

## Curonian Spit (Lithuania/Russia)

No 994

### Identification

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <i>Nomination</i>   | The Curonian Spit   |
| <i>Location</i>     | Klaipeda Region, Neringa and Klaipeda (Lithuania); Kaliningrad Region, Zelenogradsk District (Russian Federation) |
| <i>States Party</i> | Lithuania and the Russian Federation  |
| <i>Date</i>         | 23 July 1999  |

### Justification by State Party

[**Note** This property is nominated as a *mixed site*, under the natural and the cultural criteria. This evaluation will deal solely with the cultural values, and the natural values will be covered in the IUCN evaluation.]

The landscape of the Curonian Spit has been formed not only by natural processes but also by human activities, and so it represents the combined work of nature and of man. It illustrates the evolution of a society based on fishing. Up to the present day the Curonian Spit has been a continuing cultural landscape, which “retains an active social role in contemporary society associated with the traditional way of life and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress” (*Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, paragraph 39.ii). At the same time it exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time, the latter integrally related to both natural forces and human activity. On the Curonian Spit it is still possible to observe the relict landscape in which an evolutionary process came to an end in the past: the ethnographic heritage of the Kursiai tribe, which lived on the Spit for a long period, but have now disappeared, still exists. The earlier landscape of fishing villages is to be found beneath the sand-dunes.

The Spit retains the following items of cultural heritage:

- Fishing settlements, where the works of man and nature are of outstanding universal value from the ethnocultural, historical, and aesthetic points of view;
- Architectural works that are unique in scale and which are of outstanding value from the historical, artistic, and scientific points of view;
- Archaeological sites, most notably buried villages.

The special significance of the Curonian Spit is expressed through the vivid combination of its natural and its cultural heritage. The latter relates not simply to material and

spiritual aspects, but also to the experience accumulated by generations of local inhabitants, which has permitted the rehabilitation of natural systems of the Spit that had been lost.

**Criteria ii, iv, and v**

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this nomination comprises *groups of buildings and sites*. It is also a *cultural landscape* as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

### History and Description

#### History

Formation of the Curonian Spit began some 5000 years ago. Despite the continual shifting of its sand dunes, Mesolithic people whose main source of food was from the sea settled there in the 4th millennium BCE, working bone and stone brought from the mainland. In the 1st millennium CE West Baltic tribes (Curonians and Prussians) established seasonal settlements there, to collect stores of fish, and perhaps also for ritual purposes.

The temperature increase in Europe during the 9th and 10th centuries resulted in a rise of sea level and the creation of the Brockist strait at the base of the Spit. This provided the basis for the establishment of the pagan trading centre of Kaup, which flourished between c 800 and 1016. This is unique in being the last unexcavated large proto-urban settlement of the Viking period.

The invasion of Prussia by the Teutonic Knights in the 13th century marked a major change in the historical development of the Spit. They were gradually driven out, but armed conflict continued in the region up to the 15th century. The Spit had great strategic importance, and in consequence the Knights built castles at Memel (1252), Nohauz (1283), and Rossitten (1372). They also settled German farmers around the castles, building roads and clearing woodland for agriculture.

The influence of the Knights ended with the peace treaty signed with Lithuania in 1422. Groups of Baltic peoples set up settlements on the Spit and the population increased. However, since their main activities were fishing and beekeeping, this had little impact on the natural environment of the Spit. The early 16th century witnessed the economic and political rise of Prussia, accompanied by intensive industrialization. Industries such as glassmaking, shipbuilding, and salt and metal production required large amounts of wood, charcoal, and potash, all of which could be obtained easily and cheaply on the Spit. Most of the woodland was felled to meet this demand. Loss of tree cover resulted in degradation of the vegetation and exposed the underlying sand to wind erosion.

In the 16th century a new process of dune formation began and settlements became buried in sand. By the early 19th century woodland only survived in a few places on the Spit, which took on the topography that has survived to the present day.

Large sums were made available by the Prussian State Land Management from the beginning of the 19th century to prevent further destabilization of the Spit. The works took the form of the construction of a protective bank of sand to prevent further ingress of dunes (a process that took most of the century) and the stabilization of dunes by means of brushwood hurdles, accompanied by reafforestation. By the end of the 19th century nearly half of the Spit had been converted to woodland thanks to these works.

The battles of January 1945 saw considerable destruction of the woodland cover from fire, bombing, and the movement of heavy vehicles. Restoration work began after World War II and has continued with success, despite some serious incursions from the sea; nowadays woodland covers more than 71% of the surface area of the Spit.

#### *Description*

The Curonian Spit is a sandy peninsula that separates the Baltic Sea and the Curonian Lagoon. It stretches in a slightly concave arc for a distance of 98km (52km in Lithuania, 46km in Russia) from the Kaliningrad peninsula to the town of Klaipeda, and it varies in width from 0.4 to 3.8km.

The largest settlements in the Lithuanian part are Smiltyne, Pervalka, Juodkrante, Preila, and Nida and in the Russian part those of Lesnoje, Morskoje, Rybachy, and the Diuny tourist hotel complex.

The dominant relief feature is a large ridge of high dunes which stretches for 72km and varies in width between 250m and 1.2km. The average height is 35m, but in places the dunes rise to more than 60m. Dune valleys divide the ridge into separate dune massifs, and capes are generally formed in front of these valleys. At the present time more than half the ridge is forested.

The most significant element of the Spit's cultural heritage is represented by the old fishing settlements. The earliest of these were buried in sand when the woodland cover was removed. Those that have survived since the beginning of the 19th century are all to be found along the coast of the Curonian Lagoon. At the end of that century more elaborate buildings – lighthouses, churches, schools, and villas – began to be erected alongside the simpler vernacular houses. This was due in part to the fact that the Spit became a recreational centre: Juodkrante became famous as a health resort as early as 1840 and Nida, Preila, and Pervalka were given official recognition in this category in 1933.

In the centre, Nida, the largest settlement on the Spit, has a linear plan based on a single main street that runs parallel to the Lagoon and which developed spontaneously in the 19th century. Small streets, mostly dead-ends, join the main street at intervals and it is connected to the Lagoon by a network of paths.

The first fishermen's houses in Preila, 9km to the north of Nida, were built in clusters, and they were linked by a single main road. A little further north is the small settlement of Pervalka. The compact single-storeyed fishermen's houses that had survived from the early 19th century were destroyed during World War II and have been replaced by uninspiring modern buildings.

The topography of dune valleys and wooded crests imposed a special character on Juodkrante, 13km north of Nida. From the 17th century to the 20th century it was composed of

seven separate settlements, each slightly different in layout and architecture. They were united as a single urban unit at the beginning of the 20th century. Until 1942 it was the most important fishing settlement and health resort on the Spit, but this distinction was lost as a result of wartime destruction.

The most northerly part of the Spit is known as Smiltyne. It was not settled until the mid 19th century, when a health resort was created. It is the point where ferries from Klaipeda on the Lithuanian mainland arrive on the Spit.

The surviving buildings on the Spit of cultural significance are the houses of fishermen built during the 19th century. In their original form they were built of wood and thatched with reeds. A homestead consisted of two or three buildings: a dwelling house, a cattle shed, and a smoke house for curing fish. These were located to one side of the long narrow plot, leaving space for a kitchen garden and for drying nets. The houses were constructed at right-angles to the street.

The development of the Spit for recreational purposes in the 20th century saw many changes. The fishermen's houses were enlarged and new houses were built, in styles that had no reference to the traditional architecture. Summer cottages were built, usually two-storeyed and with their long sides to the street. As a result, the appearance of the settlements was radically altered.

Other buildings are the sturdy lighthouse at Pervalka and the Neo-Gothic Evangelical Lutheran churches at Juodkrante and Nida, both built in the 1880s.

The cemeteries of Nida, Preila, Pervalka, and Juodkrante are of interest. Of special significance are the characteristic grave markers known as *krikštai*. These are timber planks decorated with flowers, horses' and birds' heads, human silhouettes, and other motifs. These only survive in the Nida cemetery.

### **Management and Protection**

#### *Legal status*

The entire Curonian Spit is protected in the form of two National Parks. The Lithuanian part is the National Park "Kuršių Nerija," created by Decision of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania No I-1224 of 23 April 1991. The Russian part is the National Park "Kurshskaya Kosa," created by Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR No 423 of 6 November 1987, as amended in 1995.

The protective measures in the management plan for the Lithuanian Park make special provision for protection and conservation of the cultural heritage and cultural landscape. That for the Russian Park invokes the Federal Law "On specially protected natural territories," which forbids and activity which is potentially harmful for, *inter alia*, historical and cultural sites.

#### *Management*

Both National Parks are state property.

The Lithuanian Park is managed by its own administration, which is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Forest and Protected Areas of the Ministry of Environment. There is a territorial management plan for the Curonian Spit covering the period to 2005, approved in 1994 by the Lithuanian Government. This forms the basis for a series of detailed

plans relating to forestry management, recreational development, settlement improvement, and infrastructure development. The specific management plan for the “Kuršių Nerija” National Park includes provisions for the protection, rational use, and restoration of the cultural heritage and landscape and for ensuring the continuity of architectural traditions in developing settlements.

Management of the Russian Park takes place at two levels. Overall responsibility is with the Federal Forestry Service, which works through the Forest Administration of the Kaliningrad Region. The General Development Plan of the “Kurshskaya Kosa” National Park of 1989 sets out measures for conservation, control, and use of the Park, as well as scientific research projects. The information in the nomination dossier does not indicate whether it makes specific reference to the cultural aspects of the Park.

Both Parks have clearly defined zones. The zoning categories are:

- Strict Nature Reserves;
- Limited access zones;
- Recreation zones;
- Settlements;
- Agricultural zones.

They are also surrounded by buffer zones (in the Baltic and the Curonian Lagoon) that vary in width from 500m to 2km.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### *Conservation history*

Conservation in both parts of the Curonian Spit appears to have concentrated on its natural qualities since the end of World War II. These have, however, ensured that the overall landscape values have been protected and enhanced, which are significant when the property is considered as a cultural landscape. There appears to be only belated recognition on the part of the Lithuanian authorities of the cultural value of the heritage properties on that part of the Spit.

### *Authenticity*

In landscape terms, the Curonian Spit has high value. It is an example of a special landform that is subject to changes owing to natural phenomena resulting from climate variations and from human interventions. The latter have been both catastrophic, as in the case of the drastic deforestation in the 16th century, and beneficial, as demonstrated by the creation of artificial barriers in the 19th century against further incursions by the sea. It is undoubtedly a continuing organic landscape, as defined in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

## **Evaluation**

### *Action by ICOMOS*

A joint ICOMOS/IUCN mission visited the Curonian Spit in May 2000.

### *ICOMOS comments*

In the opinion of ICOMOS the Curonian Spit qualifies for inscription on the World Heritage List under the cultural criteria. However, it is essential that the management plans for the two components of the nominated property should be harmonized and integrated before it can be inscribed. It is especially important that there should be an effective joint tourism management plan. To ensure the proper management of the entire Spit, a joint consultative commission should be set up, operating in the same way as the Franco-Spanish commission for the Mont Perdu World Heritage site.

## **Recommendation**

At the meeting of the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee in Paris in June 2000, this nomination was referred back to the two States Parties, requesting them to take active steps to create the collaborative mechanisms proposed by ICOMOS. At the time this evaluation was prepared for printing this information had not been received.

In the event of the information being made available before the extraordinary meeting of the Bureau in November 2000 and found to conform with these requirements, ICOMOS recommends that this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *critterion v*:

***Criterion v*** The Curonian Spit is an outstanding example of a landscape of sand dunes that is under constant threat from natural forces (wind and tide). After disastrous human interventions that menaced its survival the Spit was reclaimed by massive protection and stabilization works begun in the 19th century and still continuing to the present day.

ICOMOS, September 2000