

Heritage Conservation–Concept and Dimensions

Abstract

As individuals, as communities and as nations, the very conception of ourselves viz. who are we, where have we come from, from where we have grown up is largely rooted in the past. Likewise, the history of our village, towns and countries, memories (both individual and social), help us preserve the past and connect us to places and to other people. We preserve these memories in a variety of forms, from personal journals and photographs to items with broader cultural significance, such as traditional dances, textiles, or buildings and monuments. The objects and traditions that preserve these memories, to be passed from generation to generation, are collectively referred as individual or cultural heritage.

Keywords: Heritage, Conservation, The World Heritage Committee (WHC), UNESCO, International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), World Conservation Union (IUCN), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the World Monument Fund, and the World Heritage Committee (WHC).

Introduction

Heritage Conservation –Concept and Dimensions

As individuals, as communities and as nations, the very conception of ourselves viz. who are we, where have we come from, from where we have grown up is largely rooted in the past. Likewise, the history of our village, towns and countries, memories (both individual and social), help us preserve the past and connect us to places and to other people. We preserve these memories in a variety of forms, from personal journals and photographs to items with broader cultural significance, such as traditional dances, textiles, or buildings and monuments. The objects and traditions that preserve these memories, to be passed from generation to generation, are collectively referred as individual or cultural heritage.

But what exactly does individual or cultural heritage include? The very concept of cultural significance of heritage implies a process of judging and selecting. Imagine that you have a large collection of photographs in your possession, which documents every single activity of your life. But are all of the photographs that you have in your possession worth keeping just because they are part of your past? If you decided to keep only some of the images, how would you decide which ones to keep? You might choose some photographs for their emotional or religious appeal, their aesthetic value, their uniqueness, or for what they might teach to your descendants. Every individual would therefore have his or her own approach to the question that how many of the photographs should be preserved, and the reason why they should be preserved.

On a larger scale, likewise, nations and cultures have to make similar decisions about how to preserve the traditions, monuments, landscapes that make up their heritage, or whether these things should be preserved at all. The problem of selection is further complicated by the fact that the concepts of heritage and culture are fluid, open to continual revision. Culture, in particular, is an unbounded term—a single culture may contain many minority views, subgroups, and even countercultures that share varying degrees of common ideas, customs, and values. Preserving-or-destroying-the past in any form is often a contentious issue, deeply embedded in local politics and shifting conceptions of cultural identity.

One of the fundamental issues that arises in the conservation process is the conflict between economic development and historic preservation. Conserving an ancient religious site in a crowded urban



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area, for example, might prevent the construction of an office building that could provide jobs for many people. Similarly, the building of a dam, or a factory could dramatically boost a local economy, but at the expense of an increasingly rare patch of wetlands. People often disagree about which goal is more important. Those who advocate progress might argue that historic buildings should be replaced with more modern, efficient constructions, or that tracts of green land should be developed for human settlements and commercial activities. On the other hand, people in favour of preservation might say that historic buildings and natural sites are more important as they are irreplaceable and that the value they add to our overall cultural richness is greater than that of potential economic development.

Importance and the Role of International Organizations

Ultimately, the question of who is responsible for making such decisions of conservation and preservation of heritage arises. Many countries do make efforts to protect valued urban and rural sites as historic districts, wildlife preserves, or public parks, often administered at the local, state, and national levels. But not all countries have sufficient infrastructure and the resources to carry out such programs effectively. Moreover, certain natural and man-made forces such as pollution, urban development, and political unrest continually threaten places perceived as valuable.

As a result, a number of international organizations have been founded to help identify and preserve places of historical and cultural significance, based on the belief that sites representing a common human heritage are the responsibility of the world community rather than of an individual country. The main international bodies pursuing this mission are the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the World Monument Fund, and the World Heritage Committee (WHC)¹. ICOMOS was founded in 1965 as an international organization of conservation specialists. It sets standards for the conservation and restoration of cultural monuments, provides a professional forum for discussions of conservation techniques and management of monuments, and serves as a consulting authority to governments and the WHC. IUCN was founded in 1948 and focuses on the conservation of natural resources. The organization consists of governments, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). ICCROM is an intergovernmental organization that was founded in 1956. It provides restoration training and expertise for cultural property, including movable objects such as paintings. The World Monument Fund, also founded in 1965, is a nonprofit international organization that seeks to safeguard architecturally important monuments and works of art. It identifies sites that are in danger of destruction and attempts to bring together local communities and governments with private support in preservation efforts.²

The World Heritage Committee (WHC) was founded by UNESCO in 1972³ to conserve and protect examples of world heritage, specifically monuments, groups of buildings, and natural sites of universal value.⁴ As of 2001 the organization had designated more than 600 locations around the globe as World Heritage Sites. To date, more than 150 nations have signed the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, agreeing to assist in the preservation of sites located within their borders. The convention functions as an international legal instrument governing the preservation and maintenance of cultural and natural heritage sites. With such widespread participation and global coverage, the WHC is the most influential organization for defining, conserving, and protecting places deemed significant to the heritage of humankind. The WHC classifies sites into one of two major categories: cultural sites and natural sites.⁵ According to the WHC *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, cultural sites are selected according to the following criteria:

Cultural heritage properties should⁶ : (i) represent a masterpiece of human creative genius, or (ii) exhibit an important interchange of human values over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or landscape design, or (iii) bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or has disappeared, or (iv) be an outstanding example of a type of building or architectural or technological ensemble, or landscape which illustrates a significant stage or significant stages in human history, or (v) be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement or land use which is representative of a culture or cultures, especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change, or (vi) be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas or with beliefs, or with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance (a criterion used only in exceptional circumstances, and together with other criteria).

In the years since its founding, the WHC has added two subcategories of cultural sites: cultural industrial sites, which are historically significant because of industrial development, and cultural landscapes, areas where people have formed a particularly strong relationship with the land. Cultural landscapes are areas where the inhabitants have a special relationship with the landscape.

According to the WHC operational guidelines, natural sites must meet the criteria listed below:

Natural properties should⁷ : (i) be outstanding examples representing major stages of the earth's history, including the record of life, significant ongoing geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features, or (ii) be outstanding examples representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and

animals, or (iii) contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance, or (iv) contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

Because it is not always easy to separate the cultural significance of a place from its natural significance, the WHC has named 20 mixed sites that meet some of the criteria for both cultural and natural sites. An example is the Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu in Peru. This site was selected in 1983 because it fulfilled the first and third criteria for cultural sites, and the second and third criteria for natural sites. Located high in the Andes, the historic home of the Incan Empire mixes the natural beauty of its magnificent setting with the valuable archaeological remains of an Incan city.

Similarly, countries also nominate sites within their own borders to be added to the World Heritage List. ICOMOS, ICCROM, and IUCN serve as advisers in evaluating a site for appropriateness as a World Heritage Site. In general, countries are eager to have their sites added to the World Heritage List, since the designation of sites often translates into enhanced financial and technical resources as well as increased tourism. Although the convention is a legally binding document, in practice it is the distinction, the economic benefits, and the conservation expertise that accompany designation as a heritage site that cause countries to actively seek recognition by the WHC.

World Heritage Sites, are the places of significant historic and cultural value throughout the world, selected for preservation by the World Heritage Committee. This intergovernmental organization, which is responsible for cataloging and protecting World Heritage sites, operates under the direction of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).⁸ It was established to implement the terms of the World Heritage Convention, an agreement adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1972. The convention states that a World Heritage Committee "will establish, keep up to date, and publish" a World Heritage List of cultural and natural properties, submitted by member states and considered to be of universal value. To date, 180 nations have signed the convention.

The World Heritage Committee attempts to promote cooperation among nations to protect the worldwide heritage that is recognized as being of such universal value that its conservation is a concern for all people. The convention is legally binding on signatory countries that must help identify, protect, conserve, and transmit to future generations World Heritage properties. When a site is nominated, experts conduct a careful investigation into its merits. The World Heritage Fund offers technical and financial assistance, and helps provide emergency assistance in the case of properties severely damaged by specific disasters or threatened with imminent destruction.⁹

The World Heritage sites include monuments, sculpture and paintings, cave dwellings,

architecturally significant buildings, and places of natural importance. Cultural sites outnumber natural sites by a ratio of about four to one. As of July 2015, 1031 sites are listed: 802 cultural, 197 natural, and 32 mixed properties, in 163 States parties.¹⁰

According to the sites ranked by country, Italy is home to the greatest number of World Heritage Sites with 51 sites, followed by China (48), Spain (44), France (41), Germany (40), Mexico (33), and India (3). While there are 32 World Heritage Sites in India that are recognized by UNESCO as of 2014 and out of them 25 are cultural sites, and the other 7 are natural sites. They include Kaziranga wild life sanctuary, Assam, Manas wildlife sanctuary, Assam, Mahabodhi temple complex at Bodh gaya, Bihar, Humayun's tomb, Delhi. Kutub Minar and its monuments, Delhi, Red Fort complex, Delhi, Churches and Convents of Goa, Champaner-Pavagarh archaeological park, Gujarat, group of monuments at Hampi, Karnataka, group of monuments at Pattadakal. Karnataka, Buddhist monuments at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, rock shelters of Bhim Betka, Madhya Pradesh, Khajuraho group of monuments, Madhya Pradesh, Ajanta, Eleora, Elephanta caves at Maharashtra, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus formerly Victoria Terminus, Maharashtra, Sun temple, Konark, Keoladeo National Park Bharatpur, Jantar Mantar, Jaipur, great living Chhola temples, Tamilnadu, group of monuments at Mahabalipuram, Agra Fort, Uttar Pradesh, Fatehpur Sikri, Uttar Pradesh, Tajmahal, Uttar Pradesh, Mountain Railways of India, Nanda devi and Valley of flowers National park Uttarakhand, Sundarbans national park, West Bengal, Western ghats, Hill forts of Rajasthan (Chittorgarh, Kumbhalgarh, Ranthambhore, Amber sub cluster, Jaisalmer, Gagron, Rajasthan), Rani ki Vaav, Patan Gujarat and Great Himalayan national park, Himachal Pradesh.¹¹

Difficulties and Challenges in Heritage Conservation

Although the increased revenue from tourism to World Heritage Sites can provide more resources for preservation, the corresponding increase in traffic can have severely damaging effects. Industrial development poses a threat to urban monuments and natural parks alike. Heritage sites may also be threatened by war, overpopulation, or pollution. If a country does not adequately protect and maintain an inscribed site, the WHC can place it on a special listing called the List of World Heritage in Danger and can ultimately remove the site from the World Heritage List altogether.

Cities and nations often face difficult decisions about how to ensure the best economic opportunities for their citizens while preserving important sites of cultural identity and heritage. The WHC provides much of the funding as well as the prestige of its parent body, the United Nations (UN), to the preservation of sites around the world deemed important to our human heritage. Although the WHC and its affiliated organizations cannot prevent natural disasters, war, or the machinations of politics, they do direct much-needed aid and technical expertise to the sites included on the World Heritage List. More importantly, the WHC acts as a catalyst, directing

attention to the places of our shared heritage and promoting international consensus on the necessity of preserving these places that embody our individual and collective memory.


Conclusion

Thus we see that the heritage sites are important for a nation as well as for the entire mankind as it reflects the socio-political, cultural and historical phases and development of that nation. They are not only a treasure or heritage for a specific country but also belong to the whole world. Unfortunately, because of the prevailing socio-political and religious tensions, that are being witnessed in some parts of the world, attempts are being made by certain groups to destroy these heritage sites (as we have seen at Bamiyan (Afghanistan), where ancient Buddha statue was destroyed by the Taliban extremists or at Syria by the ISIS extremists). Moreover, some people in order to commemorate their visit to a historical place or to impress their love, make certain signs or put some remarks (often expressive of their relationships) by writing on the walls of the monuments. But this is a matter of pleasure that many organizations, both national and international are working hard to preserve such heritage for posterity. Being the enlightened citizens of our country, we must try to protect and maintain our heritage, which is spread in various forms like forts, palaces, 'havelis', 'bavadis' (water tanks), national parks, historical monuments, etc.

References

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2. *ibid.*
3. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/convention> .and also, Convention Concerning the Protection of World's Cultural and Natural Heritage.
4. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>.,and also, *UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "UNESCO World Heritage Centre- World Heritage List". [unesco.org](http://whc.unesco.org).*
5. "UNESCO World Heritage, The Criteria for Selection". And also, Encarta Interactive World Atlas, Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2007. © 1993-2006 Microsoft Corporation.
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*
8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Heritage_Site
9. *ibid.*
10. World Heritage List, UNESCO World Heritage Sites official sites.and also, Sites in Germany and Italy bring to 19 the number of sites inscribed on the World Heritage List this year, UNESCO World Heritage Sites official sites.
11. *ibid.*

For a better understanding of this subject, readers are also requested to consult following sources

1. Media related to World Heritage Sites at Wikimedia Commons
2.  UNESCO World Heritage List travel guide from Wikivoyage
3. UNESCO World Heritage portal – Official website (English) and (French)
4. The World Heritage List – Official searchable list of all Inscribed Properties
5. KML file of the World Heritage List – Official KML version of the list for Google Earth and NASA Worldwind
6. Official overview of the World Heritage Forest Program
7. Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage – Official 1972 Convention Text in 7 languages
8. The 1972 Convention at Law-Ref.org – Fully indexed and crosslinked with other documents
9. Protected Planet- View all natural world heritage sites in the World Database on Protected Areas
10. World Heritage Site – Smithsonian Ocean Portal
11. *Time* magazine. The Oscars of the Environment – UNESCO World Heritage Site
12. UNESCO chair in ICT to develop and promote sustainable tourism in World Heritage Sites