

Culture and wetlands: Notes from a workshop

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On 26-27 March 2004, SEHUMED^[1] organised at the Polytechnic of Valencia a workshop 'to identify tools for managing the cultural heritage of wetlands of international importance of the Ramsar Convention. During the meeting, 25 scientists from various disciplines participated actively and debated a wide range of issues. Representing Med-INA^[2], planner and environmentalist Thymio Papayannis and archaeologist Aphrodite Sorotou expressed the position of this organisation concerning the relationship between human beings and nature and exchanged views with the other participants. They kept certain notes on the discussions, which are summarised below together with a general theoretical view of the issues raised, as a potential contribution to the methodological work undertaken by SEHUMED, with the support of the Spanish government.

culture

The concept of *culture* has undergone radical changes during the last few centuries. It first referred mainly to educated people and was recognised as a discourse of excellence preserving timeless and universal human treasures. Nowadays culture, tangible or intangible, is perceived as the way of life of a society, an element that is gradually sprouting from social practice, being structured and constantly changing. Thus it is finally regarded as the totality of socially transmitted behavioural patterns.

The latter raises the issue of heritage, which in our time is an open one reflecting living culture as well as that of the past. According to UNESCO^[3] the different types of cultural heritage include: cultural heritage sites, historic cities, cultural landscapes, natural sacred sites, the underwater cultural heritage, museums, the movable cultural heritage, handicrafts, the documentary and digital heritage, the cinematographic heritage, oral traditions, languages, festive events, rites and beliefs, music and songs, the performing arts, traditional medicine, literature, culinary traditions, and traditional sports and games.

In spite of the undeniable tendency of the human mind to organise information, to classify data, to create divisions and categories (as above), a tendency that may be useful in methodological work, as culture is a product of human beings and their social structures, it retains a high degree of complexity, interrelatedness and continuity that defies simplifying approaches. Thus, in spite of the inherent difficulties, we must treat culture in an integrative way, always looking for links and relationships that may be missed.

values

In the text of Ramsar Resolution VIII.19, and often during the SEHUMED workshop reference was made to the term *value* and *cultural values*. In pure economic terms and in a more neo-liberal perspective, the value of a good might be defined either as the amount of money that a potential consumer would be willing to pay to obtain it or its owner to part with it.

However, considering the values of culture, two issues must be faced. Firstly, culture is not a 'good', it is not just an item that can be somehow priced; and secondly, the value of any cultural element is subjective, and differs considerably from person to person, from society to society, from period to period. A cultural element, tangible or intangible, may have indeed an economic value, but it could also have an informational value, hidden or exposed, that can be extracted from an object or a notion and its associated documentation. It has a cultural value, which depends on time and place. Finally it might incorporate a spiritual and emotional value for a certain society, group or individual.

site specificity

As culture is produced by societies and societies differ from place to place and from time to time, there is a high degree of diversity concerning cultural heritage, the appreciation of cultural values and the appropriateness of measures required for their preservation and enhancement.

This diversity is increased if the relation of culture with nature is taken into account, as there are very great differences on this level from case to case. In some societies, especially in the developing world, nature is part of the daily life, an irreplaceable source of food and resources, and a crucial factor for survival. A typical example would be the populations living along the banks of the Niger River in Western Africa. In the developed world nature has a more distant role and is related more to leisure and recreation. The case of Japan, where carefully landscaped natural elements –often incorporated in the urban environment– are part of the national culture since many generations, is characteristic. Such disparities influence the sense of value that cultural elements related to nature have for each society, and consequently the sense of urgency for their preservation.

Culture as a social product retains the strongest link with the society that produces it, which also establishes a clear sense of 'ownership'. This is particularly true in the case of indigenous peoples and local communities. Such culture is usually related to the past through traditions, which may retain a varying degree of strength and relevance, varying with the time elapsed. In addition, there are cultural remains from civilisations that have become extinct, without leaving descendants to claim their spiritual heritage, while newer societies that are occupying the same space feel little interest for them. In certain cases, they may even feel animosity, if these remains are symbolic of past systems of oppressive governance.

On the other hand, cultural remains may have a strong value for individuals that belong to different ages and societies, and who are attracted to them for spiritual, aesthetic or sentimental reasons. These individuals practice 'cultural tourism' and feel that they have certain rights as to the accessibility, protection and enhancement of these values.

Such considerations create complex systems of 'ownership', with social and legal implications, which often lead to contention and conflict. A good advice, therefore, is to consider that local communities must be consulted when dealing with cultural remains, must be involved in the process of identification and study from an early stage, and must have a decisive voice in all decisions concerning any measures proposed, especially intrusive ones.

management

The notion of 'management' should be also handled carefully. Management can be defined as a programme of active and passive measures, within a comprehensive framework, implemented in order to achieve agreed objectives. Usually this is planned and carried out by public bodies, authorised in accordance with the legal system of each country, but sometimes through traditional governance practices^[4].

In the case of the cultural heritage, many countries have specialised services, at the central or regional level, rarely with a local presence. Their competence is usually limited to antiquities of widely accepted 'value', often with an international recognition, as funds are always insufficient and priorities must be carefully allocated. Other cultural values, especially living ones, are neglected and left at the discretion of local social structures.

As a result, to speak of management of the cultural heritage, and especially from above and from the outside, might be a dangerous starting point. Thus, the only approach that seems sensible is –within the legal framework of each country– to assist local social structures to appreciate their cultural heritage, preserve it and enhance it, for the benefit of their communities and of interested visitors, today and for the future. It is imperative to understand that any 'management' actions must be undertaken with and through local people and mainly for and by them. Local communities should play an important role in defining and ensuring protected area objectives and be among their principal beneficiaries. Finally, all actions should contribute to the protection and promotion of both the natural environmental and the cultural qualities of each area in an integrated manner.

Resolution VIII.19

At this point, it is perhaps necessary to clarify the purpose of the effort initiated by the Convention on Wetlands through Resolution VIII.19^[5]. It is certainly not simply to identify and list elements of cultural heritage in the proximity of wetlands. It is instead to identify the complex

relations between the cultural and natural heritage, between human beings and nature. And this not for academic reasons, but to strengthen the links between people and wetlands, thus contributing to their conservation.

In many parts of the world, there have been significant activities concerning cultural heritage related to wetlands and other protected natural areas. What is not yet fully established is a joint, integrated and multi-disciplinary approach to both natural and cultural aspects. This is the goal of Resolution VIII.19 and of the current efforts.

Given the extreme diversity of cultural values, referred to earlier, care should be given in avoiding overprescriptive and rigid methodological approaches. In fact, Resolution VIII.19 defines very wisely (and clearly) what is required. Under point 17, it only asks the Ramsar Bureau 'to seek inputs from CPs, experts and practitioners, and local communities and indigenous peoples from around the world' to improve the existing information document and guidelines and publish the results as a background document only. In this process, the MedWet Working Group on Culture^[6] can contribute significant inputs from the Mediterranean context, after a wide dialogue among the stakeholders mentioned in the Resolution.

It is also evident that the MedWet contribution will be pertinent only to the Mediterranean . It might provide to other regions useful ideas and experience, but we must remain modest in the scope and intent of our work.

On a more specific level, care is needed in developing and disseminating 'tools', as they must be appropriate and adapted to the 'hands' that will use them. Thus management plans for the natural and cultural heritage may be useful only when there are management structures in place, able to implement them. Inventories are useful in improving knowledge, but they are both time-consuming and expensive. Thus they must be designed with great wisdom so that they maximise our understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature, without producing non-significant data.

specific suggestions

The four main categories of culture that were discussed in smaller groups during the SE-HUMED workshop (cultural landscapes, building heritage, movable heritage, intangible heritage) have definitely produced some very interesting results. All of them shared many of the previously mentioned notions, but in addition have examined various others. Below are some of the suggestions that came out of two of the groups, in which the authors of this note participated.

building heritage

The built environment incorporates important cultural values, as well as the memories of the past embedded in older structures and spaces. It has to be viewed, however, in a very broad sense, including both buildings of any type and infrastructure works, as well as the spaces between constructed elements and their relation with natural elements^[7], which should be taken seriously into account. A basic guideline that seems to emerge is that older structures must be preserved in an operating form. This would imply maintaining their initial functions, if at all feasible (such as with traditional salinas), or giving them new uses, which are not incompatible with their preservation. If none of these options are possible, older structures should be maintained so that they can be available to future generations. Such an approach would be in harmony with the principles of sustainable use of resources as well. Naturally, questions of ownership must be resolved in all cases, and legal aspects of classification must be considered.

movable heritage

Movable heritage, or else material culture, is an important cultural element as well. Material things are the mute products of internalised traditions, 'ways of doing things', which are passed down from generation to generation unchanged. Changes in the form and the appearance of artefacts are the product of the contact between communities or of the actual displacement of populations. However, artefacts are not the product only of a traditional mental template, but exist in the interface between people and their environment. If the environmental conditions change, then people will change their material culture so as to accommo-

date to the new conditions. Finally and most importantly, material culture provides the context for human interaction, and means of creating and encoding meanings and a medium for social action. Of course the 'meaning' is not a latent quality encapsulated in an object, but it is rather produced in the object's 'reading' or use.

Therefore, movable material culture cannot be studied separately from intangible culture and cannot in any way be preserved without associating it with the society and the environment where it belongs. What an object means depends upon the context in which it is encountered.

[1] *Sede para el estudio de los humedales mediterráneos* of the University of Valencia.

[2] Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos, Athens, Greece.

[3] See <http://portal.unesco.org/culture>.

[4] Such as the management by elders of water distribution systems in tribal societies of Africa and South America.

[5] Approved unanimously during the Eighth Conference of the Contracting Parties of the Convention on Wetlands (Valencia, Spain, November 2002), Resolution VIII.19 concerns 'Guiding principles for taking into account the cultural values of wetlands for the effective management of sites'.

[6] Which at present consists of SEHUMED, Med-INA and the MedWet Co-ordination Unit, with the participation of the Ramsar Bureau.

[7] For example, the proximity of buildings to water bodies.