Nature–Culture Interlinkages in World Heritage: Bridging the Gap

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Whereas many stress the originality of the World Heritage Convention in linking the conservation of nature and culture in a single instrument, it is increasingly under attack for sustaining the divide. However, divisions between nature and culture are not universal. Indeed, it is considered that nature and culture are very often complementary and inseparable. Cultural identities have been forged in specific environments, just as many creative works of humankind are profoundly inspired by the beauty of natural surroundings. Such linkages have also been recognized outside the World Heritage domain.

Although the connection between nature and culture has appeared continually in the history of the convention, and much action is being undertaken in this realm, this article argues that the time has come to revisit current policies and practices and thus to respond to a major opportunity to reassert the contribution of World Heritage to the effective and equitable protection of cultural and biological diversity. This may, for example, recognize the inherent aspects of interdependency as well as stimulate the cross-fertilization of experiences and practices being developed by the cultural and natural heritage sectors.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that between 150 and 200 species are lost every day. In comparison it is estimated that one language dies out every two weeks.[1] If linguistic diversity is taken as a proxy for cultural diversity, such losses together with the degradation of biodiversity are not only among the urgent global challenges of our times, but can be seen as interconnected phenomena. Targets to integrate traditional knowledge and practices alongside participation in the Convention on Biological Diversity illustrate the growing global understanding of interlinkages, but also the continuous challenges to reverse trends of decline.[2] From this perspective, heritage interlinkages are not merely about co-evolving landscapes, cultures, and practices, but a cross-cutting reality that makes the role and contribution of the World Heritage Convention a major concern.

Many positive actions have been undertaken within the World Heritage processes from the inception of the convention. These include a variety of policies adopted by the World Heritage Committee and activities by its advisory bodies (ICCROM, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property; ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites; and IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature) collectively and individually. Indeed, this issue was triggered by one

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Figure 1. Ecosystem and Relict Cultural Landscape of Lope-Okanda (Gabon) was inscribed as a mixed site on the World Heritage List in 2007. (jbdodane)

such activity started collectively by all three advisory bodies and the World Heritage Centre involving the development of a course module for World Heritage practitioners on nature–culture interlinkages.[3]

Gaining momentum

First, the recent trend towards bridging or connecting heritage is not accidental, but signals how dominant modernist models of heritage are being questioned. In the academic field, the nature–culture dichotomy has long been under attack.[4] It is increasingly seen as a cultural expression of a distinct historical period rather than a universally valid split pertinent for heritage classification.

Second, the use of the World Heritage Convention has increasingly been internationalized beyond its European mainstay. Furthermore, shifting expert understandings and post-colonial notions of heritage values[5] defy the split between nature and culture. From Australian engagements with Aboriginal notions of Country and landscape to Buddhist temples and sacred mountains in Sri Lanka,[6] heritage realities covered by the convention today challenge narrow concepts of nature and culture. This is equally true in the European context.[7]

Third, heritage thinking in both natural and cultural fields has moved from ideas of freezing heritage as "static" values and attributes to one of recognizing heritage as dynamic, interrelated, and complex. The lived everyday dimension of heritage is no longer an anomaly, but often recognized as an integral dimension of specific values and landscapes.[8] In the

field of protected area conservation, much "transboundary" work is being undertaken in relation to spiritual and sacred values, and other cultural dimensions. In particular, the field of biocultural diversity promoted by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) has stressed the interrelated and co-evolving nature of biological and cultural systems, values, and practices.[9] The recognition of natural and cultural dynamics as intimately connected also require a rethink of conservation practice.[10]

Fourth, heritage specialists are increasingly recognizing the limitations of their own domains of expertise. A growing critique from civil society, not least indigenous peoples, also underlines the need to shift from heritage as an exclusive expert domain towards one building on local community perspectives and values that often defy narrow nature–culture distinctions. Where nature conservation just a few decades ago was dominated by natural scientists and management experts, it today includes indigenous and local community voices often stressing interlinkages through local knowledge, livelihood practices, and age-old landscape connections. In many cultural sites, the significance of natural values and local socio-environmental dynamics are equally gaining importance.

Fifth, at present, we need to recognize that cultural and natural heritage sectors have developed many tools and methods, often in isolation from each other. Management planning tools using a values-based approach to heritage management and UNESCO's Enhancing our Heritage (EOH) toolkit are among many that can be shared for the benefits of both sectors. While practitioners may sit at opposite sides of the table, much can be shared for the benefit of more effective heritage management.

Figure 2. The cone-shaped volcano is Mount Ngauruhoe at Tongariro National Park, New Zealand. (Laura Beasley)

In sum, a major drive is under way to rethink the boundaries between nature and culture as:

- embedded and connected rather than isolated qualities;
- constituted relationally rather than unique and distinct properties;
- a dynamic web of processes rather than fixed elements;
- a field for experience sharing and mutual learning.

Whereas the nature–culture dichotomy has evolved into separate heritage fields and domains of expertise, there is today a growing understanding that heritage sites are not made up of isolated natural or cultural attributes split into separate realities, but are intertwined, connected, and constituted of relationships. Heritage thinking has matured in its appreciation of the complex interconnections between values both cultural and natural, attributes, and the people living in and around World Heritage sites regardless of whether they manifest Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) only.

Recognizing management impasse and new avenues

As the number of sites now exceeds 1,000, the World Heritage system is today at a crossroads where four decades of success are challenged, among other factors, by a deepening gap between nature and culture. In practice, the majority of national management bodies are split according to natural and cultural sectors. Where national agencies are responsible for both fields, expertise, line agencies and regulatory arrangements often remain split between nature and culture. Such institutional divides are tied to the historical developments of the heritage fields, where their marriage in the World Heritage Convention was more of a historical coincidence or concurrence of parallel processes than their integration as such.[11] Furthermore, the defining articles of the convention keep natural and cultural heritage as separate domains by situating humanity, history, and construction in the cultural field, contrasting these with natural features.

Whether concerning nature or culture, it is increasingly obvious that the "culture of World Heritage" and the institutional infrastructure built up over the years cannot merely be viewed as a further addition of protection and international support. In 2013, the debate erupted once again in the World Heritage Committee session in connection with the Pimachiowin Aki mixed site nomination from Canada. Committee discussions were concerned with the "bonds that exist in some places between culture and nature" and concluded that more work was needed. A questioning of the nature divide is taking hold, where inscription criteria, nomination practices, management planning, and evaluation procedures are no longer considered neutral procedures but constitute transformative practices in need of reform.

The sheer upgrading of national heritage to the common heritage of humankind entails social effects and transformation of the very fabric of heritage. Cases of heritage recognition fueling divides between cultural and natural practitioners, nationalism, conflict, dispossession, or commodification have challenged the very meaning of World Heritage. This is, we argue, more than a simple working misunderstanding, and in practice runs the risk of undermining not only the legitimacy of the World Heritage system, but equally so the very interlinked

fabric that constitutes and sustains the OUV.

It is becoming obvious that questions of interlinkages are critical to the integrity and authenticity of *both* natural and cultural sites (although authenticity is limited to cultural sites in World Heritage processes) as well as management. The integral role of local values and connections for the OUV is being rehabilitated, no longer as superfluous local flavor, but as a basic ingredient. Studies in the field of biocultural diversity are particularly important in demonstrating such interlinkages. This even raises questions not only about the integrity of all sites but also about the "authenticity" of natural sites. Spiritual values, cultural conservation practices, traditional ecological management knowledge, and stewardship practices are just some examples of nature–culture interlinkages not only valuable in themselves, but equally critical to ensure the wholeness and integrity of the site as such. They may not meet any World Heritage criterion but nonetheless form inseparable entities for management.

Figure 3. The Koutammakou landscape in north-eastern Togo is home to the Batammariba, whose remarkable mud tower-houses have come to be seen as a symbol of Togo. (CIFOR)

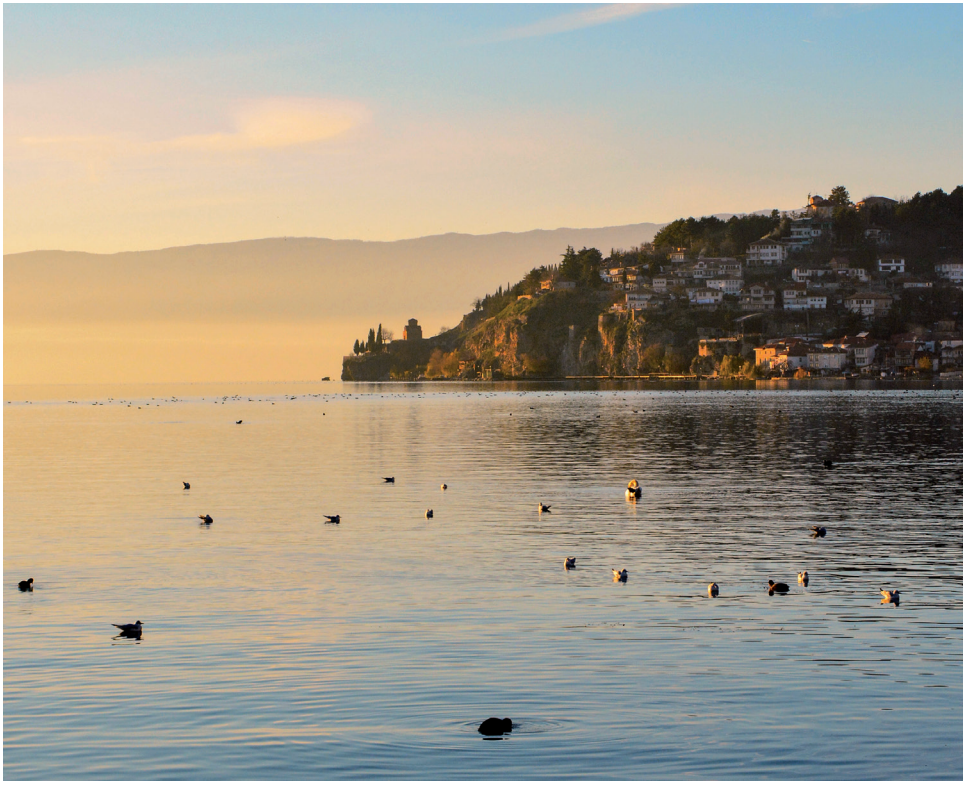
Cultural landscapes and mixed sites: learning from practice

The year 1992 is often highlighted as a breakthrough in terms of nature and culture linkages, in particular the introduction of "cultural landscapes," where human interaction with the natural system has formed the landscape and created a window of opportunity.[12] With its three categories—created landscapes, organically evolved landscapes, and associative cultural landscapes—the cultural landscape has arguably opened up a whole new range of connections, recognizing that interplays and dynamism exist with traditional ways of life and livelihoods both in terms of material implications as well as cases of "associative cultural landscapes" where (immaterial) cultural, religious, or spiritual associations are at stake. Tongariro National Park in New Zealand became the first World Heritage cultural landscape to recognize Maori values and linkages in the landscape (based on the cultural criteria of the *Operational Guidelines to the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*).

The recognition of categories of cultural landscape was not simply a move to further integration, but also led to further separation. Whereas the introduction of cultural landscapes led to explicit attention to nature–culture linkages, changes made in natural criteria that same year removed existing language pointing to interaction and combinations from the natural criteria. "Man's interaction with his natural environment" was removed from former natural criterion ii (currently criterion viii) leaving "ecological and biological processes" as defining elements. In similar terms, exceptional combinations of natural and cultural elements disappeared from former natural criterion iii (current criterion ix). Furthermore, cultural landscapes as a category of heritage are recognized only under cultural criteria i–vi of the *Operational Guidelines*.

This has in many cases caused interlinkages to become invisible in attempts to "pitch" or retrofit local realities within global categories. The division of labor between natural and cultural specialists in the World Heritage arena has left nomination teams with the creative production of retrofitting interconnected heritage values and practices into "pure" natural and cultural language. The emphasis resulting from this reorganization of heritage values around global significance has downplayed the importance of interlinkages except in cases

Figure 4. Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid region (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) is one of the oldest human settlements in Europe. (Amer Demishi)



where these have been seen as adding value to the nomination dossier (cultural landscapes or mixed sites) and non-binding discussions taking place between ICOMOS and IUCN at the time of the evaluations.

As one site manager explained, "We initially presented both natural and cultural values, but experts advised us to rework our dossier and only concentrate on natural values." The site was eventually listed, yet the manager is only now seeking to incorporate longstanding cultural dynamics into landscape management.

The World Heritage community has long been aware of this trend. States parties are easily driven to focus on single-criterion qualities when defining Outstanding Universal Value for immediately recognizable attributes, thus sticking to either natural or cultural criteria without having adequate institutional support and incentives to address other linkages. The fact remains that many nomination processes are urged to downplay interlinkages in order to portray global significance except where interlinkages are seen as "added value." As Papayannis argues,[13] this has led to obvious omissions in World Heritage designation.

Another attempt to bridge the divide has involved the creation of one set of inscription criteria while emphasizing that these should not function as a "straitjacket."[14] While united inscription criteria in theory allow for the recognition of integrated values, in practice procedures maintain a divide with sets of natural and cultural criteria "owned" and evaluated separately by IUCN (criteria vii to x) and ICOMOS (criteria i to vi) respectively.[15] Cultural landscapes are inscribed under cultural criteria only and evaluated separately by ICOMOS.[16]

The practice of "mixed sites," inscribed for both natural and cultural values, reappearing at times through renomination processes, offers obvious potential to expand beyond the single-criterion gaze. In fact mixed sites remain a small minority in the bigger picture, making up only 3% of the World Heritage List. The challenge is threefold. First, nominations are required to demonstrate the OUV for both natural and cultural values. As a result, mixed sites only concern a subset of natural and cultural values considered to have OUV, thus limiting the potential application. Second, mixed sites do not necessarily address interlinkages, but merely recognize juxtaposition. Cultural and natural values may co-exist, yet values are assessed by separate teams, management may be undertaken separately through distinct agencies, and it is not unusual to find separate management plans in place. Third, there are limited incentives to nominate mixed sites given the in-built emphasis on outstanding singularity. States parties may avoid mixed nominations because they are considered too complex. Even mixed sites that have been nominated in the past, as a result of separate recommendations by the advisory bodies, have prompted the states parties to opt for listing under the more favorable recommendation, thus completely overlooking the other.

There are today 85 properties with four transboundary properties listed as cultural landscapes. There are 31 mixed properties, some of which overlap with the former. There is now a widespread perception that a significant number of existing sites would have qualified as cultural landscapes if nominated today.

The inclusion of additional criteria may in effect be encouraged in some sites, yet is unlikely to be relevant for the vast majority of interlinkages. Whether in terms of cultural landscapes or mixed sites, the "add-on" approach of inserting more nature or culture is

challenging. Cultural landscapes and mixed sites rely on a separation between nature and culture as value that can or may be bridged. Mixed sites require both values to be present, whereas cultural landscapes involve a specific outstanding combination of nature and culture interlinkages. As a result, everyday interlinkages in the vast majority of sites occupy an uncomfortable grey zone.… In practice, interlinkages are repeatedly under-represented compared with their actual significance, with far too little space for recognizing their significance outside the models of mixed sites and cultural landscapes. Still, much can be learned from specific management efforts and experience.

While nominations and renominations for combining cultural and natural values in the World Heritage process form one part of the equation, the other challenging part is the management of both values together. Indeed, management approaches have to be oriented towards integrating all values, be they World Heritage or of local cultural and natural significance. It is in this context that the recognition of inherent aspects of interdependency, as well as experiences and practices being developed by the cultural and natural heritage sectors, can bring added value for more effective management of World Heritage sites.

Looking ahead

World Heritage practitioners have struggled with the nature–culture divide for decades.[17] Nature–culture linkages, we suggest, are not exotic exceptions, but part of the very fabric and lifeline of living heritage across the majority of World Heritage sites. Whereas only a minority of sites are considered as cultural landscapes or mixed, all sites display varying forms of interlinkages of either a tangible or intangible nature. The new trend is therefore not just about linking nature and culture—they *are* linked in multiple ways. The challenge is about creating a new space, new institutional practices, and a new language to address interconnected natural and cultural values. Can we move towards dynamic nomination and management practice, where World Heritage recognition of OUV supports rather than undermines age-old connections, knowledge practices, and evolving interlinkages between nature and culture? Can World Heritage shift from being islands of protection to offer an active contribution to wider cultural and natural landscape integrity? As we recognize the massive power and transformative potential of the heritage complex, can such energy be shifted from displacement to empowerment, from disconnection towards interlinkages? Different approaches may be considered. These questions were addressed at a workshop devoted to developing the curriculum mentioned above for an international training course on addressing interlinkages in managing World Heritage by the advisory bodies and the World Heritage Centre. A week-long course module was implemented for both cultural and natural heritage professionals as part of the ICCROM course on Conservation of Built Heritage (CBH14).[18]

The "rethinking model" discussed in Larsen and Wijesuriya's report on the course requires a rethink of heritage concepts by recognizing their cultural basis and bias. It suggests bringing on board new categories and language to move beyond the divide. Ranging from the categories used to the ways we collaborate, a thorough rethink is warranted. It is about bringing World Heritage out of a Eurocentric legacy and reconciling OUV with local values

and connections. In contrast, the integration approach discussed does not question the separation between nature and culture, but rather questions the way in which approaches to natural and cultural heritage are being implemented independently from each other. Responses may involve cultural sites "adding" natural values to their equation, or vice versa, natural sites recognizing cultural values and attributes without necessarily questioning the respective heritage categories as such. The "synergy approach" does not question the divide between nature and culture, yet suggests that there is room for cross-fertilization and synergy building between the two heritage sectors. In contrast, critical approaches challenge World Heritage with regard to the way it is framed and institutionalized, and its social effects. At stake are not simply "local" cultural or natural heritage values, but the values and cultural practices of the (global) heritage sector potentially displacing other values and practices, neglecting rights, transforming power relationships, and/or leading to commodification. Addressing nature and culture interlinkages in this respect requires addressing and harnessing the power inherent in these dynamics.

Debates have today reached a stage where they are no longer about only recognizing linkages as a distinct type of World Heritage (cultural landscapes) or as juxtaposed values

Figure 5. Rock Islands Southern Lagoon (Palau) consists of numerous large and small forested limestone islands, scattered within a marine lagoon protected by a barrier reef. The remains of stonework villages, as well as burial sites and rock art, bear testimony to the organization of small island communities over some three millennia. (Matt Kieffer)

(mixed sites), but about recognizing the variety of interlinkages found in *all* World Heritage sites. They also recognize that if heritage management does not take these into account, OUV and the conditions that maintain it may be lost. This has implications for strengthened notions of authenticity and integrity. It entails re-embedding OUV in the everyday fabric of connections, which allowed specific attributes to emerge and persist in the first place. As institutional limitations are encountered, new horizons for practice that sustain and support vital embedded linkages are being spearheaded across the globe.[19] Three immediate steps are needed to reinforce this work.

A first step involves recognizing the legacy of divides and taking up a more inclusive approach. This requires a far more integrated and holistic approach to values assessment and the interlinked and embedded nature of attributes, and will also contribute towards securing equitable and cultural representation on the World Heritage list.

Second, new tools and mechanisms are needed to assess connections and map various forms of knowledge and practices from the stages of assessment and nomination towards the identification of management responses. This entails the mobilization of contextual perspectives such as local and indigenous knowledge systems and practices.

Third, more than a top-down conceptual paradigm shift of heritage experts, there is a need to define spaces in which to engage everyday stewards and rights-holders on World Heritage matters, beyond the actual identification of interlinkages. This entails an emphasis on leveling the playing field when values are described and decisions made regarding World Heritage. Much can be learned from the emerging practices of consent-based inscription and participatory management in this respect.

World Heritage may trigger massive tourism flows, media coverage and commoditization and, this being the case, it is now urgent to render World Heritage more connected to the "affairs of life." It is all about amplifying our understanding of the foundations of OUV and the subtle processes that constitute and sustain heritage of global significance over time. There is ample room for action with practitioners on the ground.

The course module mentioned above, developed by the advisory bodies as part of the World Heritage Capacity Building Strategy adopted by the committee at its 35th session, is ready to bring heritage practitioners from both cultural and natural heritage sectors into one learning process interacting over a period of two to four weeks to trigger new collaborative approaches.

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