

## Bhimbetka (India)

No 925

### 1. BASIC DATA

*State Party:* India  
*Name of property:* Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka  
*Location:* Madhya Pradesh  
*Date received:* 29 January 2002  
*Category of property:*

In terms of categories of cultural properties set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*. In terms of Operational Guidelines para. 39, it is also a *cultural landscape*.

#### *Brief description:*

The nominated site is in the foothills of the Vindhyan Mountains on the southern edge of the central Indian plateau. Within massive sandstone outcrops, above comparatively dense forest, are five clusters of natural rock shelters, displaying paintings that appear to date from the Mesolithic period right through to the Historical period. Twenty-one villages, lived in by people whose contemporary cultural traditions are closely associated with the rock paintings, are found in the buffer zone.

### 2. THE PROPERTY

#### *Description*

The nominated Bhimbetka rock shelters site lies within the Vindhyan Hills, an area of massively sculpted sandstone rock formations clustered around Bhimbetka Hill, which forms an easily identifiable landmark, 45 km south of Bhopal.

The area has abundant natural resources – perennial water supplies, natural shelter, rich forest flora and fauna, and like similar regions of significant rock art (for example Kakadu National Park in Australia or Kondoa Irangi in Tanzania), these conditions of plenty seem to have been conducive to the development of sustainable and persistent societies and the creation of notable rock art.

The nominated area covers 1,893 ha and is surrounded by a Buffer Zone of 10,280 ha.

The site includes five clusters of rock shelters, with one large complex in the buffer zone. The Rock Shelters display persistent traditions of rock painting, spanning periods from the Mesolithic to the Historic. They also display a profusion, richness and variety of mural subjects and, as a collection, form one of the densest known concentrations of rock art, (400 painted shelters in an area of 1,892 ha or c. 19 km<sup>2</sup>).

The buffer zone includes 21 villages whose culture appears to indicate a remarkable continuity with the rock art and with the tradition of hunting and gathering depicted in the

paintings. Many of the rock shelters within the nominated area are set within fairly dense forest, which displays a high diversity of flora and fauna, still harvested by the local people.

Overall the landscape of the nominated site has a strong appealing aesthetic quality – derived from the beauty of the naturally sculpted rock formations and the contrasting lush, dense, wooded vegetation, which together give the place a ‘timeless’ quality.

**Public access:** Part of the site is now open to the public and this has necessitated the construction of paths and railings, signs, access roads and tracks. These interventions are confined mainly to part of the core area. Works undertaken so far have been done quite sensitively, with respect for the natural and cultural values of the area. Development of infrastructure including roads has been minimised. The site retains a ‘natural appearance’ with a general absence of inappropriate installations and structures.

**Boundaries:** The nominated site is in two parts, a larger area (containing Hills II to IV) and a much smaller area (Hill I), separated by the Bhopal-Hoshangabad National Highway 12 and the central railway line. In the absence of the road, a contiguous site would have been more logical.

The nomination mentioned five clusters of shelters with a sixth in the buffer zone. In the absence of a map showing the distribution of rock shelters within the nominated area, it is difficult to assess the appropriateness or otherwise of the site boundaries and to understand why the sixth group has been omitted. The suggested boundaries appear to be a pragmatic solution to the problem of defining the Bhimbetka cultural landscape within the varied and complex legal protection, zoning, tenure and land use of the site.

The nomination states that the boundaries of the buffer zone were developed through examination of forest compartments (delineated by the Department of Forest) protected and reserved forest areas and revenue and village boundaries. The delineated areas are not marked on the ground by visible boundaries. Nor are some of the boundaries contiguous with other statutory designations such as the Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary.

The evaluation report also highlights the fact that further painted shelters exist just outside the buffer zone to the west.

Much of the nominated area is contained within the Ratapani Wild Life Sanctuary, which is reported to have high species diversity. However the nominated area does not include the large lake, Ratapani Reservoir, which lies just outside the eastern boundary of the buffer zone

#### *Detailed description*

Specifically the nominated site includes:

- 400 painted rock shelters in five clusters;
- Palaeolithic evidence from excavations within shelters indicating antiquity of human settlement;
- Stone and Iron Age walls and floors within the rock shelters;

- Evidence of a very long cultural continuity within many of the painted rock shelters;
- Indications of strong cultural links between the Bhimbetka paintings and the culture of local villages in the buffer zone;
- Forest areas around the rock paintings.

**Painted rock shelters in five clusters:** The nomination says that 'the site complex is a magnificent repository of rock paintings within natural rock shelters'. No detailed inventory is provided of the painted rock shelters, (although the nomination states that 133 painted shelters have been documented) nor an analysis of the scope or contents of the paintings – so only the following generalities can be given.

Largely in white and red, the paintings are essentially a record of the varied animal life of the surrounding forest and of various facets – economic and social- of peoples' lives. Images include extinct fauna, mythical creatures; domesticated animals, carts and chariots; designs and patterns, inscriptions and Buddhist symbols of the Historic period and also pictorial narratives of events such as large processions of men on caparisoned horses and elephants, and battle scenes.

Some paintings contain a few images, while others have several hundred. Depictions vary from the realistic to the stylised, graphic, geometric or decorative. Sizes of the paintings range from five centimetres to an immense impression on a ceiling of an animal nearly five metres in length and two metres across.

Stylistically the paintings are closely linked to a distinctive, regional Central Indian style of rock paintings, which is well documented. Many features are also typical of significant bodies of rock art around the world.

**Palaeolithic evidence for antiquity of human settlement:** There have been a relatively large number of archaeological excavations at rock shelters in Bhimbetka most in the 1970s. These have produced evidence of stone tools and other materials from the Palaeolithic period as well as associations between Bhimbetka and the surrounding plains.

The original rock shelter users were probably hunter-gatherers whose seasonal patterns of land use would have extended well beyond the rock shelters (and the core zone, and possibly the greater area of the nomination). Archaeological evidence sheds light on associations of Bhimbetka with these surrounding areas. For example, the source of some raw materials of microliths excavated from the rock shelters was identified as Barkhera, 6 km south of Bhimbetka.

The excavations at Bhimbetka are said to have produced new evidence for the continuity of materials for Stone Age tools for the entire Palaeolithic period in the region.

The trench at III F (Auditorium cave), which is very significant in demonstrating the antiquity and also continuity of human settlement in the area, has been preserved for public viewing and education.

**Stone and Iron Age structures:** Excavations have also identified an association between a primary living site and the construction of stone enclosures and walls from the

Lower Palaeolithic period. Continuity of this ancient practice may also be observed in a number of rock shelters that contain stone walls and levelled stone floors, including remains dated to the second century BC and comparatively recent stone gateways noted by the evaluator.

**Evidence of a very long cultural continuity:** In at least one of the excavated shelters, it is said in the nomination that continued occupation is demonstrable from 100,000 BCE (Late Acheulian) to 1000 AD.

Bhimbetka rock art has not been directly dated (using AMS dating techniques). Evidence of early dates therefore has to come from associative material such as the presence of art in rock shelters with Pleistocene deposits, art pigments identified in Mesolithic sequences, and images in paintings associated with hunter gatherer and pre-agricultural societies.

Evidence for a long continuity of tradition comes from the content of paintings and typological analyses, which have established broad cultural periods associated with pottery found elsewhere in the region. Added to this are superimpositions or overlapping of painting of different styles and periods, observed in many shelters. Up to fifteen layers have been recorded.

Direct dating research in collaboration with Australian researchers (as identified in part of Phase 1 of the management plan) is ongoing. This work, which includes recent sampling of rock surface crusts and paints at Bhimbetka and other sites, is aimed at providing age estimates for selected motifs including engraved cupules.

On the basis of present knowledge, it is believed that the rock art dates from the Mesolithic period (around 10,000 years ago), through the Chalcolithic (Microlithic) and right into the Historic, Medieval and recent Historic periods.

**Indications of strong cultural links between the Bhimbetka paintings and the culture of local villages in the buffer zone:** Although, as noted in the nomination, a detailed picture of past Bhimbetka societies has yet to emerge, it is clear that the Bhimbetka cultural landscape has been, and still is, much more extensive than the core area of the rock shelters. Within the surrounding area are Buddhist remains and stupas in dressed stone of the Sunga period corresponding to the second century BC inscriptions in the rock shelters.

Such research work as has been done on the cultural life of the surrounding local villages in the buffer zone, indicates that current traditional lifestyles of the *adivasi* (indigenous) settlements of the Gonds, Pradhans and the Korkus peoples in the area show strong affinity to aspects of the rock painting.

Particularly noted are affinities with the tradition of wall paintings on houses that seem to demonstrate a continuity of wall painting traditions with the images in the rock shelters – the most recent of which are probably a few hundred years old. Similar decorative elements are found on pots and other handcrafted items of everyday use.

These people also still use the resources of the forest at certain times of year for hunting and for gathering edible produce – as illustrated in the cave paintings.

Clearly more ethnographical studies are needed to reinforce these preliminary studies.

**Forests surrounding the rock paintings:** The nomination does not detail particular qualities of the natural environment – which is described as ‘pristine’. An inventory of trees is given together with a list of edible plants – flowers, tubers, fruits – and the animal species, which thrive in the protected Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary – mammals, reptiles, birds and insects.

### **History**

The site complex was discovered by V S Wakankar in 1957. Almost a hundred years earlier in 1867 rock paintings had been discovered in Uttar Pradesh and the first scientific article on Indian rock paintings was published by J Cockburn in 1883. Bhimbetka was first mentioned in 1888 as a Buddhist site – from information obtained from local adivasis.

Two shelters were excavated in 1971 by Bajpai, Pandey and Gour. The following year a systematic survey of the wider area from Kari Talai to Jaora was undertaken by Wakankar. His classification into seven topographical areas (I-VII), within which clusters of shelters were numbered alphabetically, and individual shelters given Arabic numeral, is still followed. This survey identified 700 shelters of which 243 are in the Bhimbetka group. It also showed the Lakha Juar Group to be as rich as Bhimbetka in rock paintings, with 178 shelters spread over two hills.

So far excavations have been limited to Bhimbetka. Between 1972 and 1977 excavation undertaken by Wakanakar, Misra and Hass revealed a continuous sequence of Stone Age cultures from the Late Acheulian to the Late Mesolithic and also some of the world’s oldest stone walls and floors. Wakanakar revealed stratified deposits including Chalcolithic pottery, which indicated contact with Chalcolithic man on the neighbouring plains.

The excavated material has been examined to establish sequence and typology for stone tools. So far there is no conclusive corroboration between the excavated material and the wall paintings – for which absolute dates have not been established. Nevertheless circumstantial evidence from pigments in deposits and images that indicate pre-agricultural societies, together with similarities with pottery patterns of the Calcolithic Malwa ware, indicates that the earliest paintings are from the Mesolithic period. A broad chronology has been established but more work is needed to establish a detailed chronology. Similarly the nature of the societies associated with the paintings is as yet little known.

And as has been mentioned earlier, no ethnographic work has been carried out on the surrounding villages to research links with the culture of the rock shelter sites.

### **Management regime**

#### *Legal provision:*

The ownership of the nominated area and the buffer zone lies with the State Government of Madhya Pradesh. The core of the area has been declared as protected under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and

Remains Act, 1958, and the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Rules (1959) apply.

The core area of the nomination also falls within the boundary of the Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary, protected by the provisions of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, which is administered by the Department of Forest, Government of Madhya Pradesh.

Parts of the buffer zone have legal protection under the Indian Forest Act, 1927, the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.

In the buffer zone some lands are Revenue lands, administered by the Department of Revenue. These lands, which comprise mainly agricultural lands and villages, are not protected by the legislation that protects the core area and forest and sanctuary zones. However, various government programs developed for these lands are complementary to the planned management of the greater area.

The nomination dossier provides copies of relevant pieces of legislation and their respective provisions and regulations, as well as copies of revenue lands records.

#### *Management structure:*

Section 3 of the nomination document outlines the management history and context (research, notification and strategies, land tenure documents, management issues, demographic statistics) and the general approach to management. A separate Management Plan provides maps.

Management of the core area (as a declared monument of national importance) is the responsibility of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). As the core and buffer areas fall within the boundaries of reserved/protected forest/Ratapani Wild Life Sanctuary, the Government of Madhya Pradesh through the Department of Forest is a major partner in management of ecological and environmental aspects. The Department of Revenue of Madhya Pradesh is also a partner in the management system with respect to Revenue lands.

The nomination document lists the officers responsible at the regional and local levels for the implementation of management policy.

Phase 1 of Management Plan is co-ordinated by a special Bhimbetka unit chaired by the Director General of ASI. The unit has a local committee in Bhopal headed by the Superintending Archaeologist, with representatives from the state departments, which are partners or stakeholders in management. It is proposed that in the next stage of the management plan an autonomous body will be set up as the management authority.

#### *Management Plan*

The Plan is an aspirational document that outlines approaches, proposed methodologies and intended programmes rather than detailing those programmes.

Three major components are identified as the basis of management:

- Cultural content;
- Ecology and environment;
- Adivasi settlements/villages.

The management plan has two parts:

- Phase 1: survey and collection of primary data relating to the three major components (in progress; co-ordinated by the ASI)
- Phase 2: development of detailed proposals after the completion of phase 1 and implementation of these through administration by an autonomous authority, executive committee and implementation committee.

Phase 2 will therefore become the detailed Management Plan.

The nomination states that direct protective policies are being formulated by ASI in the context of legislation (re physical interventions, restrictions and regulations) and these are aimed at conservation of cultural relics, geomorphological features and visitor management. Indirect measures are also being put in place, which relate to the coordination of policies with the authorities of Madhya Pradesh (Department of Forest, Department of Tourism, and Department of Revenue).

For the revenue lands, government programmes have been devised to develop sustainable economic activities, which will help reduce the dependence of village people on the natural resources of the protected zones, and will support management policies for the nominated area. Programmes include the Rajiv Gandhi Watershed Management Mission that was set up in 1994 for the purpose of environmental management and poverty reduction. The programme has been adopted for the 21 villages of the buffer zone, and is it seems to be linked with the Joint Forest Management Programme to conserve the resources of the protected forest and sanctuary areas.

The tourism development plan, in Phase 2, indicates proposed strategies for development of tourist infrastructure and visitor management.

#### *Resources:*

The ASI has an annual budget for the maintenance and preservation of the protected monument. This budget provides for:

- Maintenance
- Visitor facilities
- Conservation of shelters, paintings archaeological deposits and architectural features
- Documentation, exploration and excavation

The department of Forests, the government of Madhya Pradesh, also provides an annual budget for the protection, preservation and maintenance of the protected forest and the Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary.

Once the management plan proposals have been finalised and agreed, the ASI has made a commitment to provide an adequate budget for the overall management and conservation of the site according to the projections made in the plan.

#### *Justification by the State Party (summary)*

The site complex is a magnificent repository of rock paintings within natural rock shelters.

It displays archaeological evidence of habitation and lithic industry from the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods, through the Chalcolithic to the medieval period.

The paintings appear to date back at least to the Mesolithic period and to have been continued into the historical period. Together, the paintings and archaeological evidence provide an undisturbed continuous sequence of living culture from the Stone Age to within the last few hundred years.

The richness and variety of the large concentrations of paintings, within a site that demonstrates a progressive sequential use throughout the ages, remains unparalleled.

While the contents of the shelters have revealed a continuity of habitation, cultural elements of this are also observed in the continuing traditional lifestyle of the adivasi villages in the surrounding buffer zone. These settlements also still manage to maintain an ecological balance with the surrounding forests, which have been a key resource for the peoples associated with the rock shelters over the past 100,000 years.

### **3. ICOMOS EVALUATION**

#### *Actions by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS evaluator visited the site in November 2002.

#### *Conservation*

##### *Conservation history:*

**Cultural qualities:** Apart from archaeological excavation carried out in the 1970s and the subsequent analysis of finds, little evidence is given in the nomination of conservation of cultural aspects of the site.

There is no complete inventory of the rock paintings and no conservation work has been carried out nor has there been any assessment of need. The nomination does indicate that some paintings are suffering from exposure to sunlight, damage by water ingress, by algae or by vandals.

**Natural qualities:** Forest records detail the diversity of flora and fauna in the forest areas. It is not clear how illegal felling is monitored or recorded. Not is it clear how other natural indicators – such as water levels – are monitored. No indication is given of active conservation work in the area.

##### *Management:*

The nominated area receives adequate legal protection under a range of cultural heritage and environmental legislation.

The evaluation focused on the contextual aspects of management, practical methods of policy implementation and current progress with management goals as outlined in the nomination and management plan.

The evaluator made visits to three major complexes of the core area, the village of Amchha in the buffer zone and to

Raisen and Shamala Hills rock shelters outside the area of this nomination. Comparisons were also made with Sanchi (a World Heritage listed, early Buddhist, site administered by ASI) and two protected cultural heritage sites (Bhojpur and Islamnagar) managed by the State of Madhya Pradesh.

At Bhimbetka it appears that significant steps have been taken with respect to the implementation of protective legislation and with some of the management programmes outlined in the plan, such as survey and research, visitor management, forest protection, other environmental management.

The diversity of interests and stakeholders involved in the nominated area- various national and state government agencies and departments, and local communities -presents a complex situation for management. Effective communication and co-ordination (including integration of the cultural, archaeological and environmental programs) will be crucial to successful management.

The Government of Madhya Pradesh, through the Department of Culture and Tourism, performs a key role in co-ordinating the functions of the ASI with the various State authorities, in particular the Department of Forest and the Department of Revenue. An effective working relationship appears to exist between the ASI and the Department of Culture and Tourism and other state authorities, for this purpose. Quarterly Evaluation Meetings will be held in Bhopal to evaluate the progress of work assigned to each of the different departments.

Conservation of the forest and natural environment are crucial aspects of the nomination. Current and planned programmes for the buffer zone appear to have great potential for environmental regeneration and community development; however, as environmental goals may take some time (and much co-ordination and consultation) to achieve, short-term strategies to protect the forest and other values are also required. The way local communities will be linked through the various buffer zone programs was made clear to the evaluator. However it was less apparent how they will connect in a practical way with the activities of the core area. Balancing and integrating the local economy with conservation/management is a major challenge.

Strategies for basic tourist management have been implemented, but additional and upgraded measures are required. Sites that are not currently open to tourism should remain closed, as there are no protective measures in place. As the management plan indicates, visitor numbers and impacts should be monitored and regulated. Forward planning (Phase 2) includes strategies to manage anticipated increases in tourist numbers including the construction of a visitor centre. It is important that, as proposed, the visitor centre and associated facilities are constructed outside the core area.

A major Phase 2 objective is the acceptance of the management plan in its final form by all stakeholders. It appears that adequate preparation and planning has been undertaken to serve as the basis for developing a comprehensive management plan. This will need to include systems to assess, monitor and review conservation and management strategies for both natural and cultural values. Help with engaging stakeholders could perhaps usefully be provided through the provision of other WHS Management

Plans that have been developed through co-operative planning with a range of stakeholders.

Overall, as there are so many stakeholders and programs involved, it is apparent that the co-ordinating roles of ASI and the Department of Culture and Tourism of Madhya Pradesh are critical.

#### *Risk analysis:*

**Rock shelters:** Apart from natural weathering – which shows no signs of accelerating – various published article have drawn attention to other threats to the rock shelters and paintings. These include inappropriate levels of uncontrolled visitors; flooding of deposits from monsoon rains; effects of nest building insects; sooty deposits from fires; disturbance of floors by wild animals; and soil erosion as a result of pastoral activities. These have not had a major impact, but implementation of the management plan is crucial to addressing these vulnerabilities in the future. In particular, the completion of a detailed inventory of the rock paintings and of their condition is urgently needed, as well as research into the water flows in the catchment area (see below).

**Farming practices:** Officers consulted during the evaluation confirmed that illicit cattle grazing (ass opposed to regulated grazing in the wildlife sanctuary area) is a major issue affecting the values of the nominated area. ASI is considering erecting a fence around the nominated area. Longer-term strategies for the buffer zone are proposed in part 2 of the management plan.

**Forest cover:** Forest cover is a key factor in preventing land degradation (quite apart from its cultural values). It protects rock surfaces (and rock art) from the effects of wind, sun and rain. Denudation of forest cover through the felling of trees continues to be an occasional problem within the wildlife sanctuary, though the Department of Forest enforces protection through rangers and guards. However outside the wildlife sanctuary, tracts of reserved and protected forest – particularly to the north of the buffer zone – have suffered denudation and felling. Poaching and cattle encroachment – in spite of protective measures- also remain a problem. Additional guards may be needed to prevent further loss of the forest cover and natural values.

**Water:** The Bhimbetka hills form a watershed for the Betwa and Narmada rivers, which provide the main source of water for the region. The nomination acknowledges a significant drop in the water levels due to ‘excessive tapping’ arising from population increases. The quality and flow of water in local springs has also deteriorated. The pollution of watercourses by cattle seems to be a major problem. Monitoring and fencing will help with this latter problem but more wide-ranging solutions are needed to gain a sustainable approach to water usage. Research into the supply and use of water within the whole water catchment area should be considered. At the moment such a wide-ranging survey is not envisaged in the management plan.

**Community life:** Risk to the integrity of local adivasi culture in the 21 surrounding villages is apparently quite high, as mounting economic and developmental pressures encourage people to move to the towns. Also new settlers from other regions are beginning to appear in the area. Although change is gradual at the moment, it could easily gain momentum. It is therefore vital that ethnographic

studies are undertaken as a high priority with a view to putting in place sustainable development practices that aim to provide incentives to keep people in the area, through sustaining key aspects of the local culture.

Such opportunities for linking cultural heritage parameters to development are not envisaged in the management plan.

### ***Authenticity and integrity***

The nomination dossier does not examine in any depth the concept of authenticity/integrity with respect to Bhimbetka as a cultural landscape. It refers briefly to geomorphological and ecological features as indicators of authenticity and integrity and says that the site is 'undisturbed and 'artificially unaltered' and that change has been only through the forces of nature.

Unquestionably, the essential geological character of the rock shelters remains uncompromised. However, as indicated in the nomination, there is a range of evidence for various sustained impacts upon the natural and cultural values of the nominated area. Many of these are implicit in the concept of a continuing cultural landscape. Understanding and acknowledging these processes - some of which will be part of the significances of the cultural landscape - is vital to the management of the area.

**Rock shelters:** Taken on their own the rock shelters and associated rock paintings are extraordinarily well preserved, both from a cultural and geomorphological point of view - largely because they remained unknown to the outside world until just over 50 years ago - and thus have a very high degree of authenticity.

**Wider cultural Landscape:** If one however extends the site to include all the elements of the cultural landscape, the picture looks slightly different - both from the point of view of authenticity and possible threats to that authenticity.

The cultural landscape should include sufficient elements of the interrelated factors that go to make up the cultural landscape to allow the site as a whole to have authenticity.

The significance of the Bhimbetka cultural landscape is about the connection between the people who created the rock art and the way they sustained a living from the surrounding countryside over many millennia. It is also about the way people have apparently shifted from living near the rocks to the villages in the surrounding areas - but still keeping their cultural links, particularly in the use of natural resources and in their artistic forms. The cultural qualities of the landscape are about sustainable management of local resources over a very long time span, and about the way landscape inspired art.

What is problematic in the nomination (and this is referred to again later) is the fact that part of the key significances of the cultural landscape is outside the nominated area - villages who use the landscape and archaeological remains linked to the rock paintings.

The nominated area is more suited to a nomination for a relict cultural landscape - one where evolution has stopped. This would fit the idea that after some point in time - perhaps four or five hundred years ago, the painting of rock shelters ceased. The nominated area would then

include the most of the corpus of rock art and would present a very authentic relict cultural landscape.

However, the nomination is for an evolving cultural landscape and therefore authenticity has to be seen in all the key elements of this dynamic cultural entity. The following elements of the landscape need therefore to be scrutinised for authenticity: natural landscape as a cultural resource; cultural traditions of the communities living within the landscape, in terms of how they relate to the rock paintings and the surrounding natural landscape, and evidence for pre-historic links between the rock shelters and the wider landscape.

**Natural Landscape as a cultural resource:** The natural landscape appears to have provided abundant food and other materials for the residents of the wider Bhimbetka landscape for many millennia. The fact that the landscape has survived largely intact reflects a sustainable use of those resources. The nomination document lists the wide range of edible fruit, tubers and flowers harvested by the local people as wild food, together with wild honey gained from the forest - depicted in several of the rock paintings, and the wild animals hunted for food also shown in the images. The forest would also have been used for a certain amount of grazing and to provide shelter for domesticated animals.

The hunting and gathering practices of the people now living in the villages is undoubtedly still there as an authentic element of their traditions, but very much under threat due to increase in population and the diminishing forest resource. It is also further threatened by the proposal to fence off the nominated area to stop excessive cattle grazing.

If the authentic nature of the relationship between people and the forest is to be sustained, then people must still have access to the forest. To achieve this, a fundamental strategy is needed to limit the number of people using the forest so that it can continue to be used as a sustainable resource.

Secondly enough of the ancient forest lands need to be included to make the association viable. At the moment certain areas of the Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary appear to be excluded from the nomination area as are some protected forest areas - although both are in the buffer zone, while other parts of the Ratapani Sanctuary such as the Ratapani Reservoir, are excluded from both and the buffer zone. Also parts of the buffer zone include areas recently denuded of forest cover.

What is needed is an appraisal of the ecological unit needed to create a manageable area, which can sustain certain uses by people as well as the inherent natural components, and which is also large enough area to have a beneficial impact on water resources.

The area of forest put forward in the nomination area is considered by the evaluator as being the minimum need to sustain the natural values as a basis for the conservation of the area. That view relies on people being excluded largely from the area. If the forests are to have a more symbiotic relationship with people, in order to sustain the authenticity of the link between people and forests, then it could be argued that a larger area is needed.

**Archaeological evidence:** The nomination highlights the fact that preliminary evidence of prehistoric campsites, which may have a link with the rock shelters have been found in the plains as well as in the riverine belt. The proposed management plan will have a section dealing with the widening of the ambit of research to consider the social links across the land. This has implications for the boundary of the nominated site and also for the authenticity of the protected cultural landscape.

**Painting styles:** A vital link between the rock painting and the people living in the villages is the stylistic similarities between their house and handicraft decorations and the rock art in the shelters. This is a very authentic link at the moment unforced by awareness of the link. How to sustain that link as something dynamic is a considerable challenge. But to do so would involve people in the village being part of the living forest and still related to the rock culture area. It would mean trying to sustain their traditions and trying to find a way of allowing them to remain attached to the area in numbers that allowed sustainable contact and still provided them with a living.

The authenticity of the link between the past painting styles and the present handicraft styles needs to be sustained through the two parts being within the nominated area.

#### **Comparative evaluation**

Comparisons can be made of Bhimbetka with other rock shelter art sites in India and around the world. Rock shelter art sites are not arbitrary – they rely on certain geocultural features and are quite distinct from ‘open air’ rock art on boulders and rock faces.

In India sites extend from the Himalayas to the far south with the greatest concentration being in the quartzitic belt of central India, including some in Madhya Pradesh. These others do not compare with Bhimbetka in terms of density of paintings, cultural continuity, variety and preservation of images and environmental values of the surrounding vegetation.

It would be logical to compare patterns of Bhimbetka rock painting sites with those of other significant regions of sandstone rock shelter art such as Kakadu National Park (Australia), or uKhahlamba/ Drakensberg Park of South Africa. However, these areas are many times the size of Bhimbetka.

It is unquestionable that the Bhimbetka area contains a major corpus of rock art, which, like other bodies of sandstone rock art, survives in various states of preservation. Although empirical data on site densities in major rock art regions is sparse, it is clear that the stated density of distribution (several hundred painted shelters in an area of 1,892 hectares or c. 19 km sq) is comparable with other significant regions of sandstone rock art such as Kakadu National Park and the Drakensberg Park in South Africa and the Laura region in north-eastern Australia.

Although many rock shelters are rich cultural repositories it is unusual for them to preserve sequences as lengthy as the Bhimbetka shelters, in combination with rock art.

Although there are a number of World Heritage listed prehistoric sites, those suitable for comparison, particularly

in Asia, are relatively few. The site of ‘Peking Man’ in Zhoukoudian, China, has remarkable evidence of human evolution and a long cultural sequence, but lacks the element of parietal (wall) art. There are some 20 properties with rock art features inscribed on the World Heritage list, but they are very diverse. Although other World Heritage properties also have rock art of very substantial antiquity, it appears that few have confirmed *cultural contexts*, which compare in antiquity, or continuity, with those nominated at Bhimbetka.

#### **Outstanding universal value**

*General statement:*

Bhimbetka is a dramatic area of sandstone outcrops, surrounded by comparatively dense forest, which rise above the central Indian plateau. Its universal value lies in the way a dense collection of rock paintings within rock shelters provide an apparently undisturbed and continuous sequence of living culture from the Stone Age to the historical period, and also in the cultural continuity between the rock shelter art and the culture of the local surrounding villages in art and in hunting and gathering traditions.

A key issue, however, is whether the area nominated is sufficiently wide to encompass these values

*Evaluation of criteria:*

The nomination proposes Bhimbetka as a cultural landscape. Although it does not explicitly state which type of cultural landscape is proposed, the nomination suggests ‘cultural landscape’ sub-category ii ‘a continuing landscape’.

No criteria are cited in the nomination for evaluating Bhimbetka. It is suggested that *criteria iii* and *v* could be appropriate:

**Criterion iii:** The significance of Bhimbetka is connected to the way people have interacted with the landscape and how aspects of that interaction have persisted over a very long time-span. The rock art images demonstrate hunting and gathering traditions that still persist in a modified form in the local villages. The tradition of painting symbols and pictures, seen in huge quantities and spanning many millennia in the caves, is still carried on in local villages on shrines and on houses.

The Bhimbetka landscape thus bears testimony to a cultural tradition closely linked to the locality of the caves. The quantity and quality of the rock art make that testimony exceptional.

**Criterion v:** The Bhimbetka landscape is closely associated with a hunting and gathering tradition, which has an extremely long connection with the area (as documented by the rock art), and is still part of the culture of the local *adivasi* villages surrounding the rock art site. Persistence of hunting and gathering traditions is now extremely rare anywhere in the world and yet once they were widespread. Bhimbetka is thus of value for the way it can still represent this way of life, although hunting and gathering is no longer a dominant part of the economy.

#### 4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

##### *Recommendation for the future*

Unquestionably the nominated area and buffer zone, which includes hills and plateaux, valleys, springs and creeks, gullies, low lands, agricultural lands, tribal villages, and forested and deforested areas represents a complex cultural landscape which has evolved over thousands of years.

However, it is clear that the Bhimbetka cultural landscape has been, and is, much more extensive than the core, nominated area of the rock shelters. By including a broader spatial context that incorporates a variety of topographic, ecological and cultural features, the nominated area could express more faithfully the totality of the Bhimbetka landscape over time.

The nomination together with the management plan raises key issues over both cultural and natural sustainability of the Bhimbetka area. Its value and significance are related to the strong association between people and the local landscape over many millennia. There are however forces working to break down that association – connected to over-grazing, reducing water levels and the gradual drift away from the area by the local people.

If Bhimbetka is to be managed as a cultural landscape, which aims to sustain its universal values, then management will need to address cultural, natural, social and economic issues. It will also need to encourage management that draws together these aspects in a sustainable way.

The evaluator considered that the nominated area was the absolute minimum needed to reflect the values of Bhimbetka as a site of universal value. What is in doubt though is whether the comparatively tightly drawn area of the nomination would provide sufficient resources to tackle the threats to the area and put in place a sustainable management regime.

Another aspect of the boundary relates to the corpus of rock paintings in the area and whether the suggested boundary reflects what is seen as the Bhimbetka group of paintings.

##### *Recommendation with respect to inscription*

It is recommended that the nomination be *deferred* to allow the State Party to provide additional information in order to clarify the following:

- How community involvement in the nominated area will be organised in order to sustain the traditional interaction between people and landscape in matters relating to the use of forest resources and the continuation of artistic traditions
- How the apparently very ancient traditions associated with the area can be recorded and documented to inform ways of sustaining them
- Whether the proposed boundaries of the nominated area provide sufficient resources to allow sustainable cultural and environmental development
- How a 'layered' approach to landscape management can be provided to allow different degrees of involvement from stakeholders involved in the property, within an overall integration of efforts
- Whether the nominated area encompasses the majority of the Bhimbetka corpus of rock paintings

Consideration should also be given to changing the name of the nomination to the Bhimbetka Cultural Landscape to reflect the wider issues involved.

ICOMOS, March 2003