

ICOMOS

Rock Art: Pre-nomination Guidelines

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1 Introduction

Rock art is the most widespread cultural manifestation of humankind. It is present in almost every region of the world; the countless rock-art sites bear witness to its production over more than forty millennia. In this way rock art constitutes one of the basic expressions of human culture and a key element of its cultural heritage. Rock art is a manifestation of human conceptual thought and of the beliefs that are at the heart of traditional societies and have survived over a longer period than any other world artistic tradition.

Against that background it is vital therefore that rock-art sites should figure significantly on the World Heritage List (WHL) in order to strengthen its credibility. For some regions rock art may be one means whereby gaps in the List can be filled. In theory there are many sites that might be identified as being potentially qualified for World Heritage status. Only certain of these will, however, be able to demonstrate Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) and hence be eligible for inclusion on the WHL.

As sites that have recently been nominated have shown, the capacity to demonstrate OUV for most sites requires research and documentation studies that are sufficiently detailed for the context, the significance, the originality, and the scope of the rock art to be presented and evaluated. It is difficult for the World Heritage Committee to be persuaded of the OUV of rock art if these aspects have not received adequate study: large numbers of paintings alone do not necessarily justify inscription, unless it can be demonstrated why the site can be differentiated from others in the same geo-cultural region or elsewhere around the world, through their meaning and relevance, through exceptional qualities, or by virtue of the characteristics of their host environment. Nominated sites thus need to be supported by adequate documentation, legal protection, and clearly defined management processes, in accordance with the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO, 2008).

These *Pre-Nomination Guidelines* have therefore been drafted in order to help State Parties identify how nomination dossiers for rock-art sites should be developed. They should be considered in parallel with the Regional Thematic Studies that ICOMOS is planning to produce for all the regions. Latin America and the Caribbean, followed by Southern Africa, North Africa, and the Sahara, are to be the first in the series. These complement the information contained in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO, 2008).

The present *Guidelines* address various important aspects of rock-art sites that should be taken into consideration when nominations are being prepared. These cover the identification and assessment of the intrinsic qualities of sites, together with their conservation and management.

Although there are some basic similarities between rock-art sites in various parts of the world, there are also very significant differences in terms of where the rock art is found, the geology and climatic conditions, and the scope and distribution of the engravings and paintings. These basic 'types' are considered below.

The most significant differences are probably those related to the geo-cultural context of the rock art – its genesis, its meaning, and its relevance to human communities, both past and present. These aspects, too, are considered below.

2 Types of Rock-Art Site

The type of site influences how it might be nominated, in terms of its scope, boundaries, context, protection, and management:

It is the cultural and not any geographical determinism that guides the choice of sites and how they are used, and for this reason rock-art sites may be quite different. This is something that must be taken into account during evaluations.

a) Caves

Examples: Altamira and the Palaeolithic cave art of Northern Spain, decorated caves in the Vézère valley in France. This type of heritage is the easiest to protect and manage owing to the limited extent of these areas, and because in general it is possible to control access to the sites. Cave art is the form of rock art with which the general public is most familiar, yet it is the least widespread around the world - the European Palaeolithic, but also Maya caves in Central America, mud-glyph caves in the south-eastern USA, Australian caves, and several isolated examples in Hawaii (lava tubes), Mexico, and elsewhere.

b) Isolated sites

These may be shelters where the art is found in areas exposed to daylight (Cueva de las Manos, Argentina) or engravings in the open air (Alta, Norway). There are countless isolated sites on all five continents. They cannot therefore be selected unless they present one or several truly exceptional features.

c) Groups of sites

Certain places - a valley, a hill or a mountain (Monte Castillo), a canyon - had a particular significance for some human communities, often related to their interpretation of their environment (see below). This explains the accumulation of sites to be observed in areas such as Valcamonica, Tanum, Côa, Serra da Capivara, Bhimbetka, Tsodilo, or uKhahlamba-Drakensberg. These groups of sites are of the highest interest.

d) Regions

In some cases these groupings may apply to an entire geographical region that has been preserved. This is the case with Acacus in Libya, Tassili n'Ajjer in Algeria, the outermost regions of the Aïr and the Ténéré in Niger, the Matopo Hills in Zimbabwe, Kakadu in Australia, and the Sierra de San Francisco in Mexico. There is no need to emphasize their exceptional value.

e) A specific type of art that corresponds with a well defined chronological or geographical tradition may be worthy of inscription on the List. This would be the case for sites of the Spanish Levante art in the Mediterranean. The art of the Pecos River in the USA and Mexico, which is not on the List, might also be considered.

3 The Geo-cultural Context of Rock-Art Sites

Rock-art sites may have been created for many different reasons. Sites may sometimes reflect several centuries or millennia of creation, and in this way their historical evolutions or those of their changing cultural contexts and circumstances. They may be of interest because of their relationship to a particular culture, epoch, or event, or they may bear witness to a particular process, whether technological or religious.

a) Practices, beliefs, tales, or legends that have persisted

When the myths that created it have completely disappeared, art becomes fossilized (for example, European Palaeolithic art and many other forms of art worldwide). However, in Australia (Kakadu) and in some parts of Africa, Asia, and America (Pecos River), traditions are either living or have been handed down through ethnological testimonies over recent centuries (Sierra de San Francisco in Mexico). The art to which these belong is all the more important and remarkable.

Nominations need to address this context for rock art and demonstrate whether the art is fossilized while having retaining evidence of past practices, is still living in the sense of the images being understood and relevant for today's societies, or still living with new rock art being produced (Bandiagara in Mali). Time frames are also relevant - whether the art was short-lived or whether it continued over many centuries, or even millennia – and what the evidence is for this. Oral traditions can often help with understanding the images or associated practices, and can even show how rock-art traditions have migrated to other surfaces, such as houses or portable utensils. In the same way, ceremonies may help to understand the rites of passage or other types of ritual to which the art was at some time associated.

b) History

Sometimes (e.g. Altamira in Spain) the history of research and discoveries during modern times may give additional value to the site.

c) Archaeology

In many cases, archaeological excavation or research at or near rock-art sites can make the first approach to determining the context of the art and the type of society to which it belonged once it becomes possible to link the art to habitation sites or when traces and remains left by the makers of the art have been observed or recovered by archaeologists. Research into the images themselves may also contribute to an understanding of the chronological sequences of the paintings or engravings through the study of superimpositions and the evolution of the themes represented or the techniques used. Engravings made with metal tools, for instance, may be linked to the spread of metalworking.

4 Settings of Rock-Art Sites

The quality of the environment

In most cases it was the environment that determined the creation of the art; it may also have played a major role in its meaning. It would therefore make absolutely no sense to dissociate the art from its natural environment. The importance of this factor is strikingly obvious in cases such as the following: Uluru (Australia), Cueva de las Manos (Argentina), the Rio Pinturas, the Côa Valley (Portugal), and the canyons of the Sierra de San Francisco (Mexico).

It is essential for nomination dossiers to consider how the natural environment that hosts the rock art is to be sustained, protected, and respected. In many cases trees and shrubs that overhang shelters or caves have the capacity to shelter paintings from direct sunlight. Vegetation can also play a role in the ecological balance which allows the painted surfaces to remain sufficiently dry despite rain and floods. Pressure resulting from the collection of firewood, from overgrazing, or from burning of vegetation can all lead to loss of protection and damage. Conservation of rock-art sites must therefore target both the rock art itself and the natural environment that surrounds it in order to sustain a balance between the two.

It is not only the vegetation that makes the natural environment important. The topography of the prehistoric landscape played an important role in the choice of locations for the paintings and engravings. Later modifications of the original landform elements due to changes in land use may have disguised the original intentions and obscured qualities which are therefore important to demonstrate. Those qualities relate to the concepts of visual and structural integrity in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO, 2008). In certain cases, such as Tanum (Sweden) the gradual change in the landscape resulting from the continuous addition of new elements resulting from agriculture and forestry was put forward as an additional quality when the rock-art site was inscribed.

5 Rock Art as Art

The rock art itself

It is clearly the most important point in evaluating and ranking sites even if the quality of the rock art overlaps with other considerations such as its setting, dating, etc.

The qualities that should be taken into consideration fall into various categories:

- the aesthetic quality of the art (the decorated caves of the Vézère valley in France, uKhahlamba-Drakensberg in South Africa);
- the quantitative dimension (Valcamonica in Italy, Tanum in Sweden, Tassili n'Ajjer in Algeria, etc.);
- exemplary or rarity aspects, whether in respect of the techniques used, the themes depicted, or its location (Alta);
- intrinsic originality (Sierra de San Francisco in Mexico, Pecos River in the USA);
- evidence of a long artistic tradition in that location (Bhimbetka in India, Serra da Capivara in Brazil, etc) or of special practices (Cueva de las Manos in Argentina).

6 Management and Conservation

In order to demonstrate that nominated rock-art sites have been adequately identified and researched and that they are well managed, conserved, and protected, the following aspects of the site need to be considered:

a) Boundaries

The boundaries proposed for a nominated site need to reflect the original scope and extent of the rock art and to be logical in terms of encompassing what is identified as having OUV. Rock-art sites can be very extensive; some may in effect be serial sites, groups of engravings or paintings separated by long distances. For example, an original rock-art tradition or style, such as the Levante art in Spain, may be spread out over an immense territory. This is why boundaries need also to reflect the geo-cultural contexts in terms of cultural links between sites. For instance, if sites reflect cultural routes, trade, migration, etc, the routes that link the sites may also need to be considered as part of the nomination. In the same way, if sites reflect links with settled communities, this might also be reflected in the area chosen for nomination. Boundaries need not conform with present-day political frontiers, since serial nominations can be used to encompass the original extent and values, which might extend over two or more countries.

b) Research

In demonstrating OUV and the appropriate management and conservation, the value of rock-art sites needs to be carefully assessed by means of research and study, in order to explain why the site is important and significant. Nomination dossiers should detail the research that has been undertaken and the conclusions drawn from it. Research may address associated factors, such as the archaeological investigation of sites, ethnological information, or social and economic factors, or it may document why the scope and extent of the site is of particular significance, first in its geo-cultural region and then internationally. Demonstrating an extensive knowledge of the sites should be a key part of the nomination process.

c) Documentation

There needs to be adequate documentation for every site inscribed on the WH List in order to create a satisfactory record of what has been inscribed and to justify its OUV. This means explaining what the site is and what constitutes its value. This is a challenge for large sites with many thousands of images, and several levels of information may be considered:

- i. The first level would be to provide a description to a standard format and a map for each site.
- ii. The second level would be to provide a description to a standard format and an accurate drawing and photographs for each element.
- iii. Once the study of the site has been completed, the third level would be to provide a description to a standard format for each image. Examples of such formatted descriptions, which in every case should be adapted to local conditions, can be provided.

In general, only the first and second levels of information are essential for justifying the OUV.

To summarize, the minimum requirement is to provide a description of the approach adopted for the documentation, using an accepted methodology, an explanation of how the overall inventory was compiled, and a demonstration of the scope and extent of the images (see examples above), indicating the resources that are available and a time-frame for its implementation.

This needs to be supplemented by a recognized method of storing and accessing the results (maps, analogue and digital photographs, database, tracings, research into the environment, the archaeology, the ethnology). It is also necessary to state precisely where and how all the data are archived and made available to researchers.

Good practices for the production of inventories have been developed in many regions of the world. Ways of supporting and disseminating these are being considered by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Rock Art (CAR - Comité International d'Art Rupestre) and other international bodies such as IFRAO (International Federation of Rock Art Organizations).

The documentation submitted in the nomination should justify the proposed boundaries. This means that, once what is contained in the site and what it may not contain have been identified, it is necessary to specify how the OUV is defined by the proposed boundaries, and at the same time why what lies outside the boundaries is considered to be of lesser value or less susceptible to proper preservation.

d) Conservation

There are two aspects to conservation. Is the site (or the group of sites proposed) particularly well preserved or is it in danger? What conservation measures have been taken to ensure its lasting protection and are any complementary measures necessary?

Conservation must concern itself not only with the images but also with their context, in terms of the rocks on which they are found and the natural environment. It also needs to take account of access by visitors and the prevention of resulting damage, the prevention of natural degradation (such as wasp nests, termites, flooding, visits to the sites by animals, etc.), regulation of agricultural and community activities in the vicinity of the site, etc. It is furthermore of vital importance to demonstrate that the conservation is carried out using a proactive approach and, as far as possible, non-intrusive methods that avoid the use of harmful substances.

For some sites maintenance of the ecological balance of the surrounding natural vegetation, combined with careful arrangements to limit access, by both visitors and grazing animals, may be needed in order to conserve the site. In such cases the arrangements for achieving these, in both the short- and the long-term, should be described. At other sites the engravings and paintings might already have suffered from graffiti or water penetration, and so the conservation will include measures to minimize further damage and to stabilize the images.

e) Management

Active management of the nominated sites is crucial if their value is to be maintained. First of all, the appropriate type of management must be identified.

Management needs to achieve the following:

- Monitoring of the condition of the rock art;

- Measures for achieving ecological stability of the surrounding areas;
- Management of visitors where the sites are accessible to the public;
- Arrangements to allow agricultural activities to continue without adversely impacting the rock art;
- Where sites are still used as part of local ceremonies or traditions, arrangements to allow these to continue without damage to the rock-art images;
- The management of known and unexpected threats;
- Involvement of local communities (stakeholders, citizens, schools). For large dispersed sites, with low visitor numbers, management in cooperation with local communities might be the preferred option, in which case details of how this arrangement has been structured should be provided to show how monitoring and regular inspections are carried out.

Where sites are heavily visited, or where an increase in visitor numbers is desired, a direct on-site presence is needed to manage these visitors. This may consist of paid staff combined with volunteers to guide parties of visitors. For heavily visited sites, the management arrangements will need to include an access strategy as a function of the visitor numbers. Means of enabling visitors to understand the significance of the rock art is a crucial part of most management arrangements, with the aim of strengthening respect for the images.

Many rock-art sites are located within areas that are already protected on ecological grounds, such as national parks. In some cases the existing management staff may be able to manage the rock art. However, there is usually a need to complete these teams with people who are knowledgeable about the cultural values of the rock art and the conservation issues specific to it. It is essential for conflicts between the two types of management - the cultural and the natural - to be discussed and resolved. For instance, the burning of grassland in order to encourage the retention of certain plant species could be highly detrimental to painted rock art. In such cases there must be an understanding that the management of the natural qualities of the site should be less strict so as to respect the cultural values of the rock art.

In other areas rock art is found in forest reserves from which people may have been moved. Evacuations of this kind could undermine the cultural value of rock art in terms of its meaning for present-day communities. Management regimes should give consideration to aspects of this kind to see what might be achieved through effective partnerships.

The inscription of rock art on the World Heritage List can in some instances provide the opportunity for local communities to benefit in social and economic terms through strengthening their relationship with the rock art and offering the potential for them to benefit from visitors.

On the other hand, access to some particularly vulnerable sites might have to be severely restricted.

7 Justifying the outstanding universal value of sites

Around the world there are hundreds of thousands of rock-art sites, but only those possessing outstanding universal value (OUV) should be inscribed on the World Heritage List. The crucial test for nominated sites is whether or not they can demonstrate OUV by satisfying the criteria in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO, 2008) and by demonstrating by comparative analysis that the site or sites are outstanding in geographical, cultural, and global terms.

Comparative analysis

A successful comparative analysis must set the nominated site or sites in context, which means demonstrating knowledge of how the site or sites fit(s) into the wider picture, first regionally and then globally. This is not an easy task when records of rock-art sites are scattered around the world. It is, however, a study that must be undertaken in order to make a strong case for why the site or sites should be inscribed. Nomination needs to justify, by means of a comparative analysis, why the site or sites should be inscribed rather than many hundreds of others. This means justifying why their qualities are outstanding in terms of type, geo-cultural context, and setting.

Justifying the OUV of sites needs requires a thorough appraisal of the full range of the site's values and must above all show qualities other than large numbers of images or generalizations on how those images display evidence of past societies. Almost all rock art can be said to be of documentary value and the mere numbers of images alone do not of themselves necessarily imply OUV, whether these are large or indicate rarity.

The regional studies that ICOMOS is commissioning will help with this process. Both ICOMOS and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre are working to encourage knowledge of and better access to rock-art records.

Criteria

In order to satisfy the criteria, rock-art images must be justified in a precise way - why they demonstrate particular characteristics connected with the place in which they were found, the significance of their distribution, how they were connected with the culture and beliefs of the communities that created them, and the meaning they may still have for present-day communities.

The criteria most commonly used to justify the OUV of rock-art sites are (i), (ii), (iii), and (vi).

Criterion (i) "represent a masterpiece of human creative genius" requires that the site should be considered to be a "masterpiece." For this the images should be outstanding in visual terms, in terms of the techniques used, or their location - when, for instance, they appear to have been deliberately sited in a specific place in order to achieve a particular effect, as in the case of the spectacular panels in the Sierra de San Francisco (Mexico).

Criterion (ii) "exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design" requires consideration to be given to how sites can demonstrate an interchange of ideas, both inwards and outwards. To satisfy this consideration it is necessary to demonstrate how rock-art sites have either absorbed ideas from elsewhere or have influenced other areas. It is not easy to justify this criterion unless sufficient information is available on the cultural/ethnological context that is available or when stylistic (or thematic) comparisons can be made with other rock-art sites in areas that are more or less remote.

Criterion (iii) “bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared” may be applicable to many rock-art sites, but to justify it evidence is needed about how the rock art is really exceptional testimony and to what extent it relates to a civilization or to a specific cultural tradition.

Criterion (iv) “be an outstanding example of a type of building or architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history”, is usually not applicable to rock-art sites (save for the ancient use of deep caves) unless the sites are set within a wider landscape which as a whole can illustrate a particular phase in human history – for instance, a relict landscape in which rock art is just one of the pieces of evidence.

Criterion (v) “be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement or land-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change” is one that rock art can only satisfy if it is still living and represents a significant part of the culture of a society.

Criterion (vi) “be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance (the Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria).” Examples of the permanence of beliefs and practices related to rock art in traditional cultures are to be found on all the continents with the exception of Europe. This criterion is applicable to rock-art sites where the images can be directly associated with ideas or beliefs that are still living only where those beliefs themselves are presented in the context of the ideology and history of the people who created the rock art and which may be said to be of OUV. This criterion needs to be associated with further criteria which encapsulate the physical value of the rock art, the fabric of the site, its history, and its relationship with the landscape.

8 Conclusion

Rock art undoubtedly differs from other elements of human heritage by reason of its geographical extension (all over the world except in the Arctic and the Antarctic), by the number and variety of sites (more than 400,000), and by its time-depth (at least 40,000 years). This will have two consequences for a balanced and credible World Heritage List: in the coming years many more rock-art nominations (and inscriptions on the List) may logically be expected. For obvious reasons, however, the selection of the “best” sites needs to be strict, not to say drastic.

The object of the *Guidelines* is to make it clearly understood that rock-art sites nominated to the List will have better chances of being inscribed when:

- they meet several, and not just one, of the proposed criteria;
- the various domains mentioned above have already been adequately researched and the data about them are extensive, correctly archived (in the form of a database), and accessible;
- the problems of conservation and management have already been solved and adequately dealt with;
- the nomination deals clearly and comprehensively with these questions and is substantiated with relevant documentation.