

## PANAMA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

A key issue for heritage conservation in Panama (although not exclusive to it) is the insufficient institutionalisation of heritage management principles and requirements. This problem is compounded by the lack of resources allocated to the state bodies that have responsibility for heritage, as well as a lack of administrative structures to implement what legislation and regulations exist.

This lack of ability to manage Panama's heritage is evidenced with all the country's forms of heritage, but is perhaps most keenly visible at the two cultural World Heritage sites in Panama, the Fortifications on the Carribean Site of Panama: Portobelo-San Lorenzo and the Historic District of Panamá, with the Salón Boliva. Both sites have not had any active management since their listing, being completely abandoned, and have no management infrastructure. There are no management plans or conservation policies for these places, nor visitor presentation and interpretation, and no access controls.

Some aspects of heritage are at great risk, as they have never received a high priority, mostly due to the lack of expertise to deal with it. This is the case with the archaeological resources of Panama, which like so many Central American countries, has not developed archaeological heritage management expertise. This means that there is no comprehensive identification of this heritage by ground survey and other means. Without such identification, with a frail infrastructure and limited skills to ensure that such survey takes place prior to development projects, it is

likely that much of Panama's archaeological and prehistoric heritage has been subjected to looting and sub-surface sites ignored during major earthmoving works. It is therefore a positive sign that now with the assistance of the Chilean heritage authorities archaeological survey mapping has just begun.

It is also encouraging that *patronatos* are being actively established to foster private donations for specific heritage buildings and sites, including Panama Viejo (the Historic District) and more recently the Portobelo site. Their enthusiasm and energy, however, needs to focus on proper management and conservation techniques and principles, availing themselves of adequate professional expertise.

This lack of any institutional sense of heritage management is currently all the more a threat to Panama's heritage as the Panama Canal Zone has just reverted to Panama by the United States. While the canal proper is well managed, the early managerial and residential communities that grew in association with it are now being privatised on a piecemeal basis, without any restrictions on the part of the owners to alter them at will. This constitutes a grave danger in that it is diminishing, perhaps even eliminating, the historic character and significance of these sites and landscapes. The features of this major and very important heritage element of the world's transport and communication system is at risk if the very best heritage management practice is not put in place for it immediately.