

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Pyrénées-Mont Perdu (Spain and France)

No 773

Identification

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| Nomination | Pyrénées-Mont Perdu: Cirques and Canyons |
| Location | Spain: Autonomous Community of Aragón, Province of Huesca, Communes of Torla, Fanlo, Tella-Sin, Puértolas, Bielsa, and Broto |
| | France: Midi-Pyrénées Region, Hautes-Pyrénées Département |
| State Parties | Spain and France |
| Date | 1 September 1997 |

Justification by State Party

This property is nominated as a continuing cultural landscape, as defined in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (1997), para 39 (ii).

It is an example of land settlement representative of local cultures that is vulnerable as a result of current economic changes (decline of pastoralism, tourist development). **Criterion v**

This landscape is associated with living traditions (pastoralism, cross-border cultures, "pyreneism") and with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal value (Raymond de Carbonnières, Henry Russel, Victor Hugo etc). **Criterion vi**

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a site.

History and Description

Humankind has contributed to the moulding of these landscapes and its traces are to be seen everywhere,

thanks both to the material remains and to memory. Despite the difficult living conditions imposed by altitude, human beings are established here and provide what is above all a natural property with a meaning.

The Mont-Perdu forms the pivot of a geographical space crowned by the Tres Serols, which is the centre of the world that unifies, according to traditional mythologies, the Heavens and the Earth. It results from the coming together of two ancient continents and continues to serve as a frontier which acts both to define and to link all together in a symbolical sense that is in itself impressive. It is, moreover, clearly defined in physical terms, providing its soils with specific characteristics in terms of geology, relief, hydrology, and climate which have had direct effects on the relationship of humankind with this environment.

Nature favoured the early appearance of humans in these regions, first as nomads and then as permanent settlers. Their settlements were organized so as to be able to make use of the resources of not only the valleys and their slopes but also of the high pastures, the woodland, the rock walls, the passes, the waters, and the mineral resources. There has been human settlement here since the Upper Palaeolithic period (40,000-10,000 BC), as shown by sites such as the Añisclo and Escuain caves, the Gavarnie stone circles, and the Tella dolmen. The permanent settlements entered history in documents of the Middle Ages; they were situated on the slopes of the massif and in the valleys around it, formed by the hydrographic network of the rivers Ara, Yesa, Aso and Vellos, Yaga, Barrosa and Cinca, Neste d'Aure, Gaves de Gavarnie, and Héas.

Here are to be seen tracks and roads, bridges, houses, and hospices (such as the *espital/hospitales* of Gavarnie, Bujarelo, Aragnouet, Parzan, Héas, and Pineta). Humans and their flocks influenced the flora of pastures and woodland in many ways. The use of high pastures such as those of Gaulis or Ossoue are remarkable testimony to this system of transhumance.

The valleys of Mont Perdu and their passes have served as the means of contact between communities on either side, who have more in common with one another than with the communities on the plains below them. As a result there is a long-established juridical and political system to regulate them that has long been independent of central governments.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The nominated area, covering 30,639ha, is situated in France within the Parc National des Pyrénées Occidentales and the listed site of Gavarnie (10,505ha), whilst in Spain it includes the entire Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido and a portion of its peripheral zone (20,134ha).

The Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido was established by Royal Decree in 1918 and

reclassified and extended by Law No 52 of 13 July 1992. The latter instrument created a peripheral zone in which no activity may be carried out that is not traditional and compatible with the objectives of the Parque.

The Parc National des Pyrénées Occidentales was founded by Government Decree on 23 March 1967. Any activity within its boundaries must receive Ministerial approval. There is a buffer zone around the Parc with similar constraints; this includes the listed site of Gavarnie, Troumouse, and Estaubé, listed as a *site classé* by Decree on 26 December 1941, where any intervention requires Ministerial authorization.

Management

Both National Parks come under the control of their respective ministries - the Ministerio de Medio Ambiente (Organismo Autónomo Parques Nacionales) in Spain and the Ministère de l'Environnement in France. Management is delegated to the respective regional bodies - the Consejería de Agricultura y Medio Ambiente, Gobierno de Aragón, in Zaragoza and the Parque administration in Huesca, and the Parc administration at Tarbes.

The two National Parks signed a Charter of Cooperation on 24 September 1988. Its objective is to carry out communal work for the conservation of a "unique heritage." So far this cooperation has included scientific studies and information and presentation documentation. They have produced a detailed joint declaration relating to the management of the zone proposed for inscription, which *inter alia* provides for the creation of a Franco-Spanish management committee, which will undertake the responsibility of producing an annual report on the development of the property

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The commitment of the two States Parties to the conservation of this landscape is well expressed by the existence of the two National Parks over more than thirty years, and by the strict application by those responsible for their management of the regulations governing their protection.

Authenticity

Overall the property is very authentic in two functionally related senses - use and appearance. The former is more significant than the second in terms of "cultural landscape," but the second is important in distinguishing this area of the Pyrenees, especially the northern (French) part, from other parts of the mountain range.

The area proposed still supports extensive pastoral farming of a type that is integral to the traditional way of life of the central Pyrenees, well documented back to medieval times and likely to have originated much earlier. The land belongs not to individual landlords but to communities, who negotiate rights

of passage and grazing to support long-distance transhumance which disregards the modern national frontier.

The second use is tourism, more recent but, in a meaningful sense here, "historic." The French part has been a tourist destination for over 200 years, with the Gavarnie area one of the most significant resorts of the European Romantic movement, especially writers and painters such as Victor Hugo and Gustave Doré, in the first half of the 19th century.

The present-day appearance of the nominated area is largely a function of the first use, and has much to do with the attractiveness which encourages the second use. The landscape has remained unchanged to a remarkable degree. The natural characteristics - geology, altitude, and climate - remain dominant, with the continuing pastoralism controlling the flora so that the montagne landscape is largely free of trees and scrub, markedly so above about 2000m, and studded with broad pastures of short-cropped grass on both sides of the frontier.

Seven communities involving in all no more than 700 people gain their livelihood in the traditional ways there. The way of life is itself sustainable: essentially the energy it produces is recycled within itself by the careful regulation of extensive pastoralism; but the numbers now involved are becoming low in relation to the critical mass needed to maintain the cycle. External pressures, especially the attractions elsewhere for young people, are obvious. On the other hand, clear signs of investment in and support for the maintenance of the economically fragile communities around the Ordesa National Park are apparent: eg the provision of basic services (electricity, piped water, and sewage systems), road improvement, and building restoration. The values at the core of this proposal are under very real threat from two directions: long-term economic and demographic decline, and the consequences of improvement, however well intentioned.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in October 1997; this was not possible earlier because of the late receipt by ICOMOS of the relevant documentation following the acceptance by the States Parties of the request by the Bureau at its meeting that the property should be evaluated under the cultural as well as natural criteria.

Qualities

The landscape is the product of an interaction between nature and man. Nature is visually dominant, but the influences of man are extensively apparent to the discerning eye. It is a landscape produced by the effect of man the farmer, the mountaineer, and more recently the conservation-minded manager on an old and complex geology ravaged by climate and erosion.

The most important of the human activities has been, and remains, long-term pastoralism. This is represented by particular types and spatial groupings of settlements, buildings, and enclosed and often irrigated fields along the valleys of the north, and by small villages perched on spurs and hilltops on the drier, southern slopes. The latter are surrounded by unenclosed strip-shaped fields, often terraced, notably at Bestué. At the higher altitudes, the pattern, type, and appearance of the flora are all strongly anthropogenic. The huge open spaces are as much the result of sheep nibbling and cattle grazing over millennia as they are of blizzards and erosion. Trees grow where nature has created sheltered circumstances and man has controlled his animals. Much of the cover of what appears to be scrub in fact consists of trees such as stunted beech, restricted in height because domestic animals continually browse their new shoots. The grass sward on the upland pastures is more deliberately maintained by careful cropping and animal droppings and recognized as of high value by those with grazing rights upon them.

It is crucial to realize that the land belongs to the communities, farmed by a mixture of management and customary rights on a local and trans-Pyrenean basis. Sheep and some cattle, horses, and goats regularly cross from the Spanish side to the better summer pastures of the French mountains where southern communities have rights of passage and pasture. Such farming is well documented in the proposed area in the medieval period, and is likely to have been practised there since prehistoric times.

There has been no permanent settlement in the nominated area in historic times because of the climatic extremes at an altitude of 2500-3500m. It is crossed by pathways and tracks still in use by shepherds, traders, and, now, recreational walkers. Cabanes (summer residences and shelters of pastoralists) dot the high grounds but, with the exception of some maintained as refuges for walkers and mountaineers, they are either in traditional use or ruinous.

Provision for tourists is either outside the area or relatively modest within it. There is no skiing on the Spanish side, and on the French side the visually obtrusive ski infrastructure towards Gavarnie is entirely outside the nominated area, though partly visible from within it.

Comparative analysis

Other Pyrenean landscapes are as dramatic scenically and also support transhumant pastoralism, but they are not as significant artistically. This nomination is of a visually dramatic area whose scenery is significantly enhanced by its continuing traditional use, its good historic documentation and depth of study, and its role in an important strand in European artistic development, the Romantic Movement. It has attracted considerable scholarly endeavour, on interacting factors such as geology and botany and human beings.

The other major factor that distinguishes this nomination is the fact that almost all the proposed area is within one or other of two National Parks,

each with a successful record of conservation management over several decades and about to complete a decade of co-operation. Though the French National Park extends considerably further to the west, most of the remainder of the Pyrenees do not enjoy either National Park status or a record of management of such quality. Thus, if any part of the Pyrenean range is worthy of World Heritage Status, the proposed area has a very strong claim on pragmatic grounds.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

The States Parties had not at the time of the ICOMOS mission appreciated the need for a management plan specific to the World Heritage Site as distinct from merely showing that such plans existed already for the two National Parks separately. This was accepted by the officials in the two Parks and a draft was quickly prepared, which ICOMOS recognizes to form the basis of a excellent management plan (see *Management* above).

In practice important elements of such a plan are already in place and active. Important among these is the Association Mont Perdu Patrimoine Mondial, formed as the mechanism to prepare the application. ICOMOS recommends that it should play an important consultative and advisory role with respect to the eventual World Heritage Site.

Just outside the proposed boundary on the south-east is a visually striking and historically important landscape centred on the village of Bestué. The village itself is partly occupied, partly well preserved, and partly undergoing repair and restoration. It is a classic example of a *village perché* on the dry, lower limestone hills of the Spanish Pyrénées, with its surroundings dominated by spectacular flights of extensive terraces, now abandoned, which until last century were the permanent arable of this mountain community. This is where the cereal counterpart to the livestock farming was grown, and so, in addition to being a very striking landscape, this area complements in landscape terms the historic economy which these mountains support.

ICOMOS suggests that, subject to formal approval of the local community, Bestué and its environs, including an extensive area of terraced fields (to be defined in detail), should be included within the World Heritage Site at some future date.

Recommendation

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

The Pyrénées-Mont Perdu area between France and Spain is an outstanding cultural landscape which combines scenic beauty with a socio-economic structure that has its roots in the past and illustrates a mountain way of life that has almost disappeared elsewhere in Europe.

ICOMOS, November 1997