



Concept paper

International Conference

“World Heritage Sites and Museums”

co-organized by UNESCO and Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage (ARCWH)

in cooperation with ALECSO, ICCROM, ICOMOS, IUCN and ICOM

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Background

World Heritage sites and museums: the issue and possible debate themes

For over 40 years, UNESCO has been working with countries around the world to identify properties of outstanding universal values and ensure their safekeeping for future generations. There has been 1052 cultural, natural and mixed (both cultural and natural) sites inscribed on the World Heritage List. Their splendour enriches our lives and illustrates the diversity of our planet and its inhabitants. World Heritage Sites are ours to share, to protect, and to respect, and their disappearance would be a loss to humanity as a whole.

The World Heritage Convention¹ is an international agreement adopted in 1972 and founded on the premise that certain places have an Outstanding Universal Value and as such should form part of the common heritage of humanity. The States Parties to the Convention² have become part of an international community of states united in a common mission to identify and safeguard the world's common heritage. While fully respecting national sovereignty and without prejudice to the property rights provided for by national legislation, the States Parties to the Convention recognises that the protection of World Heritage is the duty of the international community as a whole. The particular value of the Convention is that it links nature conservation and the preservation of cultural sites together in a single document. The inscription of these sites onto the World Heritage List is only the first step towards safeguarding them for future generations. Management and preservation efforts are an ongoing process, which involves local communities as well as site managers and national authorities.

It has been said that there are 8 000 museums and similar institutions located in either cities or sites recognised as World Heritage sites. By ‘site museums’, we designate museums possessing collections uncovered from or serving as interpretation facilities of World Heritage Sites , as well as museums and collections designated as World Heritage. Given the ever-growing international and domestic

¹The *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*

²192 State Parties as of June 2016

tourism, the site museums' contemporary missions are multifaceted in preserving integrity of values of the sites through conservation efforts, public awareness raising and education, to be shared by practitioners, visitors and local communities alike.

In November 2015, UNESCO adopted a new global instrument, the *Recommendation on the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society*. This adoption reaffirmed that museums are no longer temples of erudite scholarship or warehouses of artefacts, but they play a vital role in education, social cohesion and sustainable development by stimulating intellectual exchange and creativity. The international community has acknowledged that museums continue to fulfil a wide variety of useful functions for society at large, as well as being a source of identity. These guidelines are particularly relevant to create a strong linkage between World Heritage Sites and museum institutions, in multiplying social, educational and economic benefits to local communities.

Session 1. Site museums as mediators – conveying sites' Outstanding Universal Values, shared history and common duties

In our increasingly globalised world, against the backdrop of growing heritage tourism, site museums have great potential to serve as communicators of the values associated with World Heritage Sites and as conveyors of the Convention's message. However, many 'site museums' or related museum institutions in the world remain as deposits for archaeological artefacts. Their classical style of research-oriented displays of archaeological artefacts is not always the most adept method to convey the more holistic view of the site, notably its Outstanding Universal Value for which these sites are distinguished. The concept of Outstanding Universal Value is defined as "cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole." In fact, many World Heritage Sites focus their declarations of Outstanding Universal Value on the role the sites have played in various regional and global contexts, which are seldom understood by visitors. The perception of this broader dimension of World Heritage Sites can better lead to a deeper understanding of the historical links between different cultures and populations and to an enhanced intercultural dialogue, both of which are necessary for sustainable development.

The site museums would be required to further develop their interpretation of the histories and life of World Heritage Sites which often continue to be living worship places and home to many local populations. This will stimulate an authentic feeling of shared duties of safeguarding World Heritage sites, by the diverse public.

Session 2: Site museums as custodians of World Heritage sites' Integrity

Conservation of movable property related to World Heritage Sites is an issue which is not systematically integrated into the overall picture of the management of inscribed sites. Heritage collections related to World Heritage sites comprise of a wide variety of objects, materials and techniques, whose diversity calls for greater conservation efforts, as well as new interpretations of collections and their roles. This leads to an urgent need to better understand the character and

behaviour of objects in heritage collections as many objects are very sensitive to environmental conditions. Collections are deteriorating due to problems ranging from excessive humidity, insect attacks and damage from light to challenges arisen due to new types of their use motivated by the development of tourism. Museum staff is therefore faced with an increasingly complex list of tasks and challenges.

While the number and variety of site museums and collections have increased across the world, resources and training opportunities are less accessible notably in developing countries. The smaller urban and rural centres and the numerous community-based heritage collections are most affected by the insufficient number of properly trained staff and lack of managerial and financial autonomy. The lack of resources and training opportunities is seriously hampering the survival and development of these institutions and their collections, dramatically decreasing the ability of these collections to serve the international and national visitors and local communities.

Collections related to World Heritage Sites may share common conservation challenges at national, sub-regional and regional or even transregional level, yet useful local knowledge and experience in conservation are not systematically compiled nor exchanged within the professional community. Also, there is very weak ownership of this knowledge at local scale, the strongest initiatives in this area being undertaken by researchers and institutions outside of the sub-region. In every country, strongly committed people have dedicated their lives to site museum development. Yet they are often isolated, and their experience and expertise is not circulated widely, and unfortunately only a limited amount of people will benefit. The mechanisms for inter-institutional collaboration within the countries and on a broader scope are either non-existent or very rigid and slow.

Session 3: Increasing relevance to local communities - education and participation

2012 marked the 40th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention, and it was celebrated with a particular focus on World Heritage and Sustainable Development and the Role of Local Communities. As this remarkable international instrument enters its fifth decade, communities – both local groups and virtual social networks – are playing an increasingly important role within society and in our ever more globalized world by setting the development agenda and leading numerous grass-root initiatives. The debate on the place for communities in heritage conservation has now taken centre stage. How can we ensure that World Heritage is given “a function in the life of the community” (Article 5 of the Convention) and what could this mean in practice in light of the rapidly changing social, economic and environmental contexts?

Along with the many benefits deriving from inscription on the World Heritage List, there are also specific challenges for those living near, working at, or visiting World Heritage Sites. One example is an increase of visitors to a site, one of the benefits of World Heritage status, but this also leads to the need for this growth to be carefully managed to ensure the interests of all parts of society are met and the site retains its integrity. The Convention’s 40th anniversary focus on World Heritage and Sustainable Development illustrates how the participation of local communities can – and should – lead to a win-win scenario for everyone committed to protecting the world’s common heritage.

Many of today’s societies are rapidly changing and this change increases the risk of societies and populations to become alienated from their heritage. This risk should be addressed by innovative approaches to promote interaction between heritage and their audiences. According to UNESCO, one of the site museums’ core missions is to give a sense of history and identity that is specific to their

local communities. Hence site museums should invite their communities to contribute in activities linking World Heritage Sites and museums in order to retain the vitality of the World Heritage Sites and its surrounding communities. Local communities' participation would also lead to an inclusive process of preservation as they are custodians of immaterial and living cultural heritage associated with World Heritage sites. The holistic approach is also an important and valuable challenge of a site museum, so as to maintain communities' creativity and their link to their built heritage.

Session 4: World Heritage sites and museums under threat

Recent conflicts have increased the risk for World Heritage Sites and museums to become targets of violent extremists. Heritage is targeted because of its symbolic value that it holds for local and international communities. It is our common responsibility to protect and support their intrinsic role in promoting exchange and dialogue among cultures as the driving force throughout history. We need to respond to the intentional destruction of culture and cultural institutions, described by the UNESCO Director-General as "cultural cleansing." In emergency situations, preparedness and operational capacities of local and national agents and institutions are of the utmost importance to cope with emergencies especially when external intervention cannot be operated. The international heritage community should show its solidarity with World Heritage Sites, related museums and institutions under threat to increase their capacities so that they can fulfil their role in rebuilding unity in affected communities.