

Managing, Preserving and Integrating Underwater Cultural Heritage in World Heritage Sites

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Session Description

Maritime cultures and activities are pivotal in shaping our interconnected global societies, influencing diverse aspects such as identity politics and map-making. Despite their significance, maritime narratives are often underrepresented or completely absent in the values and statements of significance of World Heritage Sites. The 50th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention in 2022 prompted stakeholders to re-examine the Convention, exploring nomination and listing processes, and reassessing its overall significance. Notably, the opaque representation of maritime contributions in the Outstanding Universal Values of many sites spurred the ICOMOS International Committee on the Underwater Cultural Heritage (ICUCH) to establish a working group in 2021 specifically to address this gap.

This Session, organized by ICOMOS-ICUCH, will delve into the critical issues surrounding the identification, study, management, and preservation of underwater cultural heritage (UCH) within the World Heritage framework. By presenting diverse case studies from various regions, the session aims to underscore the importance of UCH of enhancing the OUVs of World Heritage sites and identify some of the policy gaps within the Convention processes that might impact UCH's preservation. Because UCH is seldom considered in nomination files or inscriptions, coastal and marine World Heritage sites often overlook the significance of the marine heritage within their boundaries. Consequently, elements of UCH are frequently omitted from Management Plans, Periodic Reporting, and updates of World Heritage Buffer Zones.

To achieve a more representative and inclusive World Heritage List, it is essential to comprehensively integrate UCH within World Heritage processes. Strengthening the synergies between the 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage and the World Heritage Convention is crucial in this regard. This session will explore the politics behind the World Heritage listing and management processes, and the potential contributions of UCH to their OUVs. It is high time for UCH to be acknowledged and incorporated within World Heritage processes, promoting a more holistic approach to heritage preservation and management.

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