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# The Challenges of Creating an Integrated Approach—Nature, Culture, People—for the Conservation of the Fortifications of the Caribbean Coast of Panama

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## Background

Fort San Lorenzo, a Spanish colonial fort built in 1597 near the mouth of the Chagres River (Figure 1), sits on the Caribbean shore of the San Lorenzo Protected Area in Panama. The Chagres River was a key element of the richest trade route of Spain. Portobelo, the site where exchange fairs between Spain and its colonies were celebrated for some 200 years, grew up at the end of the overland route nearby, and was the principal Spanish Caribbean port in Central America until the 18th century. The historic town of Portobelo declined with the completion of the Panama Canal in 1913. The population as of 1997 was 3,300. To the west and south of the surrounding protected area are located several rural communities, where approximately 4,000 people live along the banks of Gatun Lake and on the road to the Costa Abajo of Colon. These communities are dedicated mainly to coffee farming, cattle raising and subsistence agriculture.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Aerial view of Fort San Lorenzo.

## The work

Portobelo and the San Lorenzo fortifications are a clear example of multi-dimensional sites with built heritage and natural resources of international importance. The fortifications were registered on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1980 under the name of “Fortifications of the Panamanian Caribbean.” According to the nomination, they represent an outstanding universal value since they are a magnificent example of military architecture of the 17th and 18th centuries and are part of the defense system developed by the Spanish Crown to protect the transit between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

After years of unsteady management, the Fortifications of the Panamanian Caribbean were included in the World Monuments Fund’s (WMF’s) Watch List of 1998 as a result of the partial loss of the original fabric of Fort San Gerónimo in Portobelo. The extreme fragility of the military structures and the remarkable natural resources of both national parks were the appropriate scenario to research the connection of cultural and natural resources. People, a third mandatory element for the research, were added to the equation and included in the WMF–Panama’s Pilot Project “Nature, Culture, and People—Portobelo–San Lorenzo: An Approach to Integrated Conservation for Sites Containing Endangered Cultural and Natural Resources.”

The study was conducted by a multidisciplinary team which focused on diagnosing the present status of existing assets, learning how local people and visitors interact with these

resources, and recommending follow-up actions to promote both mid- and long-term effective conservation of both cultural and natural resources.

The framework objective of the project was to help identify standardized work criteria and action plans that will promote integrated conservation of the natural and cultural heritage included in Portobelo and San Lorenzo. Specific objectives were: identification of cultural, physical, and biological resources in Portobelo and San Lorenzo National Parks, emphasizing their economic, ecological, and use values by neighboring communities; identification of physical, biological, and cultural elements that have a repeated influence on the conservation of the monuments; discussion and analysis of the influence of natural elements on the historic and cultural structures; discussion and analysis of the conservation problems of natural and cultural resources in these two sites; a proposal and recommendations for conservation measures and follow-up activities based on the study; and pilot conservation actions to solve the most urgent deterioration problems in the fortifications.

In the diagnostic phase of the project, baseline information on the current conditions of the resources and living communities was gathered to analyze the relationships between the natural environment and historical-cultural resources and with the living cultures of Portobelo and San Lorenzo. The management situation of the cultural heritage and national park agencies was also analyzed and evaluated. The initial development of a general public participation process to include local organizations and specialized groups was also promoted to raise awareness about the need to know and value heritage resources and nature and culture interrelation.

In Portobelo, the case study concentrated in the sector of Fort San Gerónimo and its immediate environment, which includes Guinea Creek, and the shantytown of La Estacada. In San Lorenzo, the analyses focused in the sector of the fortress itself and the rocky peninsula where this structure stands. The remainder of the two protected areas surrounding these monuments was considered as part of a second level of the milieu related to these monuments. Later conservation field work also focused on these two fortresses.

Risk assessment, a special component of the study, proved to be a useful tool to compare the relationship of historic structures with their surrounding natural environment. A broader picture was obtained when the interaction of neighboring populations was added to an evaluation matrix designed to examine all factors affecting building conservation. General conclusions of the risk assessment led us to conclude that the main threats to the resources at Portobelo are centered on human activity and the deficiencies of conservation. In the San Lorenzo sector the risks are centered on environmental factors and also on management deficiencies. It may be said that threats in specific places within Fort San Lorenzo and Fort San Gerónimo are due to two antithetical phenomena: human inaction and human action (in the surrounding environment). Their effects are equally noxious to the conservation of both resources.

Assessment of threats also led to the adaptation of tools and methodologies from the scientific realm to the cultural sphere to evaluate historic structures, analyze managerial conditions, and prioritize the actions required for their conservation and general improvement. Several other working methodologies were unified and tested as part of the study and proved to be useful in building a common language for integrated management.

The interdisciplinary exchange allowed us to make additional findings, besides the standardization of methodologies, which emphasize the unavoidability of an integrated management of compound heritage sites. Among the most relevant are:

- Destruction of nature has, in the context of our project, a negative influence on the conservation of historic structures. For example, destruction of the rainforest has provoked soil erosion that runs along the rivers and reaches the bay where fortresses are located, affecting water currents and reducing seabed depth, both of which threaten the forts.
- It is imperative to acknowledge the value added to national parks where historic sites and artifacts are located, and the responsibilities derived from their protection. On the same line of thought, natural landscapes and scenery increase the interest and potential of cultural sites and should be safeguarded as integral parts of the site.
- National parks and other protected areas have sheltered and guaranteed a long-lasting life to many historic relics<sup>2</sup> for which, while under regional or local protection, conservation has been consistently deprived.

## Challenges

The work as previously described was a road paved with difficult but amazing challenges to find the way to switch from isolated to integrated management of heritage resources. Even though it is not possible to assert that both are the same, it is incorrect to assume that it is impossible to find a common ground on which to build integrated management. Some of the most relevant challenges were as follows.

**Identification of common criteria for integrated conservation.** The primary connection between natural and cultural heritage is a territorial matter since both Portobelo and San Lorenzo fortresses are located within natural reserves. Besides this obvious fact, the first challenge of the work was to understand further the complex relationships between natural and cultural resources. No attempt to protect them as related entities had been done before.

During the process of learning and understanding the sites, a strong and well-defined sense of place was recognized (defined by the cultural and natural dimensions of both sites), as well as the sense of time (derived from the historic features that represent the continuum of time) inherent to both sites. They together constitute the key factors that determine a cultural landscape. This conservation criterion allowed us to link these separated entities under one working philosophy which led us to place special emphasis on conservation of natural and historic-cultural assets, management, study, and research, educational opportunities and a controlled development.

Another essential matter to connect both natural and cultural heritage is the population and how they use and value their resources. Communities don't make a clearcut separation of heritage into very distinctive elements. Most of the time, people perceive it as a single unit while they interact with the environment.

**Multi- and interdisciplinary work.** An integrated approach was possible only because a multidisciplinary research group was formed that could work together to produce and exchange ideas. General coordination was under the charge of a cultural heritage specialist. From the beginning, it was a requirement to find a culturally sensitive natural scientist. Once

that was accomplished, the rest of the working team was identified and incorporated into the project. The group was ultimately composed of 17 members, including geologists, biologists, zoologists, sociologists, archaeologists, architects, structural engineers, and communication specialists.

Although the first goal of constructing of a multidisciplinary research group was accomplished, making it work efficiently was the second task required to reach the larger goal of a balanced interdisciplinary study. Even when the decision was made to divide the group, general meetings were still necessary to discuss findings, understand and recognize common trends between the disciplines, and adapt working systems from both fields.

**Lack of interagency exchange.** In Panama, the management of cultural and natural heritage sites has been traditionally under the responsibility of two different governmental agencies. As a result, the amount of institutional exchange needed for study, management, and protection has been insufficient up until this time.

Another element is the precarious exchange with agencies of urban development and local governments, which are often excluded from the conservation planning programs. A widespread number of isolated and even opposed actions is the daily reality of the sites. The tendency has slightly improved just recently when the urgency to create a common ground for the development of the tourist industry in the country brought together several central government agencies to work on a regional plan.

Exchange and integrated approaches are also discouraged by disparities in the budgets, human resources, and infrastructure of each agency. While tourism and environmental institutions are provided with decent budgets, the cultural affairs agency has always been the Cinderella among governmental organizations.

The actions taken to create a common ground for discussion among the related agencies were promoted by emphasizing the urgent need to identify common trends, and also by reviewing the differences of each field. There was a need to produce fluent exchanges and openness in order to understand the sites as layers of factors that must be planned and worked out with a mutual vocabulary.

**Conserving for local people and conservation as a participatory process.** These two concepts came out of the working philosophy of the agencies traditionally responsible for cultural and heritage, and had been outside the established practices of conservation programs. Under the viewpoint of protection of natural reserves and cultural sites, the involvement of local communities has been scarce and hardly included on the agendas of conservation agencies. Programs directed to integrate communities in the sustainable development of the park and historic districts are insufficient, as has been the communities' participation in management, yet their pressure on the resources is steadily increasing. Communities perceive conservation as a set of controlling ordinances that are opposed to local necessities, and which are not even close to the improvement of their quality of life.

Another factor to be considered is that the population is a summation of several ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, heritage values are not just one, but several. At least two well-defined ethnic groups inhabit the study area and each one has a slightly different set of heritage values. On the one hand, African descendants' beliefs and awareness of the environment can be described as a low-key impact to nature and an emphasis on non-material her-

itage. On the other hand, campesinos have a persistent history of engaging in deforestation for the purpose of cattle raising, leading to destruction of the surrounding landscape, while at the same time showing a higher consciousness of the monuments' protection. Therefore, well-defined programs directed at broadening the understanding of conservation and creating alternative sources of income are priorities to change the attitudes of local populations towards heritage protection.

Participation of local governments and communities in decision-making is not an ordinary practice anywhere in Panama. The sturdy centralized government structure does not offer an opportunity to include regional and local viewpoints on administration and management decisions. Most of the time governments are disconnected from local reality. The project opened a small space for discussion and recognition of people's interaction with their heritage through several workshops oriented to exchanging ideas and viewpoints, and to raising awareness of mixed heritage as a relevant part of the region's development opportunities and inherent heritage.

### **Endnotes**

1. This and further information on the San Lorenzo Project can be found on-line at [www.sanlorenzo.org.pa/index\\_in.htm](http://www.sanlorenzo.org.pa/index_in.htm).
2. In Panama, 40% of the protected areas have several types of significant known cultural resources. In addition, another 52% are located within zones of high concentration of archaeological sites.