
Prehistoric Sites and Decorated Caves of the Vézère Valley (France) No 85bis

1 Basic information

State Party

France

Name of property

Prehistoric Sites and Decorated Caves of the Vézère Valley

Location

Communes of Les Eyzies de Tayac, Tursac, Montignac-sur-Vézère, Saint-Léon-sur-Vézère, Marquay, Manaurie-Rouffignac, Saint-Cirq-du Bugue;
Department of the Dordogne
Nouvelle-Aquitaine region

Inscription

1979

Brief description

Located in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region in the Department of the Dordogne, the Vézère Valley is a privileged prehistoric territory that contains more than 150 deposits dating back to Paleolithic times and about thirty decorated caves. This vast territory of roughly thirty kilometres by forty kilometres is of outstanding interest from the ethnological, anthropological and aesthetic point of view with its cave paintings, in particular those of the Lascaux Cave, discovered in 1940. It also enabled the establishment of a chronological cadre for the prehistoric civilisations of the European Quaternary Period. This property comprises fifteen prehistoric sites that bear witness to a strong Paleolithic occupation: decorated caves, funerary places, workshops, exploitation areas for raw materials, habitats, hunting scenes. Furthermore, its potential as an archaeological reserve is considerable, as demonstrated by the discoveries carried out as preventive excavations since its inscription on the World Heritage List.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

10 March 2023

2 Issued raised

Background

In 2006, the Periodic Report for Cycle 1 Section II pointed out that there was no buffer zone, and that it was necessary to create one; the State Party then declared that it would envision creating a buffer zone.

From 2006 to 2011, the conservation situation of the property was a matter of concern, and it was regularly examined by the World Heritage Committee (Decisions 30 COM 7B.6; 32 COM 7B.88; 33 COM 7B.100; 34 COM 7B.85 and 34 COM 7B.92); the essential issues were conservation problems in the main decorated cave and the scientific management of this situation. In March 2009, the property was examined by an ICOMOS reactive monitoring mission. Following the closure of underground access to visitors, a project for a replica cave emerged. In accordance with paragraph 172 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, the World Heritage Committee asked to be kept informed at all stages of this tourism project (35 COM 7B.92).

From 2013 to 2015, it seems that the state of conservation of the cave paintings had stabilised and was under control (37 COM 7B.74 and 39 COM 7B.77); the State Party was nevertheless asked to provide information and an impact assessment with regard to the various projects outside the property itself, such as the replica of part of the main cave, the access roads and the new vehicle parking areas.

In 2014, the Periodic Report for Cycle 2 Section II set out the results of the retrospective inventory, particularly as regards the clarification of the property boundaries. The boundaries were shown on a new map approved by the World Heritage Committee (38 COM 8D). However, the property still had no buffer zone.

The state of conservation report on the property, prepared by the State Party (January 2015), provided a comprehensive overview of the management of the property following the stabilisation of its state of conservation. It found that the state of the main cave was "convalescent". The management measures presented comprised very restricted access to the decorated cave, scientific research on the factors affecting the state of conservation of the property, the "sanctuarisation" of the Lascaux hill, and the creation of the "Lascaux IV" replica. It was thus the property itself, and then its direct environmental context (geological, climatic, hydrological, etc.) and a new way of presenting it to the public, that were the focuses of attention for the management partners and the scientific advisors up to this stage.

Decision 42 COM 8E in 2018 ratified the retrospective Statement of Outstanding Universal Value proposed by the State Party.

The need to define a buffer zone has long remained a matter of secondary importance, in light of the urgency and imperative need to solve the problems of sustainable conservation of the property itself. A number of questions concerning the use of the nearby areas and their strict control did however arise, related on the one hand to the conservation of the property and its Outstanding Universal Value, and on the other hand to the communication of the OUV to the general public and to local inhabitants, in particular by means of the construction of the Lascaux IV replica.

The definition of a buffer zone for the property is a recent initiative by the State Party, reflecting the application of the Heritage Code (*Code du patrimoine*, 2004) and the LCAP Law (2016) relating to the built and archaeological heritage and museums, and particularly the *Site Patrimonial Remarquable* scheme (SPR). These legal provisions refer to the requirements set out in the World Heritage Convention, calling on the authorities concerned to establish and manage a buffer zone around the properties inscribed on the World Heritage List, and pointing out the necessity of developing a management system and plan.

The State Party submitted a minor boundary modification request in 2021, which was examined by the World Heritage Committee during its session of the same year.

At that time, ICOMOS considered that the proposed buffer zone was adequately justified and the protection proposals appropriate. However, approval of the protection mechanisms by the local authorities was not provided, nor was the adoption of the management plan incorporating these mechanisms.

The World Heritage Committee adopted the following Decision 44 COM 8B.62:

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Documents WHC/21/44.COM/8B.Add and WHC/21/44.COM/8B1.Add,
2. Refers the proposed buffer zone for **Prehistoric Sites and Decorated Caves of the Vézère Valley, France**, back to the State Party in order to allow it to:
 1. Provide a timeframe for the municipal and/or inter-municipal approvals of the regulatory measures associated with the proposed buffer zone, and their incorporation in local town planning documents, in order to render them operational,
 2. Provide a timeframe for the finalisation, adoption and implementation of the management plan for the property, especially with regards to tourism management and facilities.

Modification

The serial property comprises fifteen component parts that are separate but geographically close to each other, with a total area of 105.733 ha, for which the State Party proposes a single buffer zone of 17,022 ha. It comprises the whole of the Vézère Valley from Montignac to Limeuil, taking into account the Beunes Valleys.

The State Party has provided several maps indicating the proposed boundaries of the buffer zone and the archaeological zones.

The State Party points out that the buffer zone perimeter must be defined in such a way as to enable control over human activities and the monitoring of physical factors that could affect the atmosphere underground in the decorated caves. More generally, the proposed buffer zone will ensure the sustainable conservation of the underground

archaeological and heritage assets. Of particular importance are controlling tourism flows and modifications to the built structures, and preventing pollution and fire risks. It will also enable a better knowledge of the environmental, climatic and hydrological parameters, which play a major role in the long-term conservation of the decorated caves. The buffer zone will thus contribute to a more global management approach to the component parts, which until now has been considered individually for each site individually.

The State Party has also specified the forms of protection. It points out that the obligation of proposing a buffer zone for a property inscribed on the World Heritage List has been incorporated into the Heritage Code.

The mechanisms of legal protection that apply in the buffer zone are as follows:

- The fifteen sites forming the property are listed as Historic Monuments, and have their own protected surroundings; any intervention is subject to an authorisation by the Prefect of the region.
- The SPR (*Site patrimonial remarquable*) of Eyzies-de-Tayac-Sireuil has an area of some 3,904 ha; it is therefore covered by a number of heritage protection measures. Any building work in this sector is conducted under the control of the state.
- In the ZPPA areas (*Zones de présomption de prescription archéologiques*), all town planning applications registered are subject to the decision of the Prefect of the region.
- In the sector of the Listed site "*Vallée de la Vézère et sa confluence avec les Beunes - Grotte de Rouffignac - La Ferrassie*", all building work is conducted under the control of the State; the listed site itself is surrounded by a registered site in which building work is also under the control of the administration of the State Party.

The proposed buffer zone is furthermore covered by several regulatory or administrative protection plans, as set out in local planning documents ("*Plan local d'urbanisme*" and "*Plan local d'urbanisme intercommunal*") which reinforce the protective mechanisms.

As regards the involvement of the local authorities in the protection of the property, the Heritage Code states that the buffer zone is defined "in conjunction with the territorial authorities concerned and then adopted by the administrative authority" (article L.612-1, paragraph 2). It is then adopted by the Prefect of the region (L.612-1, R.612-1 and R.612-2). These provisions have been complied with.

The whole of the buffer zone is covered by at least one of the protection mechanisms mentioned. Furthermore the buffer zone itself bears the French label of *Grands Sites de France*, which covers a series of measures for the protection and enhancement of the property as a whole, with regard to the management plan currently in preparation.

However, the management of environmental issues does not seem to have been sufficiently taken into account in the protection of the Outstanding Universal Value of the property. In view of its underground nature, the property is particularly sensitive to the hydrogeological situation of its environment. The pressures exerted by human activities and land use modes (housing, agriculture, industrial and craft activities, tourism), in the buffer zone, are all factors which can affect the hydrogeological situation of the property, by pollution linked to agriculture (nitrates, pesticides), to industry and craft activities (organic pollutants, heavy metals, nanoparticles) and to the disposal of domestic wastewater after a degree of treatment that varies depending on the location.

The legal protection mechanisms presented, although enabling effective control and management of the aspect of building work and alterations inside the boundaries of the property and its buffer zone, have however only a slight effect on changes in the hydrogeological characteristics of the property and its buffer zone.

ICOMOS considers that the buffer zone boundaries are justified and that appropriate protection mechanisms have been proposed for the whole buffer zone.

ICOMOS considers that the State Party, in response to the World Heritage Committee decision 44 COM 8B.22, has indicated that it has drawn up the proposed buffer zone in conjunction with the territorial authorities, in accordance with the Heritage Code recommendations. It also mentions the regulatory role of these authorities through local urban planning documents.

ICOMOS notes however that the management plan has still not been promulgated by the various parties involved in the management of the property, to ensure that protection is proactive and not solely regulatory, especially for tourism facilities and development.

ICOMOS also notes that the protection of groundwater in the Vézère Valley requires a refined strategy for the sustainable management of the resource and its treatment after use, accompanied by a research strategy. The latter should enable a highly detailed characterisation of the processes involved, and the monitoring and modelling of the behaviour of the hydrosystems of the Vézère Valley, in light of hypotheses for tourism frequentation, agricultural land management, and the climate change now taking place.

3 Recommendations

Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the proposed buffer zone for the Prehistoric Sites and Decorated Caves of the Vézère Valley, France, be **approved**.

Additional recommendations

ICOMOS further recommends that the State Party give consideration to the following:

- a) Providing a timeframe for the finalisation, adoption and implementation of the management plan, especially for tourism facilities and development,
- b) Proposing a project for the study, monitoring and regulation of human activities with regard to their long-term impact on:
 - i) The water resource and its foreseeable evolution across the whole of the property and its buffer zone,
 - ii) The hydrogeological environment of the property and its buffer zone, changes in which could affect the Outstanding Universal Value of the property in a mid-term to long-term perspective,
 - iii) The integration of appropriate regulations into the town planning documents as approved by the local authorities;