

Vega (Norway)

No 1143

1. BASIC DATA

<i>State Party:</i>	Norway
<i>Name of property:</i>	Vegaøyane – Vega Archipelago
<i>Location:</i>	Nordland, Vega
<i>Date received:</i>	27 January 2003
<i>Category of property:</i>	

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*. In terms of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, paragraph 39, this is a *cultural landscape*.

Brief description:

A cluster of islands centred on Vega, just south of the Arctic circle, are a testimony to people who developed a distinctive and frugal way of life based on fishing and the harvesting of ‘eider’ down (the down of the eider duck), in this extremely exposed archipelago just south of the Arctic circle.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The nominated site is the major part of the Vega archipelago, a seascape made up of more than 6500 islands, islets and ‘skerries’, and surrounding shallow water. It is an open and exposed landscape of sea and land – a multitude of low, almost treeless islands dotting the surface of the sea against a backdrop of dramatic, massive coastal mountains. Over 50 islands are, or were, inhabited – many seasonally.

This seascape is centred on Vega, the largest island, some 10km from the indented mainland shore. The nominated site covers 103,710 ha of which 6,930 is land. Around a third of the island of Vega is within the nominated site. The remaining two thirds, together with its adjoining seascape extending out to about a kilometre, makes up the proposed Buffer Zone. There is no need for a Buffer Zone on the seaward side.

The unique geology of the area forms the raw material for settlement and livelihood. The Vega archipelago is part of a ‘strandflat’ formation, a wave-cut platform providing a broad area of shallow sea punctuated by flat, low islands, in distinct contrast to the cliffs and fjords of the mainland. Although the strandflat is typical of the Norwegian coast from Leka in the south to Hamarøy in the north, it is best developed in Vega.

Thus the Vega archipelago shares characteristics with Norway’s northern Atlantic coast, but its cultural landscape is more intense, and better preserved, than elsewhere along the coast.

The Vega seascape contains fishing villages, quays, warehouses, ‘eider’ houses, the farming landscape and navigations buildings such as lighthouses and beacons. Overall the landscape reflects unique cultural traditions based on the way the particular topography has been used to provide a living for its inhabitants from a combination of farming and harvesting wild produce, a tradition that still survives today.

The nominated site reflects the following cultural qualities:

- Historical depth: evidence of early settlement from the Stone Age
- Distinctive settlement patterns
- Eider down harvesting
- Fishing traditions
- Intangible cultural traditions

These are dealt with in turn.

- Historical depth: evidence of early settlement from the Stone Age:

There is extensive evidence for Early Stone Age habitations. More than a hundred sites, some with visible house, have been discovered on the lower slopes of Vega Mountain but this is thought to be a tiny percentage of the total. The largest settlement site is Asgarden, which had the safest harbour and where several hundred thousand artefacts have been recovered. Elsewhere smaller settlements probably functioned as hunting sites.

Whereas the very early sites on Vega were subsequently abandoned, as people moved to lower ground, finds on the smaller islands dating back to between 1500 and 1000BP, reveal a continuity of settlement to the present day – and a continuity of livelihood with finds associated with farming, fishing and collecting down. Finds include house mounds, field clearance cairns, harbours, barrows and ‘eider’ houses.

- Distinctive settlement patterns:

The strandflat formation has allowed agriculture to develop in a small scale-form on the islands. Fields were formed by building up suitable soil through mulching with seaweed. The traditional pattern of ‘infields’ (cultivated permanently for corn and later potatoes) and ‘outfields’ (cultivated in rotation) can still be clearly seen.

Beyond the fields, varieties of heath have developed through prolonged grazing (by sheep and cattle), scything and burning, and much of the diverse heathland vegetation is now related to these processes. Elsewhere there are various types of species rich grassland, formerly cut for hay from enclosed fields each with their hay-barns.

Of the 56 islands that have been inhabited, some had only one house while others such as Skjaevaer and Vega had larger settlements. Many of the houses were used only seasonally – for fishing or down gathering. The local building material was wood – gained from driftwood or from the mainland. In the extreme climate, buildings had a limited lifespan: no surviving buildings are older than 100-200 years. Dwellings were built of logs, clad externally with vertical planks, traditionally roofed in turf, (although now mostly covered in roofing felt) – in an overall style typical of outer coastal settlements in Nordland.

Many dwellings survive (particularly on Vega) whereas far fewer buildings related to the fishing and farming processes such as barns, boathouses, storehouses, cooking houses and fishermen's shacks still exist. The islands of Muddvaer and Skjaevaer are particularly noteworthy in having all categories of building fully represented.

- Specialised occupations: down collecting and fishing:

The harvesting of down – the soft feathers from the nests of eider ducks, who breed in large numbers on the islands – is the most distinctive occupation. The people on the islands attracted the wild eider duck to nest year after year on the same sites through providing nesting houses. The down was used for bedding quilts.

There is archaeological evidence for the harvesting of birds from the time of the earliest settlements, and archival evidence from Egil's Saga, written down in the 11th century but referring to two hundred years previously.

By the 9th century the down from Nordland had become a valuable trading item, and the Vega archipelago the single most important district for its supply. Down seems to have accounted for around a third of the islanders' income. Eggs were also collected for domestic use.

The nesting houses were built of either stone (*e-husane*) or wood (*e-banene*) and lined with seaweed to simulate natural nesting sites under crags on the shore. They attracted the birds and provide shelter from predators. On the larger sites, there was accommodation for as many as 1000 to 1400 birds. In all, the Vega archipelago had 17 down sites in use in the 19th century. Today six of the sites are tended by islanders. Financial support is now being provided by Vega Council and an eider farm association has been formed.

Traditionally eider farming was carried out by women. This is something not stressed in the nomination.

The fishing and hunting of marine animals has taken place since the ice retreated around 10,000 years ago. The type of fishing varied throughout the year. In summer saithe were caught, whereas in late summer and autumn it was herring, both caught from around the islands in small boats.

In winter the main catch was cod from much further afield in the Barents Sea, some 250 km to the north of Vega. Each winter a high proportion of the islands' men went there in large, ten-men rowing boats. The winter fishing lasted three months and the resulting dried or salted fish provided a significant part of the annual income.

Today there are still active fishermen but very few compared to their numbers a hundred years ago.

Remains of this fishing tradition are seen in quays, breakwaters, warehouses and boathouses, as well as the Bremstein lighthouse.

The tradition of boat building dates back to Viking times and is still maintained. Six distinctive types of boats, each suited to a particular purpose such as fishing transporting people etc, were built on the mainland fjords.

- Cultural traditions:

The oral traditions of the islands, related to the traditions of fishing, farming and down harvesting, are not given

prominence in the nomination but referred to in connection with place-names, landmarks for fishermen, 'superstitions', rituals and folk medicine. The local 'superstitions' include spirits to be propitiated for successful fishing or farming, and those that foretold death and disaster.

This aspect of the culture would seem to deserve more attention, documentation and evaluation.

History

Archaeological evidence suggests that the island of Vega was well populated with marine hunters and fishermen in the early Mesolithic period, and that this settlement persisted through the Stone Age. Gradually as the ice retreated, larger areas of land rose from the sea and the 6500 islands, islets and skerries slowly evolved. Settlement of the islands closest to Vega was in place by around 1500BP, and of the outer islands by 1000BP. Initially this settlement was seasonal.

The small islands began to be settled permanently around 1000 BP. They were the property of rich estate owners on the mainland and their first permanent occupants would have been landless tenant farmers escaping famine. The landowners required the tenants to look after the eider ducks in order to increase production of the valuable down. In time sealing stations developed in the islands and fishing produced large quantities of dried fish traded out of the area.

From 1560, by decree, all wares from the north had to pass through Bergen in the south of Norway. This meant fishermen became bound to certain merchants. At the end of the 16th century discoveries of new fishing grounds in the North America weakened the pre-eminence of Bergen. Following the Great Nordic War (1700-1721) agriculture recovered and Russians begun trading with Nordland. Around 1770 merchants were given landlords' licences and in 1813 trade became free – thus the power links to Bergen ceased.

The period from the end of the 19th into the beginning of the 20th century was one of massive change. A marked growth in population, and innovations such as boat engines which reduced the need for labour, encouraged many to emigrate to America, and others to move to the mainland.

Another landmark change was the Government's centralisation plan of the 1950s (the Nordland Plan) which aimed to put an end to settlement in the islands through the closure of schools and boat services, and the introduction of financial incentives to settle on the mainland.

In spite of all these constraints, some people continued to live in the islands, particularly the older generation, and even those who left kept their houses in repair for summer use.

Recently people have begun to move back to the islands and the policies are being reversed: Vega Council is now looking at ways to encourage the utilisation of the islands' resources as a way of sustaining their rich cultural traditions and ecological diversity.

Management regime

Legal provision:

All pre-Reformation (i.e. pre AD1537) archaeological and historical monuments and sites are protected by the Cultural Heritage Act of 1905. Vega has 238 known localities on the Monuments and Sites Register. This is thought to be a small proportion of what is there. The Vega project in 1984-88 revealed the huge research potential of the archipelago.

The Cultural Heritage Act of 1978 extends protection automatically to buildings between 1537 and 1650. Under the terms of the Act, later individual buildings may also gain protection from individual protection orders. A Royal Decree may protect cultural environments as a group. Under this Act, individual protection orders have been issued for 29 buildings in Skjaerø and for the Bremstein Lighthouse. The Hysøer/Sola area has also been designated as a protected landscape of 9317 ha.

The SEFRAK register of buildings covers buildings and remains of buildings from before 1900. Vega has 711 entries, 199 being ruins or remains. The SEFRAK register of other objects is incomplete. 21 objects from Vega are on this register.

The Nature Conservation Act of 1970 can protect landscape areas, nature reserves and bird sanctuaries. Under this Act, the Hysøer/Sola area has become a protected landscape, 5 nature reserves and 4 bird sanctuaries have been designated, in all amounting to 22% of the land surface.

Other relevant Acts include those protecting drinking water, regulating sea fishing in line with natural resources, the protection of wildlife, the use of land, (this expects agricultural land to be continued in use and is of particular relevance to Vega) and a Sustainable Development Plan for Vega which will 'hinder the Municipal Master Plan for Vega from being developed'.

The Master Plan for Vega (2001-2005) includes a general ban on building in the proposed World Heritage site but also promotes aquaculture around certain parts of Vega which are in the Buffer Zone. This Master Plan will be revised in 2003 and the values that form the basis of the nomination will underpin the new plan.

All of these plans cover the whole of the archipelago and in some instances they set out to promote development. Notwithstanding the checks and balance introduced by other acts, there is a need for an overall plan for the proposed World Heritage site that can put forwards a vision and aims specifically for the site – these seem at the moment to be implicit rather than explicit. This plan could also cover sites not currently protected - such as eider houses.

A Declaration of Intent between landowners, authorised users, the Vega Borough Council, the County Council and Government authorities was signed in 2002, under which the signatories agreed to preserve 'the landscape of Vega with its cultural and biological values', and to establish a consultative group for the World Heritage site. This group could drive forward a strategic/management plan that could inform the Master Plan.

Management structure:

There is no specific management structure in place although a World Heritage site consultative group is provided for under the Declaration of Intent (see above).

Responsibility for the conservation of the cultural and natural heritage is at three levels:

National:

The Directorate of Cultural Heritage has the overriding professional responsibility for the management of archaeological and historical monuments. Much of its work is carried out through County Council staff. For the natural heritage the Directorate for Nature Management is the professional advisory body. Likewise it issues instructions to County Council officers.

Regional:

The County Governor's office has responsibility for ensuring local authorities fulfil their obligations in respect of, for instance, nature conservation and agriculture (but not cultural matters). At County level the Nordland County Council is responsible for planning and development. It has delegated powers under the Cultural Heritage Act.

Local:

Vega Borough Council has responsibility for allocating land and resources with due consideration to archaeological, historical and natural resources.

Resources:

The Government allocates funds annually to administer World Heritage sites. Protected cultural sites can apply for funding from the Directorate of Cultural Heritage. A new Cultural Heritage Fund was set up in 2003 for cultural heritage projects. There is a raft of funds to support agriculture in relation to cultural heritage, and for farming, forestry and related rural industries.

There is an extensive range of trained staff at national level, and expertise at regional level in archaeological and historical monuments and the environment. At local level, the Council includes staff with expertise in cultural affairs. Also significant is the substantial practical and theoretical knowledge amongst local people of their traditions and cultures –which are crucial to the survival of the Vega cultural landscape.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

The outstanding universal values of the site are identified as being a combination of:

- A unique landscape of islands and shallow water reflect a living testimony to the life and labour of people who have lived in this exposed archipelago.
- A collection of built remains which testify to a long association between people and the land.
- Unique cultural traditions associated with fishing and farming.
- The unique millennium long tradition of down farming which had mutual benefit to man and birds.

- A landscape that represents the lives of people living in a harsh marginal area of the world.

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS mission visited the site in September 2003.

ICOMOS has also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Historic Gardens / Cultural Landscapes.

Conservation

Conservation history:

Buildings and the remains of buildings in the north and northwestern parts of the archipelago that pre-date 1900 were recorded and documented in the early 1990s. (Eider houses were not included). These include 40 dwellings, 19 barns and 14 storehouses.

Conservation of buildings has been concentrated on the restoring and refurbishing 20 buildings in the abandoned fishing village of Skjaeruaer. So far new uses for these buildings have not been found.

Conservation work has also included projects to try and reverse the decline of agricultural fields. A research project in 1998 looked at over-growing on 100 islands. Out of this emerged an upkeep and maintenance plan for the Vega Archipelago. This plan will begin in 2003.

State of conservation:

The Vega landscape has been preserved through under-use and at the moment that is not being reversed to any great extent. Active conservation has only taken place at a few sites. Nevertheless, there is a need for intervention for under-used buildings. However the majority of these are in private ownership.

Risk analysis:

The following risks were identified in the nomination:

- Depopulation:

This is the over-riding threat to the way of life of the islands. This is being addressed indirectly through the introduction of various incentives to add value to local produce and encourage traditional livelihoods.

- Lack of grazing:

Without a viable farming community, many former arable and hay fields and also grazing grounds are becoming over-grown. Sheep have been reintroduced in Hysvaer (through a private initiative) but there are as yet no plans to transport sheep to other islands. It is not clear how this issue will be addressed.

An associated issue not addressed in the nomination is:

- Sustaining fields:

Most of the fields were 'created' through applying seaweed to the land. This not only gave fertility to the fields it also created enough depth for cultivation. It is not clear from the nomination whether erosion on these fields

is a problem and if so how sufficient soil depth will be maintained.

- Forestry:

In 1980-1989 conifers were planted on 24ha of the buffer zone and these impact adversely on views. Vega Council now aims to encourage thinning and felling.

- Aquaculture:

Aquacultivation is given priority in the Vega Master Plan for the coastal plain to the east of Vega Island in the buffer zone. It is however stated that 'knowledge of the marine ecosystem and its biological resources is limited' and it is not clear how the sustainable development plan will mitigate this activity in sensitive areas.

- Tourism:

Tourism is not currently a threat as it is under-developed. However the local authority wishes to encourage the development of sustainable tourism.

- Lack of use of buildings:

This is a major issue and one that can only be addressed in the medium and long term through more viable activities.

- Pollution:

Pollution from large vessels sailing along the Norwegian coast is identified as a potential threat as is radioactive contamination from possibly, Sellafield, in England. Adequate oil protection measures and contingency plans are in place.

- Natural disasters:

Heavy grazing of the kelp forests by sea urchins – whose reasons are not known - is considered by some a disaster for fish stocks. More research is needed before this issue can be addressed.

- Masts:

A large radar installation stands on the summit of Gullsvagfjellet, the highest peak on Vega Island. This area had been excluded from the nomination. This does not however stop the mast having a negative visual impact on the proposed site.

The following issues were not addressed:

- Repair and maintenance:

The authorities have restored the buildings at Skjaeruaer in a professional way. Advice should be given to private house-owners perhaps through guidelines to encourage best practice and stop the use of unsuitable materials.

Authenticity and integrity

Authenticity:

There are no issues connected to the authenticity of the proposed site, apart from the radar installation, currently excluded from the site but not excluded from its visual envelope.

Integrity:

The nominated area can be considered sufficiently large to encompass the expressions of cultural heritage of the strandflat.

Comparative evaluation

The nominated area has been evaluated in a Nordic context by a group of Nordic experts as part of the Nordic World Heritage project. This concluded that the Vega archipelago could not be likened to other Nordic coastal landscapes in broad cultural landscape terms.

In a European context, the Outer Hebrides, the Orkneys and Shetland, which once had Nordic populations, do have some features in common in terms of a fishing/farming culture in a comparatively hostile environment. What they lack is the fragmented topography and shallow waters between islands which allow extensive fishing in comparatively simple vessels.

In a global context, archipelagos exist in western Canada, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the east coast of Chile, the Seychelles, the Maldives, Indonesia and New Zealand. None of these exhibit similar landforms to the Norwegian strandflat, and all have evolved in a different geo-cultural context.

One aspect, not stressed in the nomination under this heading, is the practice of eider farming. Although this practice was formerly more widespread, and still exists in Iceland on an industrial scale, nowhere else does the 'domestication' of eider farming still exist with houses being provided for the birds and the down being cleaned by hand. This cultural system, with its associated sites and structures, is now therefore unique. As a key part of the Vega archipelago economy, it thus has a marked bearing on the overall profile of the cultural landscape of the area.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The Vega archipelago has outstanding universal value for:

- The now unique eider duck farming culture which has persisted in the area for more than a thousand years.
- The manmade landscape which is a testimony to people who developed a distinctive and frugal way of life in this extremely exposed area just south of the Arctic Circle.
- The long and persistent interaction between man and the landscape which displays a remarkable continuity of culture
- The key part women played in eider farming and thus their involvement in the production of a high value product which became part of the Hanseatic trade

Evaluation of criteria:

The site is nominated on the basis of *criterion v*:

The cultural landscape of the Vega Archipelago illustrates in an outstanding way how people have earned a living

from their inhospitable environment over a long time span and in a persistent and distinctive way.

The site reflects the long and now unique tradition of eider duck 'farming' which possibly stretches back to pre-historic times and certainly has persisted over the past 1500 years.

The site is a testimony to women's labour and their control of the eider duck farming.

The site shows how a small-scale society in a remote and hostile environment could develop sustainable ways of harvesting resources to become a crucial part of a national and international trade network through producing high value produce.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for the future

This site is undoubtedly of outstanding universal value. It is, however, not without its vulnerabilities. At the moment it is a living landscape where – remarkably – the process of eider down farming has persisted in spite of pressures to the contrary over the past hundred years. However there are currently insufficient people to utilise all the islands' buildings and insufficient farmers who are willing to take sheep to graze the islands rich pastures.

There is evidence of a strong commitment to tackle these problems and a raft of projects has been put in place that could help sustain local processes. Four aspects need attention:

1. There is currently no inventory of the duck nesting houses on the islands. This should be completed as a matter of urgency, a conservation plan drawn up for these unique structures, and ways found to give them protection.
2. Although the Vega Master Plan is being rewritten to espouse the aims of this nomination it covers more than the nominated site and includes development proposals for the buffer zone. A specific strategic plan for the nominated site should be prepared which can feed into the Master Plan. It should address:
 - a. Measures to support traditional forms of land management, particularly the grazing of sheep on the islands,
 - a. Sustaining field patterns
 - b. The interface between conservation and sustainable development in respect of aquaculture
 - c. Documentation
 - d. How private land-owners may be engaged in the management processes
3. There is a need to formalise the collection of traditional, intangible knowledge of the islands' cultural processes and traditions, in order to monitor their survival. A plan to record cultural traditions should be put in place.
4. The large radio mast on Vega Island is visual intrusion into this dramatic and attractive

landscape. Ways should be found to re-site this mast in order that its footprint can be included in the nomination.

It is recommended that the State Party give consideration to strengthening the boundary of the nominated site to the north and northeast through the inclusion of further islands and marine areas.

It is further recommended that consideration should be given to acquiring abandoned islands for public ownership, where appropriate, in order to sustain the cultural landscape of these islands.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

That, subject to the four points mentioned above, the property be inscribed on the World Heritage list as a *cultural landscape* and on the basis of ***critterion v***:

Criterion v: The Vega archipelago reflects the way generations of fishermen/farmers have, over the past 1500 years, maintained a sustainable living in an inhospitable seascape near the Arctic Circle, based on the now unique practice of eider down harvesting, and it also celebrate the contribution made by women to the eider down process.

ICOMOS, March 2004