the Faro Convention, 2005).

Next steps and follow up from meeting

36. Participants recommended that the database and gaps identified in its analysis should be a basis for developing future research into properties of religious interest, particularly in networking with UNESCO Chairs and other interested research institutions.
37. Participants recommended that, subject to further written comments by them on the draft Guidance Recommendation by 29 February 2016, and any necessary amendments to the text by 31 March 2016, the Steering Group for the UNESCO Initiative for Heritage of Religious Interest should further develop the draft through consultations and arranging its consideration by thematic expert meetings on other parts of the world as an essential step towards development of the thematic paper requested by the World Heritage Committee.