

## Río Pinturas (Argentina)

No 936

### Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	La Cueva de los Manos, Río Pinturas
<i>Location</i>	Patagonia Region, Santa Cruz Province
<i>State Party</i>	Argentina
<i>Date</i>	30 June 1998

### Justification by State Party

The Area Arqueológica y Natural Río Pinturas-Santa Cruz, which includes the archaeological site of the Cueva de los Manos (Cave of the Hands) with its cave, rock shelters, and rock walls decorated with magnificent paintings, is an outstanding area because it contains the oldest artistic representations belonging to the first hunter-gatherer groups who inhabited what is now the territory of Argentina.

The artistic sequence, which includes three main stylistic groups, began as early as the 10th millennium BP [Before Present]. It is one of the few rock-art sites from the Early Holocene Period in Patagonia that is still well preserved. The sequence is a long one: archaeological investigations have shown that the site was last inhabited around AD 700 by the possible ancestors of the first Tehuelche people of Patagonia. The Cueva de los Manos is considered by the international scientific community to be one of the most important sites of the earliest hunter-gatherer groups in South America.

The Area Arqueológica y Natural Río Pinturas-Santa Cruz is an outstanding example of a prehistoric human habitat. Archaeological sites found on both sides of the Río Pinturas Canyon are evidence of occupation by pre-Hispanic hunters who made use of the resources of the canyon and its environment.

The paintings on the rock shelters and cave are located in an outstanding landscape, with the river running through a deep canyon, and provide an incomparable aesthetic experience for the visitor. The hunting scenes depict animals and human figures interacting in a dynamic and naturalistic manner. Different hunting strategies are shown, with animals being surrounded, trapped in ambushes, or attacked by hunters using their throwing weapons, round stones known as *bolos*. Some scenes shown individual hunters and others groups of ten or more men.

There is no doubt that the Area Arqueológica y Natural Río Pinturas-Santa Cruz has high symbolic value. The inhabitants of Argentina are hardly aware of their pre-Hispanic past, since the links with that period were broken by the Spanish conquest and in the subsequent colonization

of the territory. The Cueva de los Manos is one of the most important testimonies to that past, and it is the archaeological site best known to the Argentinian people.

[**Note** The State Party does not make any proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers this property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List.]

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

### History and Description

The progress of human penetration into South America is the subject of intensive scientific debate at the present time. Some early radiocarbon dates from the north-eastern region of Brazil have challenged the hitherto generally accepted view that this began around 12,000 BP.

However, this does not affect the dating of the occupation of the Río Pinturas rock shelter, which has been established by excavation and radiocarbon analysis to *c* 9300 BP. The first human group (whose art is classified as Stylistic Group A) were long-distance hunters whose main prey was the guanaco.

Around 7000 BP a second cultural level can be identified, distinguished by Stylistic Group B. Hunting scenes are no longer found, and the rock art is dominated by hand stencils. There are also some examples of stencils of the feet of the American ostrich (*ñandú*). This culture lasted until *c* 3300 BP, when the art became more schematic and included highly stylized zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures.

The final cultural phase at Río Pinturas began around 1300 BP. Its art (Stylistic Group C), executed in bright red pigments, concentrated on abstract geometric figures and highly schematic representations of animals and humans. It is believed to have been the work of the historic Tehuelche hunter-gatherers who were inhabiting the vast area of Patagonia when the first Spanish traders and settlers arrived. It was the creation of vast cattle ranches (*estancias*) that brought their way of life to an end.

The Area Arqueológica y Natural Río Pinturas-Santa Cruz is located in the *pampas* section of the Pinturas River region. Low plateaux at an altitude of 800-1000m are cut by deep canyons bordered by steep cliffs, the main one being that of the Pinturas itself. There are many natural rock shelters in these cliffs. The soil is rocky and poor, but the region supports a diverse natural fauna, in which the guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*) figures prominently.

The climate of the canyons is temperate, since they are protected from the winds that sweep the *pampas*. The mild winter temperatures and the high humidity as compared with the *pampas* make this region appropriate for seasonal grazing of the cattle from the *estancias*. Palaeoclimatic studies based on the sediments of the Cueva de los Manos suggest that the present conditions had been established by 11,000 BP.

The entrance to the Cueva de los Manos is screened by a rock wall that is covered by many hand stencils. Within the rock shelter itself there are five concentrations of rock art. Later figures and motifs are frequently superimposed upon those from earlier periods.

The paintings were executed with natural mineral pigments that were ground and mixed with some form of binder, the nature of which is unknown. Traces of the pigments were found in the archaeological excavations carried out in the entrance to the cave, thus establishing a contextual link between the paintings and the stratified cultural material. X-ray diffraction analysis has shown that the most common minerals used were iron oxides (hematite and maghemite) for red and purple, kaolin for white, natrojarosite for yellow, and manganese oxide for black; gypsum was sometimes added to the mixture.

## **Management and Protection**

### *Legal status*

The National Congress of the Argentine Republic declared the Cueva de los Manos an Historic National Monument by Law No 24.225 of 20 July 1993. This was in accordance with powers accorded by Law No 12.665 of 1940 to the National Commission of Museums, Monuments, and Historic Places.

At provincial level, the Government of the Province of Santa Cruz declared the City of Perito Moreno as the Archaeological Capital of Santa Cruz, because of the importance of the archaeological site of the Cueva de los Manos, by Decree No 133 of 13 May 1981. The promulgation of a provincial bill on the Protection of the Cultural Heritage is currently in progress.

### *Management*

The 1993 National Law assigns responsibility for all actions relating to the Cueva de los Manos to the National Commission for Museums, Monuments, and Historic Places and the Culture Secretariat of the Presidency of the Nation.

An Agreement for the Protection, Security, and Expansion of Infrastructure in the National Historic Monument "Cueva de los Manos" was signed in December 1998 between the Municipality of Perito Moreno, the local Departments of Culture and Tourism, the Southern Directorate of Architecture (an agency of the national Secretariat of Public Works), and the National Institute of Anthropology and Latin-American Thought (*Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Pensamiento Latinoamericano* – INAPL), which reports to the Culture Secretariat of the Presidency. This agreement assigned responsibilities to each of these bodies for specific activities within the framework of the Agreement.

INAPL began work on a management plan for the site in 1995. The first phase, which was completed in 1997, involved comprehensive recording, survey, and documentation of the entire site, inventarization of the state of conservation of the paintings, analysis of the reasons for deterioration and sampling for analysis, and the creation of a database. This was accompanied by programmes of education and public information, training of specialists, and dissemination of scientific results.

The second stage is under way. Activities in 1998 covered the preparation of bilingual interpretive material and signage and monitoring of the state of conservation of the paintings (including vandalism). A comprehensive site management proposal that is being presented to the responsible authorities covers precise delimitation of the site and the erection of a secure barrier round it, the installation of two alternating guardians permanently on the site, tighter control of tourist visits, the training of local guides and the provision of facilities for them, setting up regular opening and closing hours for visits, imposition of a charge for visits, provision of adequate on-site signage, creation of an interpretation centre, and replacing the barrier with a boardwalk.

The area proposed for inscription covers 600ha: this is shown on the map accompanying the nomination dossier as a rectangle surrounding the Cueva de los Manos. The buffer zone, however, which is not shown on the map, is only 2.331ha. Both the site and the buffer zone are within the property of a private individual, who has signed an agreement consenting to the declaration of her land as a World Heritage site.

There is a guardian living on the site, which is remote from any settlement, during the four summer months; he is assisted by his son and daughter. They are responsible for supervision, security, and visitor management. Visitors register at a cabin on the site and must be accompanied by a guide. Organized tours from Perito Moreno are accompanied by a national tourist guide who is a specialist in the Cueva de los Manos. Private visits are also organized by local *estancia* owners as part of horse-riding or backpacking tours.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### *Conservation history*

Travellers have been visiting the Cueva de los Manos since the mid 19th century and recording their impressions of the paintings. They were first mentioned in the scientific literature during the present century, but it was not until the 1960s that they became the subject of serious study by Carlos J Gradin and his co-workers. Their work on recording and excavation established the importance of the Cueva de los Manos as a prehistoric rock-art site of international scientific importance.

The favourable conditions (very low humidity, no water infiltration, stable rock strata) at the rock shelter have ensured that the state of conservation of all but the most exposed paintings is excellent.

However, the increase of tourism to Patagonia in recent years has resulted in damage from human vandalism. This has included graffiti, removal of fragments of painted rock, touching of painted surfaces, accumulation of dust and refuse, etc. Visitor numbers to the Cueva de los Manos have risen from 123 in 1991/92 to 3027 in 1997/98. The presence of a guardian on the site during the summer months, when almost all visits take place, and the installation of a protective barrier in front of the paintings, which stretch along some 680m, have helped to reduce damage of this kind, but the need for better protection remains.

### *Authenticity*

The authenticity of the rock art of the Cueva de los Manos is unquestionable. It has survived several millennia untouched

and no restoration has been carried out since it became widely known to the scientific community in the second half of the 20th century. The archaeological excavations have been very restricted, so as to obtain the maximum cultural information for dating the art with the minimum disturbance to archaeological layers or to the appearance of the rock shelter.

### **Evaluation**

#### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the Area Arqueológica y Natural Río Pinturas-Santa Cruz in January/February 1999. ICOMOS also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Rock Art.

#### *Qualities*

The rock art of the Cueva de los Manos in the Area Arqueológica y Natural Río Pinturas-Santa Cruz is exceptional, both for the range of its subject matter and execution and its remarkable state of conservation after several millennia.

#### *Comparative analysis*

The nomination dossier refers to several comparable rock-art sites in Patagonia, but concludes that they do not approach the significance of the Cueva de los Manos.

In a comparative study carried out in 1998, the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Rock Art identified six criteria for evaluating rock-art sites: aesthetic qualities; ethnological qualities; archaeological and chronological qualities; environmental qualities; number of images in a prescribed area (sacred sites); and degree of protection. In applying these criteria, the study identified the Cueva de los Manos as conforming in an exceptional manner with these criteria.

#### *ICOMOS recommendations*

There was considerable ambiguity about what was originally proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List. The area shown on the map supplied seems to be a somewhat arbitrarily drawn rectangular area of 600ha. However, the nomination dossier concentrated entirely on the Cueva de los Manos and its rock art. ICOMOS recommended that only the rock-shelter site itself, with a small security and facilities area around it, should be delineated and proposed for inscription. The 600ha area shown in the nomination dossier could be retained as an appropriate buffer zone, since its role has already been acknowledged by the owner of the land. This proposal was accepted by the State Party.

ICOMOS was concerned about the management of the site, in the light of the remarkable growth of visitor numbers over the present decade and the continued increase likely to result from eventual World Heritage inscription. However, the State Party has informed ICOMOS that the proposals made for the second phase of the INAPL programme were now in force and constituted an official management plan, fully supported by the responsible institutions.

### **Recommendation**

That the title of the nominated property be changed to “The Cueva de los Manos, Río Pinturas” and that it be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *critterion iii*:

*Criterion iii* The Cueva de los Manos contains an outstanding collection of prehistoric rock art which bears witness to the culture of the earliest human societies in South America.

ICOMOS, September 1999