

# The World Heritage Convention, cultural landscapes and wetlands

**T**he World Heritage Convention (WHC) defines and conserves the world's heritage by drawing up a list of sites whose outstanding natural or cultural values should be preserved for all humanity, endeavoring to ensure their protection through a closer cooperation among nations. A number of Ramsar sites are also WHC sites and a Memorandum of Understanding between the two conventions, signed in May 1999, provides a framework for future cooperation on their common objectives.

Initially, World Heritage recognized sites for either their natural or their cultural properties, but a major step was taken in 1992 to encourage the identification of cultural landscapes as a separate category worthy of protection, making the WHC the first international legal instrument to recognize and protect such areas. In doing so, the WHC acknowledged that cultural landscapes represent the "combined works of nature and of man" designated in Article 1 of the Convention. They illustrate the evolution of human society

and settlement over time as influenced by the physical constraints as well as the opportunities presented by the natural environment.

The term "cultural landscape" embraces a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between people and their natural environment, often reflecting specific techniques of sustainable land use or a specific spiritual relationship with nature. As of August 2001, a total of 23 cultural landscapes have been

included on the World Heritage List and this modest number is certain to increase significantly in the coming years. Already five of the cultural landscape sites



T. JONES/RAMSAR

Hortobágy National Park, a Ramsar site in Hungary, is an outstanding example of the World Heritage Convention's "organically evolved landscape".

include designated Ramsar sites and, through the formal relationship between WHC and the Ramsar Convention, there is a great opportunity for recognizing the cultural heritage of other Ramsar sites as cultural landscapes under the WHC.

## WHC defines three categories of cultural landscape

The most easily identifiable is the **clearly defined landscape** designed and created intentionally by man. This embraces garden and parkland landscapes constructed for aesthetic reasons which are often (but not always) associated with religious or other monumental buildings and ensembles. A typical example is the Cultural Landscape of Sintra in Portugal.

The **organically evolved landscape** results from an initial social, economic, administrative, and/or religious imperative and has developed its present form by association with and in response to its natural environment. Such landscapes reflect that process

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of evolution in their form and component features in two ways:

a) A **relict (or fossil) landscape** is where an evolutionary process came to an end at some time in the past but its significant distinguishing features are still visible in material form. Hortobágy National Park, a Ramsar site in Hungary, is an outstanding example, where the cultural landscape was shaped by a pastoral society whose traditional use of the area over more than two millennia is still visible.

b) A **continuing landscape** retains an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life, and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress. At the same time it exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time. Three such sites in Europe, Southern Öland in Sweden, part of the Loire Valley in France, and the Curonian Spit on the Lithuanian-Russian Federation border, include designated Ramsar sites.

**Associative cultural landscapes** are those where powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element exist rather than material cultural evidence, which may be insignificant or even absent. A fine example is Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (Ayers Rock), which is of fundamental significance to Australia's indigenous people.

Characterized by the interaction of spiritual, material, and technological responses of people to their environment, cultural landscapes demonstrate the indivisibility of nature and culture. The preservation of this mix of beliefs, traditions, monuments and nature poses significant challenges for site managers. To help managers meet these challenges, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and its three international advisory bodies are developing *Management Guidelines for Cultural Landscapes*. The guidelines, due to be published in 2002, will assist site managers in the day-to-day protection of the delicate balance between people and nature, and can provide a useful tool for the management of Ramsar sites that are cultural landscapes.

The "World Heritage Convention" is formally *The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. The Convention was adopted by UNESCO in 1972. As of July 2001, 164 countries have signed the Convention (<http://www.unesco.org/whc/>).

*The Convention's three international advisory bodies are:*

**IUCN-The World Conservation Union**, advising on natural heritage (<http://wcpa.iucn.org/theme/heritage/heritage.html>)

**International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)**, advising on cultural heritage (<http://www.icomos.org>)

**International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM)**, advising on cultural heritage (<http://www.iccrom.org>)

#### **The Ramsar Bureau**

Rue Mauverney 28  
CH-1196 Gland  
Switzerland  
Tel.: +41 22 999 0170  
Fax: +41 22 999 0169  
E-mail: [ramsar@ramsar.org](mailto:ramsar@ramsar.org)  
Web site: <http://ramsar.org>



CONVENTION ON WETLANDS  
(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)