

Ribeira Sacra Declaration on Water Cultural Landscapes

6-8 November 2023
Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil
Ribeira Sacra (Galicia, Spain)



RIBEIRA SACRA DECLARATION ON WATER CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

INTERNATIONAL MEETING OF EXPERTS

wateRScapes:

BRIDGING THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Ribeira Sacra 6 – 8 November 2023

The group of experts gathered in Ribeira Sacra (Galicia, Spain).

We, the experts assembled at the monastery of Santo Estevo de Ribas de Sil on the occasion of the International Meeting “Waterscapes: Bridging the Past and the Future”, twinned with the “Water, Culture and Heritage” event held at the same time in Amsterdam (The Netherlands);

Thanking the Xunta de Galicia’s for their warm hospitality in hosting and organising the meeting, with the collaboration of the UNESCO MaB (Man and Biosphere) Programme, the Global Geopark Network, the UNESCO Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme (IHP), the Spanish National Committee of ICOMOS, the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Water and Heritage (ISCWH), the ICOMOS IFLA International Scientific Committee on Cultural Landscapes (ISCCCL), the Cultural Landscapes Alliance and the universities of Santiago de Compostela, A Coruña, Autónoma de Madrid and Ca’ Foscari of Venice;

Recognising that water has been and continues to be an element that has structured and shaped landscapes since time immemorial, being an essential part of humanity’s cultural legacy, and that over the centuries it has forged an extraordinary diversity of cultural landscapes, particularly in river zones, where human work has merged with nature, creating unique territories shaped by the past and the present of water;

Affirming that the culture of water in these places is reflected in an exceptional heritage that includes archaeological sites, hydraulic works from all periods, agriculture and ancestral irrigation systems, vernacular architecture, water



management systems, river routes, industrial water heritage and other intangible cultural expressions, such as traditional water management practices, beliefs and related ritual uses, and is essential for the livelihood of local populations;

Convinced of the need to preserve, disseminate and enhance the value of this multifaceted heritage, strategic in a context of climate crisis, which includes an immense repertoire of systems, knowledge, structures and devices that throughout history have allowed humans to take advantage of and master this vital element for their survival, with identifiable expressions in the form of, inter alia, canals, polders, qanats, alfajs, chinampas, waterwheels, watermills, reservoirs, dams and hydropower facilities, which exemplify some of the countless works that illustrate the human odyssey of water;


Bearing in mind the profound interdependence between intangible cultural heritage or living heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage associated with cultural waterscapes;

Recognising that waterscapes and some of the works they contain have been symbolic references, sacred spaces or places charged with spirituality or beauty, with a very special meaning for many peoples, being associated with exceptional events or living traditions;

Knowing at the same time the fragility and vulnerability of these waterscapes, their habitats and the strong threats to which they are subjected, and the consequent need to implement specific initiatives to safeguard heritage;

Aware of the need to move beyond the approach that has prevailed until now, which considers water management and associated cultural heritage as exclusive domains, limiting the capacity to make use of past experiences and assets for current and future challenges of sustainable water management;

Convinced of the need to adopt an integrated and sustainable approach to the maintenance of environmental services of freshwater ecosystems, which include the provision of multiple assets such as food supply, crop irrigation, drinking water supply, water regulation, tourism, river transport or hydropower, the latter activity contributing significantly to the reduction of emissions and the mitigation of climate change;



Underlining the need to stimulate scientific research and training in the protection, conservation and management of cultural waterscapes and the water heritage they contain;

Aware that cultural waterscapes are useful sites for testing innovative solutions for sustainable water management, including the preservation of aquatic ecosystems and the recognition of related cultural heritage, paving the way to achieve SDG 6 and contributing to SDG 13, SDG 14 and SDG 15;

Recognising that water has been a meeting place for and has played a role in the genesis of civilisations and cultures, today it is a more a priority than ever to claim the cultural heritage of water as one of the driving forces of the culture of peace among the peoples of the planet;


In light of the guidelines set out in the UN Water Action Agenda (2023), the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the Cultural and Natural World Heritage, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), the goals of UNESCO's MAB Programme, and all other international conventions, programmes and agreements that have an impact on the preservation of aquatic biodiversity and its landscapes, the role of river systems in sustainable development, and the recognition of water cultures;

And inspired by the terms of the Statement on Water, Culture and Heritage by the participants of the conference "Water and Heritage: Connecting Past, Present and Future" in New York (2023).

WE MAKE THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

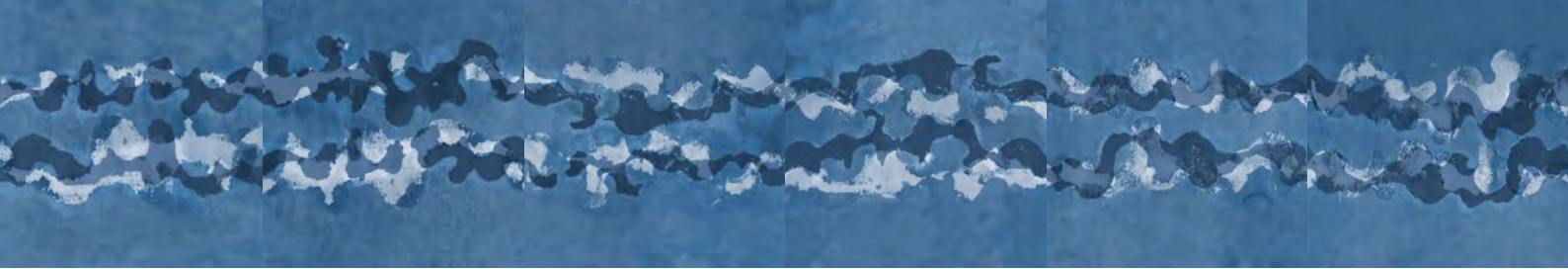
To all parties concerned

1. **Promote** cross-sectoral dialogues that connect water and heritage professionals, scientists, decision-makers, local administrations, traditional custodians and other concerned organisations at local, national and international levels.
2. **Promote** the creation of expert forums to foster the recognition of the value and importance of cultural waterscapes, always keeping in mind the people who inhabit the territory.

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3. **Support** local communities so that they themselves implement appropriate management mechanisms that solve their current needs while respecting their water-related heritage.
 4. **Incorporate** and recognise water-related living heritage in water management policies and programmes, with a view to its preservation and promotion.
 5. **Develop** a thematic agenda for research on the importance of water-related biocultural heritage to address future water management challenges.
 6. **Promote** interest in “learning from the past” and adding value to future water management interventions.
 7. **Promote** specific meetings and scientific contributions on thematic areas of common interest that contribute to fill the gaps in traditional and current ecological knowledge on cultural waterscapes.
 8. **Identify** case studies and good management practices, including those for the safeguarding of intangible heritage associated with water.
 9. **Support** the launch and consolidation of the platform on “Water, Culture and Heritage” recommended by the participants of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference, in the event “Water and Heritage: Connecting Past, Present, and Future”, organised by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Water .

To UNESCO


10. **Strengthen** the role of UNESCO sites in the preservation and enhancement of cultural waterscapes and their associated heritage.
11. **Support** States Parties to submit new cultural waterscapes nominations that contribute to a more representative, balanced and credible World Heritage List.



12. **Encourage** the MaB Programme with the World Network of Biosphere Reserves and the Global Network of Geoparks to identify cultural waterscapes as sites of special interest to promote innovative sustainable development initiatives for water and heritage management, committed to climate change and with the involvement of local communities.
13. **Encourage** the registration of new significant elements of living water heritage on the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices, in view of their under-representation.
14. **Include** research on the significance of water-related cultural and natural sites for livelihoods including in the context of climate change adaptation and mitigation within the UNESCO Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme (IHP).

To the Advisory Bodies

15. **Promote** the creation of a working group between the ISCCL (International Scientific Committee on Cultural Landscapes) and the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Water and Heritage (ISCWH) on cultural waterscapes.
16. **Propose** initiatives that address the living heritage of water to the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas Specialist Group of the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Places of Religion and Ritual (PRERICO).
17. **Urge** ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) to support the development of thematic studies on cultural waterscapes and associated heritage at different regional levels.
18. **Draw up** guidelines, including case studies and the exchange of experiences and good practices, on the use of an inclusive and holistic approach to the recognition, governance and management of cultural waterscapes.

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19. **Promote**, under the “Water, Culture and Heritage” thematic platform, national and local studies on water-related heritage and its significance for livelihoods in, for example, terraced agriculture, water mill landscapes and hydropower, urban and rural water ways, qanat systems, spate irrigation, governance systems and spiritual as well as religious visions and practices.
 20. **Encourage** the “Water, Culture and Heritage” platform to organise dialogues on international and national heritage, and to participate in water-related conferences such as the 10th World Water Forum (Bali, Indonesia, 2024), IUCN world congresses, UNFCCC COPs, regional water weeks, and ICOMOS and TICCIH conferences such as the ICOMOS General Assembly (Malaysia, 2025).

To FAO

21. **Support** examples of cultural waterscapes in the framework of the “Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems” (GIAHS) programme, considered as aesthetically impressive sites that combine agricultural biodiversity with resilient ecosystems and valuable cultural heritage, taking into account the heritage significance of water culture.

To governments and public administrations

22. **Identify and prepare** regularly updated inventories of relevant cultural waterscapes, including related cultural heritage.
23. **Prepare** inventories of the living heritage associated with water culture present in each territory and encourage their updating.
24. **Encourage** the recognition of the value and importance of cultural waterscapes, especially in river areas.
25. **Create** a suitable framework to help local authorities and communities to take action for the benefit of their water heritage and its management, following the recommendations suggested by the European Heritage Strategy for the 21st Century.