

Rock Art at Risk

The situation concerning the relative under-representation of rock art properties on the World Heritage List has improved to a considerable extent in recent years. Recent inscriptions of rock art sites have included Chongoni, Malawi (2006), Twyfelfontein, Namibia and Gobustan, Azerbaijan (2007). In addition to these properties, the Ecosystem and Relict Cultural Landscape of Lopé Okanda in Gabon in Africa, with a remarkable collection of some 1,800 rock carvings also was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2007.

In other positive developments, a number of joint initiatives of the World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS International and ICOMOS's Rock Art Committee (CAR) have focussed on the support and facilitation of the process of selection and nomination of new rock art sites to the World Heritage List:

- The publishing of a World Report on Rock Art in 2004 - The Future of World Rock Art (Bertilsson & McDermott, 2004).
- The creation of a draft Charter on Rock Art that was presented in 2004 and waiting to be finally approved in 2007.
- ICOMOS's Rock Art Survey, Analysis and Action Plan were presented at the World Heritage Durban Meeting in 2005. The report is based on the Inventory of Nomination Dossiers of Rock Art Sites Inscribed on the World Heritage List that was accomplished the same year.
- The launching of a new program of Regional Thematic Studies on Rock Art in co-operation with the World Heritage Centre (ICOMOS 2006).
- The creation of Pre-Nomination Guidelines for applications to the World Heritage List (work in progress).
- A designated focus on Rock Art and the World Heritage List at the Valcamonica Symposium in May 2007, including a special session on Managing Rock Art Sites directed by UNESCO-WHC. The UNESCO session held during the biennial Valcamonica symposium was aimed at the development of a site technical cooperation network in the area of conservation and management of Rock Art World Heritage sites.

The accomplishment of the draft Charter has also been followed by initiatives to undertake Regional Thematic Studies and to formulate Pre-nomination Guidelines as supportive tools to facilitate the process of selecting sites with potential for World Heritage List applications. This concept was originally developed by a group of ICOMOS people, namely Regina Durighello, Gwenaëlle Bourdin, Susan Denyer, Ulf Bertilsson and Jean Clottes. It has been further elaborated in close cooperation with Nuria Sanz of the World Heritage Centre, thanks to whom it was officially presented at the meeting organized by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in Basse Terre, Guadeloupe in May 2006, with the aim of developing a transnational Rock Art nomination in the region. The report on Latin America and the Caribbean was finalized and published in 2006. It is also available on the internet on the following web address: <http://www.icomos.org/studies/rock-latinamerica.htm>. A second report on the Rock Art of North Africa and the Sahara is already in progress and planned to be published in 2007.

The purpose of the Regional Thematic Study on Latin America and the Caribbean is to give an extensive overview of the region that can be used as a tool in the process of selecting rock art properties for future World Heritage nominations. An important starting point for this work was the International Seminar on Caribbean Archaeology held in Fort-de-Franc in Martinique in 2004 and organized by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and the Regional Council of Martinique.

Regardless of the slow but steady closing of the gap of missing rock art sites on the World Heritage List there are still far too many rock art sites under threat of damage and destruction around the world. One of these that have been under long-term threat of destruction from industrial exploitation is the Dampier Archipelago in Australia.

Dampier Archipelago and Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia

The Dampier Archipelago and Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara region of Western Australia contain many outstanding concentrations of rock engravings and associated archaeological occupation sites, some individual types of engravings such as anthropomorphs as well as some stone features. Together, these sites are considered to be of national importance. Extensive shell middens occur at these locations with stratified deposits potentially covering many thousands of years of occupation. Groupings of significant stone arrangements occur together with scatters of flaked stone artefacts, major quarry locations and reduction areas and grinding patches occur in varying degrees of density and diversity.

The engravings on the Dampier Archipelago include finely executed images of a wide range of terrestrial, avian and marine fauna many of which can be identified to genus or species level. Most of the engravings, particularly the images of marine fauna, are only slightly weathered and were produced following the rise of sea levels about 8,000 years ago. There are also many deeply weathered images of terrestrial fauna, particularly kangaroo, which date to the time when the sea was much lower and the coast over 100 km away. The different degrees of weathering of particular types of faunal engravings on the Dampier Archipelago provide an outstanding visual record of the course of Australia's cultural history through the Aboriginal responses to the rise of sea levels at the end of the last Ice Age. There are also many deeply weathered 'Archaic Faces' across the Dampier Archipelago, including some images that are locally unique developments of this theme. 'Archaic faces' are widely distributed through arid Australia and are found in the Calvert Ranges, Western Australia, the Cleland Hills and the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory and in South Australia and Queensland. The 'Archaic Faces' on the Dampier Archipelago demonstrate the long history of contact and shared visual narratives between Aboriginal societies in the Dampier Archipelago and inland arid Australia and are exceptional in the course of Australia's cultural history.

The Pilbara has been described as the richest region of rock engravings in Australia. It is the diversity of representations of the human form, many of which are in dynamic attitudes, and the way in which they are sometimes arranged in complex scenes that makes the Aboriginal engravings in the Pilbara exceptional. An analysis of site locations demonstrates that large concentrations of engravings in the Dampier Archipelago are found on inland plateaus, steep valley inclines bordering watercourses and on rock platforms next to the ocean. The Dampier Archipelago contains particularly high concentrations of rock engravings when compared with other rock art provinces in Australia.

The distribution of engraved motifs across the Dampier Archipelago reflects economic and cultural variability. Previous

work on the Dampier Archipelago provides an outstanding demonstration of the way in which a detailed analysis of archaeological remains (middens, grinding patches, quarries) and associated rock engravings can contribute to an understanding of the cultural and economic meaning of the rock engravings.

Standing stones on the Dampier Archipelago range from single monoliths through to extensive alignments comprising at least three or four hundred standing stones. While some standing stones are associated with increase ceremonies, *thalu*, others were used to mark particular places with scarce resources, such as seasonal rock pools, and were also used to mark sites of traditional significance. Hunting hides and fish traps are also found amongst the extensively modified cultural landscape of the Archipelago. The range of stone features in the Dampier Archipelago is outstanding in a national context for the number of purposes they are known to have served.

The engravings on the Dampier Archipelago include detailed and finely executed examples of water birds, crabs, crayfish, kangaroos, turtles and fish, some of which, because of their detail, can be identified to species level. The finely executed animals identified to species level, the diversity of human forms and the panels of engravings showing scenes of human activity exhibit a high degree of creativity that is spectacular for Australian rock engravings.

The battle for protecting the rock art and archaeological remains at Dampier Archipelago has gone on for many years giving rise to strong professional and popular support. These endeavours have finally resulted in a happy ending; on July 3rd, 2007, two weeks after a letter of intervention was dispatched by CAR, the Minister for the Environment finally announced that the renowned rock art of Western Australia's Dampier Archipelago (including the Burrup Peninsula) had been included in the National Heritage List. The reasons were stated as follows:

"The Archipelago was formed around 8,000 years ago with underlying rocks amongst the oldest on earth, formed in the Archaean period more than 2,400 million years ago. In the rocky red valleys we can begin to understand how Aboriginal people responded to changes in the landscape from the last Ice Age. Rock engravings are thought to number in the hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, with individual sites like Skew Valley in the Southern Burrup containing over 20,000 individual engravings. Images in the Burrup area range from humans including figures engaged in everyday activities such as hunting, to animals like fish, turtles, kangaroos, emus and snakes and species such as the thylacine or 'Tasmanian Tiger' that have been extinct on the mainland of Australia for thousands of years."

A factor of vital importance for the final decision was the two-and-a-half-year assessment of the Dampier Archipelago and Burrup Peninsula performed by the Australian Heritage Council that included extensive research, stakeholder consultation and opportunities for public comment. The declaration has demonstrated how environment and heritage protection can be balanced with economic and industrial development on a site that is home to Australia's second largest tonnage port, supports thousands of jobs and contains in excess of \$35 billion in industrial developments. The decision shows that the Archipelago's significant heritage can co-exist alongside resource-rich industrial areas. The positive implications of this partnership approach are further witnessed by the long-term management of the site through the development of Conservation Agreements and industry contributing many millions of Australian dollars to protect this unique heritage place.

(See also Australia report, p. 30).



Graffiti signatures made with charcoal over the prehistoric rock paintings at Rekeiz Lemgasem (Tifariti) by both Sahrawi (left) and MINURSO (right) (Photo: Joaquim Soler i Sublis)

Damage to rock art sites in Western Sahara

The University of Girona (<http://www.udg.edu/sahara>) has been developing archaeological research in the Frente Polisario-controlled part of the Western Sahara since 1995 in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture of the Sahrawi Republic (the other part of Western Sahara has been occupied by Morocco since 1975). In the course of the study there have been alarming observations of damaging activities at several rock art sites. The damage seems to be concentrated in the most visited places and consists of engraved and painted (with charcoal or spray) graffiti.

Numbers marked with the UN blue sprays. They deface more than ten engraved slabs at Sluguilla Lawash (Photo: Joaquim Soler i Sublis)



Part of the damage seems to stem from the use of the rock-shelters as dwellings during the war of independence. It was clear that the Sahrawi soldiers were responsible for the damage: the graffiti are written in Arabic and the content was related to war, fatherland or God. Although this type of graffiti still occurs the Ministry of Culture is regularly in close contact with the military to reduce such acts and to promote knowledge and respect for the rock-art among the local population. We are now proud to report that the Sahrawi army has become involved in the research and protection work.

Another part of the damage, however, is caused not by the local population but by the international troops deployed in the country. The soldiers of the *Misión Internacional de Naciones Unidas para el Referéndum del Sahara Occidental* (MINURSO) were engaged in September 1991 to monitor the ceasefire and to organize and conduct a referendum which would allow the people of the Western Sahara to decide the Territory's future status. Some of the painted signatures on the rock panels have been thoroughly studied and the result is that they seem to correspond to the list of participating troops published on the website of United Nations: Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, China, Croatia, Denmark, Egypt, El Salvador, France, Ghana, Greece, Guinea, Honduras, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Russian Federation, Sri Lanka, Uruguay and Yemen. Researchers working in the area have collected a wide spectrum of examples of damage which have apparently been the members of the MINURSO:

- Troops from the above mentioned countries wrote their names, origin and the date.
- The texts are written in English or an oriental alphabet.
- At the Sluguilla Lawash site, panels with engraved images have been sprayed with blue paint, which is regularly used by the MINURSO's blue helmets in order to mark GPS points and routes. The same blue colour spray is used regularly by the troops all through the Western Sahara.

This damage has been documented on several sites and over a wide time-span. The Ministry of Culture has contacted those responsible for MINURSO but the damaging activities continue. Therefore, the researchers of the University of Girona have decided to share this problem with colleagues and the international agencies which care for the culture and the World Heritage.

This sad example of members of the UN blue helmets forces damaging the Western Saharan rock art obviously stands in sharp contrast to the engaging and demanding words of the past Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, about the value of the African rock art and the need for including more sites on the World

Heritage List. Therefore CAR and ICOMOS have to intervene to make these unethical activities to cease.

The World Heritage property of Sierra de San Francisco, Baja California in Mexico

One of the most remarkable rock art sites that have been inscribed on the World Heritage List is that with the marvellous rock paintings at Sierra de San Francisco at Baja California in Mexico. In recent years advanced plans to develop an infrastructure for tourism with motorways, hotels and other facilities typical of modern society have been presented. Such plans are becoming more frequent in connection with World Heritage properties and sometimes they are also needed to improve conditions and to facilitate visitors' access to sites. But at others they may just as well pose threats to the authenticity and significant values that once justified the decision of the World Heritage Committee to inscribe the property on the List. The prehistoric rock art at Sierra de San Francisco is definitely an example of the latter. The incomprehensible aesthetic of the rock art images and the pristine beauty of the serene landscape would be lost if a modern infrastructure were imposed on the property. To avoid such a devastating measure, World Heritage rock art experts and World Heritage rock art site managers, international experts and representatives of the World Heritage advisory bodies met during the session entitled 'Managing Rock Art World Heritage Sites' (22-23 May 2007) directed by Nuria Sanz of the World Heritage Centre at the 22nd Valcamonica International Symposium on Rock Art. These experts sent a motion to the responsible Mexican authorities stating that the proposed plans would threaten the outstanding universal values of the property and therefore must be stopped immediately. The experts highlighted that a monitoring mission to the site may be necessary, depending on the reaction of the State Party to the motion.

Acknowledgements

Nuria Sanz (Guadeloupe, Valcamonica, Baja California), Jo McDonald (Dampier), Joaquim Soler i Sublis (Western Sahara).

Ulf Berthilsson
President of CAR



Rock art site at Sluguilla Lawash damaged by blue spray paint (Photo: Joaquim Soler i Sublis)