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World Heritage in Small Island Developing States

Culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development

Anita Smith
La Trobe University, Melbourne (Australia)
At the 36th session of the World Heritage Committee (2012), Rock Islands Southern Lagoon (Palau) and Pearling, Testimony of an Island Economy (Bahrain) were inscribed on the World Heritage List. This brought the total number of World Heritage properties in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to twenty-eight, eleven of which have been inscribed since the adoption of the World Heritage Programme for Small Island Developing States by the World Heritage Committee in 2005.

The SIDS are thirty-seven self-governing island states in the UNESCO regions of Africa (five – see box page 10), the Arab States (one), Asia and the Pacific (eighteen), and the Caribbean (thirteen). They have been identified by UNESCO as a special cluster of nations on the basis of the common issues they face in achieving sustainable development. These arise from their small size, relative remoteness, narrow resource base and vulnerability to global environmental and economic challenges, in particular climate change. This special status was reaffirmed at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development – Rio+20 held in Brazil in 2012.

**Diverse island nations**

These island states include some of the most beautiful places on Earth – atolls of white sand beaches ringed by blue seas and coral reefs, mountain ranges covered in cloud forests, historic ports and towns and cultural landscapes created through traditional agricultural practices. The SIDS are some of the smallest nations – the Pacific Island of Niue has a population of only 1,269 and Tuvalu a total land area of only 26 km² – but also some of the most densely populated, such as Bahrain and Maldives, which respectively have a population of over 1,600 and 1,030 per square kilometre.

Although all the SIDS are characterized by island geographies and environments and their shared social, economic and environmental concerns, they exhibit a great diversity in cultures and languages. In the Pacific Island nations, traditional indigenous systems of knowledge and land tenure shape the island landscapes and seascapes, while elsewhere cultural diversity and hybridity are the result of African, Arab, European and Asian influences in the histories of these islands. In all, their rich and interconnected maritime histories reflect successive waves of willing, and in some cases unwilling, ocean voyagers who created the unique societies of these nations within a diverse and rich tapestry of natural, cultural and intangible heritage.

The recent inscriptions of the Bahrain and Palau sites are emblematic of the unique contribution of the SIDS to global heritage. Pearling, Testimony of an Island Economy, celebrates the traditional harvesting of pearls from oyster beds in the Persian Gulf, a cultural tradition that shaped the economy of Bahrain for millennia and dominated the Gulf between the 2nd and early 20th centuries. The serial property includes the oyster beds themselves, the seashore and built heritage, a tangible manifestation of the major social and economic institutions of pearling society. Rock Islands Southern Lagoon, an exquisitely beautiful marine and terrestrial landscape, was inscribed as a mixed site for its outstanding marine biodiversity and evidence of past human settlement. The archaeological remains of villages, the settlements of ancestors of present-day Palauans, are found on the small mushroom-like limestone islands. These small communities survived for over three millennia in this remote and marginal island environment while maintaining the outstanding biodiversity of the surrounding ocean.

Although vastly different in their tangible expressions, both the Bahrain and Palau sites are outstanding examples of traditional marine-based economies and human interaction with the environment that have enabled communities to flourish on small islands that have shaped their cultural identity all the way to the present.

The inscription of Rock Islands Southern Lagoon is a particular landmark for the Convention in that its Outstanding Universal Value directly acknowledges the critical role of cultural practices, traditional systems of resource management and traditional knowledge in maintaining sustainable human existence on small islands in the distant and more recent past and into the future (see page 30).

**Sustainability and the SIDS Programme**

The promotion of culture as the ‘fourth pillar of sustainable development’ and the need to ensure that policies for sustainable development in the SIDS are underpinned by culture and cultural practices were key
Pearling, Testimony of an Island Economy, celebrates the traditional harvesting of pearls from oyster beds in the Persian Gulf, a cultural tradition that shaped the economy of Bahrain for millennia.

Muharraq is part of the Pearling, Testimony of an Island Economy site in Bahrain.
A major feature of East Rennell (Solomon Islands) is Lake Tegano, which was the former lagoon on the atoll.
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Tangible and intangible heritage, the protection of the issues of cultural identity and development, emphasizing the culture for their sustainable development of Small Island Developing States. The panel argued for the importance of cultural heritage for their sustainable development, emphasizing the issues of cultural identity and diversity, the protection of the tangible and intangible heritage, the incorporation of local languages and traditional knowledge in formal education, as well as the economic opportunities provided by culture. Key recommendations of the panel were included in the Mauritius Strategy for Sustainable Development in the SIDS 2005–2015, adopted by the UN in 2005. In response the World Heritage Committee at its 29th meeting in Durban (South Africa) in 2005 adopted the World Heritage Programme for Small Island Developing States, to coordinate efforts to exchange information and implement the Mauritius Strategy within the context of the World Heritage Convention.

The SIDS Programme works alongside regional World Heritage Action Plans for the Caribbean and the Pacific Island nations initially developed in 2004 under the World Heritage Committee’s Global Strategy for a balanced and credible World Heritage List. The Pacific and Caribbean subregions and subsequently the African SIDS have been identified as significantly under-represented on the World Heritage List. In 2004 membership of the World Heritage Convention in these regions was relatively low and, together with the absence of systematic programmes for the conservation and management of heritage in the SIDS, reflected the broader lack of human and financial resources of the majority of them, nine of which are still considered least-developed countries (LDCs, see box page 10). Under the circumstances it was clear that promotion and implementation of the World Heritage Convention in the SIDS needed to take place within the broader agenda of sustainable development in these small island economies, to which they are also expected to contribute. In these countries individuals or very small departments within government are commonly the focal point for a range of heritage-related international conventions and agreements, as well as being responsible for administering national systems for heritage protection. In this context and given their shared issues of sustainability and the cultural and historical relationships of many SIDS, it was appropriate that the SIDS Programme should take a holistic approach in developing heritage policies and activities integrating natural, cultural, intangible and movable heritage. In the coordination and development of World Heritage activities in the SIDS, the aim of the programme has been to strengthen the overall capacity for heritage management through the sharing of knowledge and skills within and between the SIDS regions, utilizing existing regional networks, educational institutions and governmental and non-governmental organizations, and supporting and strengthening community resource management.

An outstanding initiative under the SIDS Programme has been the Caribbean Capacity Building Programme (CCBP), established in 2004 as a long-term training programme aimed at creating a Caribbean network of heritage professionals with skills in cultural and natural heritage protection and conservation. CCBP recognizes the shared issues and needs for training across the SIDS and provides flexible practical training through a network of heritage professionals and educational institutions offering approved training courses. CCBP provides maximum benefit from limited resources and a potential model for training in other SIDS regions, in particular the Pacific, was the recent establishment of a UNESCO Pacific Heritage Hub hosted by the University of the South Pacific, which will provide a regional focus for heritage initiatives and training.

From indigenous cultures to the nuclear age

In 2012, thirty-two of the thirty-seven SIDS are States Parties to the World Heritage Convention. Of the twenty-eight World Heritage properties in these island states, nineteen are cultural, eight natural and one mixed. When viewed historically, a number of themes emerge with regard to these sites. Many of the early inscriptions focus on historical colonial forts and towns of the Caribbean nations, but more recently they include an increasingly diverse range of site types and values that reflect a recognition and celebration of the unique heritage of small islands and the maturing of the World Heritage List in general.

Since 2005, SIDS properties inscribed on the World Heritage List have represented the heritage of slavery and indenture (Aaparavi Ghat, 2006; Le Morne Cultural Landscape, 2008, both in Mauritius); 20th-century global heritage of the nuclear age (Bikini Atoll Nuclear Test Site, Marshall Islands, 2010), indigenous stories and knowledge (Chief Roi Mata’s Domain, Vanuatu, 2008); traditional economies (Pearling, Testimony of an Island Economy, Bahrain, 2012; Kuk Early Agricultural Site, Papua New Guinea, 2008),
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vernacular and colonial architecture (Cidade Velha, Historic Centre of Ribeira Grande, Cape Verde, 2009; Historic Bridgetown and its Garrison, Barbados, 2011) as well as superb natural and mixed sites (Phoenix Islands Protected Area, Kiribati, 2010; Rock Islands Southern Lagoon, Palau, 2012). The Outstanding Universal Value of most directly reference the nature of islands – the sea, the maritime histories, their relationships with other peoples and places that underpinned their histories and identities.

Although nominations of the built heritage of the colonial era have continued, the Outstanding Universal Value of these properties are increasingly celebrated not as an architectural expression of colonial power but rather as an embodiment of the complex encounters and processes of exchange and their unique expression in the island landscapes. These trends are also evident in properties included on the Tentative Lists that have now been submitted by the majority of SIDS. These also include rock art sites and archaeological sites reflecting the early settlements by indigenous peoples of both the Pacific and Caribbean SIDS.

Filling gaps in the future

While the increasing representation of the SIDS on the World Heritage List is impressive, especially since 2005, given their economic and social needs, it should be kept in mind that the twenty-eight inscriptions are concentrated in sixteen of the thirty-seven SIDS, with nine being Cuban sites. Less than 3 per cent of a total of 962 World Heritage sites are in the SIDS. Gaps in the strategies of SIDS communities would make a strong contribution towards a representative World Heritage List. Similarly the natural heritage of the SIDS continues to be under-represented. Only three marine properties in SIDS have thus far been included on the World Heritage List. Their terrestrial natural heritage is slightly better represented by six properties, however of these only East Rennell (Solomon Islands) represents the exceptional natural heritage of Melanesia that dominates the Tentative Lists of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

The peoples and cultures of the SIDS are testament to human ingenuity in reaching these small isolated pieces of land, utilizing their resources and building sustainable ways of life, flourishing cultures and traditions that continue to pattern the island land and seascapes. These communities, while particularly vulnerable to the impacts of both climate change and global economic fluctuations, have identified their cultural heritage as underpinning their sustainability. The contribution of cultural and environmental diversity to sustainable development was reaffirmed at Rio+20 in 2012. The international cooperation that underpins the World Heritage Convention is a call to the governments and communities of the developed economies to support these island communities in their efforts towards a sustainable future.

Communities have identified their cultural heritage as underpinning their sustainability.

Small Island Developing States by region

- Africa (Cape Verde, Comoros, Mauritius, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles)
- Arab States (Bahrain)
- Asia/Pacific (Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu)
- Caribbean (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago)

The SIDS nations of Comoros, Kiribati, Samoa, Sao Tome and Principe, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tuvalu and Vanuatu are also least-developed countries.
The Palace of Sans Souci, the buildings at Ramiers and, in particular, the Citadel (Haiti) serve as universal symbols of liberty, being the first monuments to be constructed by black slaves who had gained their freedom.

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