



PROTECTING AND PRESERVING CULTURAL HERITAGE

Topic Background for the Committee on Protecting and Preserving Cultural Heritage

“Cultural heritage is a reflection of human history, civilization, and the coexistence of multiple peoples and their ways of life. Its protection is a shared responsibility of the international community, in the interest of future generations.”

— Paolo Gentiloni, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Statement of the Problem

From the raiding of ancient tombs in Peru and China, and the destruction and theft of **antiquities** and **archeological sites** in Iraq and Syria, to the environmental concerns surrounding the Great Barrier Reef and the canals and waterways of the Italian city of Venice, **cultural heritage** is under threat around the world. Recognizing the importance of this problem to the global community, Ban Ki-moon, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), recently proclaimed, “An attack on cultural heritage in one part of the world is an attack on all humanity.” The protection and preservation of cultural heritage is essential to supporting the development of peaceful societies, strengthening **sustainable development**, preventing violent **extremism**, and stopping the financing of terrorism.¹

Having at one time only applying to objects, monuments and artifacts, cultural heritage is now a wide concept that has gradually evolved over time. Simply put, cultural heritage includes all the elements that a community uses to construct its identity and its sense of the past, the present, and the future.² Today, experts agree that cultural heritage can be specified to include both tangible and intangible forms. **Tangible cultural heritage**, or objects you can touch, includes movable cultural heritage (paintings, sculptures, coins, and manuscripts), immovable cultural heritage (monuments, archaeological sites, natural landscapes, and geological formations) and even extends into certain aspects of culture that can be found underwater (shipwrecks, underwater ruins, and cities). **Intangible cultural heritage** includes **oral traditions**, the performing arts, the knowledge and skill to produce traditional crafts, and even rituals.³



A young Chinese boy takes photos during an exhibit specifically intended to raise public awareness around the country's progress in protecting both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Although concerns surrounding the protection and preservation of cultural heritage for future generations is not new, in recent years cultural heritage has deteriorated at accelerating rates and increasingly become under threat as a result of **industrialization**, rapid **urbanization**, technological advancements, **climate change**, mass tourism, war, and conflict⁴. Currently, cultural property related to world heritage is being unlawfully excavated, stolen, looted, and exported or imported with the help of sophisticated modern technologies. These crimes are

¹ [Protecting Cultural Heritage: An Imperative for Humanity](#), Interpol, 2016.

² [“What is Cultural Heritage?”](#) Penn Cultural Heritage Center, 2013.

³ [What is Cultural Heritage?](#) UNESCO, 2010.

⁴ [World Heritage in Danger](#). UNESCO, 2015.

increasingly linked to international criminal activity. The expanded definition of cultural heritage has made it difficult for effective national and international action, prompting an urgent need for cooperation and collaboration. The necessity to both define and **deter** the issues that threaten cultural heritage is an important matter that **transcends** borders and is as important for **developing** United Nations Member States as for **developed** ones.

History of the Problem & Past International Action

Cultural heritage and cultural properties have been destroyed, looted, and trafficked throughout history, particularly after war has ended. Since the 18th century, and even before, protecting and preserving cultural heritage has been recognized as an essential part of the responsibilities of a modernized society. The oldest urban settlements in China, Egypt, the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia⁵, and the Mediterranean formed some of the world's foremost, culturally diverse regions. In the age of early empires and kingdoms and all throughout both rural and **indigenous** communities, there has always been a basis for the development of particular artistic contributions to culture. Cultural influences from other areas of the world came through various types of contact and included the use of early trade routes and **human migration**. Industrialization and technological advancements have also greatly contributed to the diversity and spread of culture throughout early history.



In Cambodia, a shadow theater performance featuring leather puppets takes place three or four times a year and has evolved from being a ritualistic activity in the fifteenth century to an artistic form in present day.

Since the early 19th century, there has been a need to understand the future of cultural heritage specifically in relation to its treatment during times of war and conflict. Although international documents date back as far as the 6th century AD, the *Hague Conventions with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land* (1899 and 1907) introduced several modern conditions and statements that forbid the destruction of an enemy's property, which in some cases included cultural heritage. The **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** was founded in 1945 with an early emphasis on **conservation** and is the only specialized agency within the United Nations system with a specific focus on culture. UNESCO assists Member States in the **implementation** of certain measures for the effective safeguarding of cultural heritage.

The first international treaty to specifically address the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones was the *Hague Convention* of 1954. It was created in light of the destruction of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, during the Second World War. During the 1950s and 1960s, efforts were made to encourage international cooperation to protect cultural heritage and extraordinary natural areas for the benefit of future generations, and additionally for all humankind. In light of the increasing number of international crimes related to the looting and **trafficking** of cultural heritage in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the first international responses was the *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* (1970), established by UNESCO. The first national response was the formation, in Italy, of the world's first police force specialized in the protection of cultural property.

As the protection of cultural heritage became a more pressing matter, UNESCO passed the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (1972). The **Convention** defined what cultural heritage and natural heritage are along with why and how they should be protected. It also established an assumption of responsibility to protect cultural heritage through the development of designated **World Heritage Sites**, or examples of cultural heritage. The Convention also established a **World Heritage Fund** from which assistance is

⁵ The Indus Valley extends from what today is northeast Afghanistan to Pakistan and northwest India. Mesopotamia roughly corresponds to what today is Iraq and Kuwait, the eastern parts of Syria, and Southeastern Turkey.

available to Member States for the identification and conservation of the world's heritage. Toward the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, there were a variety of armed conflicts across the globe that forced UNESCO to realize that the 1954 Convention was not enough to fully protect world heritage. In 1999 the *Second Protocol to the Hague Convention* was added to outline procedures and impose **sanctions** on Member states who violated the Convention and potential conditions for individual criminal responsibility for damaging or destroying world heritage sites.⁶ In 2015, the 1972 Convention was strengthened to include preventative measures as well as return and **restitution** procedures.

Discussion of the Problem and Examples of Threats

International conventions, along with their resolutions, aim to safeguard tangible and intangible cultural heritage by attempting to create a universal code of conduct. However, if the participants of crimes against cultural heritage do not abide by the laws of their country, one cannot expect them to conform to international codes of conduct and ethics.⁷ In the Middle East, many historical landmarks – including designated World Heritage Sites – have been damaged or destroyed, while archaeological sites have been ruthlessly and systematically looted, usually for illegal profit gains. The recent destruction of world heritage sites includes that of Palmyra by **ISIS** in Syria as well as the well-known Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, which were destroyed in March 2001 by the **Taliban** after being declared idols against **Islam**.



The Bamiyan Buddhas, carved out of sandstone cliffs, were built in the 6th century when Bamiyan was a holy Buddhist site. After being declared idols, the Taliban reportedly spent 25 days demolishing the revered statues in 2001. This before/after photo shows the extent of the destruction.

Within the last century, the United Nations has assumed a more prominent role with regard to the protection of world heritage sites. However, critics claim that outside influences and **bureaucracy** have tarnished the world heritage program and that the “World Heritage Site” label has simply become a marketing tool aimed at increasing a Member State’s tourism revenue.⁸ Additionally, critics claim that an increase in tourism to these same sites can be damaging, particularly if tourism rates increase faster than a Member State can keep up with. Tourism is not the only concern, with some believing that a World Heritage Site label makes sites an easy target during armed conflicts. In recent years, ISIS has actively destroyed all UNESCO World Heritage Sites that they deem to be **blasphemous** throughout Iraq and Syria.⁹ While some protective measures have been put in place, there is still much to be done to ensure these sites remain a part of the world’s heritage.

Because of their **transnational** dimension, cultural trafficking offenses involving antiquities and artifacts can involve multiple national **jurisdictions** presenting an even more challenging problem. Trafficked items are looted in one country and travel across several others before reaching their final destination. If items are intercepted, local authorities do not always have the necessary expertise to identify them, assess their value, or grasp the scale of the criminal operation behind a single act of trafficking. National responses at the **legislative** and law enforcement levels have proved insufficient and have indicated that these threats require action at the regional or global level. Combined with a lack of resources and public interest in protecting and preserving cultural heritage, archeological sites and artifacts that might represent over 2,000 years of history could irreversibly be destroyed in a matter of seconds.¹⁰

⁶ [UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Background Guide](#). Mace, Deacon, and Taton, 2015.

⁷ [Protecting World Heritage Sites in Conflict Zones](#). London International MUN, 2016.

⁸ ["Is UNESCO Damaging the World's Treasures?"](#) *The Independent*, 2009.

⁹ [ISIS Video Confirms Destruction at UNESCO World Heritage Sites](#). Shaheen, Kareem, 2015.

¹⁰ [Protecting Cultural Heritage: An Imperative for Humanity](#). Interpol, 2016.

Threats to Cultural Heritage 101

Cultural heritage is under threat from numerous risks and dangers such as war and political, ethnic and religious conflict, looting, theft, illegal export and import, illicit trafficking of cultural property, deterioration, neglect, destruction of or alteration to heritage, pollution, and disappearance. Learn more about some of these threats below. (UNESCO 2016)

WAR AND CONFLICT

Besides targeting human lives, conflicts have a profound impact on human values, cultures and religions. Conflicts target symbols of culture to destroy identities – but this damage can also be accidental.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Some experts say that climate change is one of the top threats to aspects of cultural heritage. Rising sea levels and changing weather patterns make it clear that world heritage designated sites on every continent are in danger.

UNSUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Today many world heritage sites are receiving a huge influx of visitors which has led to unsustainable tourism practices.

DEVELOPMENT/GLOBALIZATION

Development and globalization can threaten cultural heritage. This includes large-scale projects such as mines or dams, the impact of industrial expansion, and smaller-scale projects such as housing and tourism developments.

NATURAL DISASTERS

The world heritage sites throughout the world are in constant danger from both natural and man-made threats. Natural threats can range from natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, typhoons, etc. to humidity or dampness.

ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES

Precious works of art, antiquities and artifacts are being traded on the black market in most instances for weapons or illegal gain. Poaching, illegal drilling and looting are some examples of these illegal activities.

These are just a few of the many threats to cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. As you begin to research this topic, see if you can determine what other threats are important to make note of.

Aside from trafficking, other events have threatened cultural heritage and World Heritage Sites, as well. In 2014, experts declared climate change to be the most serious potential threat to natural World Heritage Sites worldwide. Looking more widely at all types of threats, the report also noted that only half of all natural sites were routinely monitored; more than a third had serious concerns about the levels of conservation; and 13% had ineffective levels of protection and management. Experts say that monitoring threats and impacts of all types is critical for ensuring cultural heritage is protected and preserved.¹¹

Possible Solutions

Many international guidelines about cultural heritage, including UNESCO's official definition, involve a complex strategy to protect and preserve cultural heritage. However, getting countries to agree to the same strategies is not a very realistic solution because what works in one country or region may or may not work in another. One of the biggest obstacles to ending threats to cultural heritage is the UN's respect of each country's **national sovereignty**. The UN cannot step in and interfere with how a government is running a country unless it is clear that the government is neglecting or harming the people.

Countries and international organizations have made some progress with regard to combating the illegal trafficking of antiquities. These efforts target law reform, the role of customs and law enforcement authorities, museum practices, and public education. A prime example of this progress is the *Emergency Red List of Syrian Cultural Objects at Risk*. This list helps to alert international customs authorities to the illicit

trafficking of Syrian artifacts and has produced a map featuring 1,000 important museums, historic buildings, and archaeological sites. Although this list certainly raises awareness of the threats specifically pertaining to Syrian cultural heritage, there are many other areas of the world that could benefit from the same type of effort.

Advancing sustainable conservation policies and strategies among member countries is another possible solution. The *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* recognizes the 'importance of intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development'. We know that

¹¹ [World Heritage and Tourism in a Changing Climate](#). UNESCO and UNEP, 2016.

today, the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* addresses the three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – of sustainable development through the 17 **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. In addition, the sharing of effective **sustainable tourism** practices can support the SDGs and promote the preservation of both natural and cultural heritage. However, balancing preservation and economic development could present challenges to Member States, especially the less developed ones.

Increasing community engagement and public awareness is another possible solution. UNESCO has worked with youth, educators, and other like-minded organizations that encourage efforts that promote adherence and aim to strengthen **international regimes** through conferences, workshops and publications. Launched by the United Nations in 2015 in response to the growing use of social media by violent extremists, the *#Unite4Heritage* campaign uses the power of social media to create a global movement for young people to take action for the safeguarding of heritage under threat. Although it does raise awareness about cultural heritage in general, the *#Unite4Heritage* campaign has a main focus on countries in Africa and the Middle East.¹² Equally important as education is the importance of investing in technology. For example, with recent advancements in 3-D light projection, the cultural heritage of the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan that was destroyed by the Taliban can be revived even as the reconstruction of the massive statues is considered impossible.¹³ Encouraging the exchange of knowledge and resources both locally and globally, while keeping in mind the power social media, technology, and the importance of education could certainly help to solve this pressing matter.

The Challenge

The intentional destruction of cultural heritage is by no means a uniquely new problem, but rather it is as ancient as the many aspects of heritage, both tangible and intangible, being targeted. Threats to cultural heritage are more diverse and destructive than ever before and the need for an organized response from the international community to protect and preserve it so that traditions and culture persist through generations is a central concern. It is critical that the international community act quickly and cooperatively to address the issues surrounding the protection and preservation of cultural heritage, including but not limited to encouraging the exchange of knowledge and resources both locally and globally, combating the illegal trafficking of antiquities, increasing community engagement and public awareness, and advancing sustainable conservation policies and strategies. In this committee, delegates will come together to discuss these issues and debate the responsibilities that individual countries have with respect to this growing global concern.

¹² [Unite4Heritage CAMPAIGN](#). UNESCO, 2015.

¹³ *UNESCO Background Guide*. Gaucho Model United Nations Conference, 2016.

Questions to Consider

- 1) Why is cultural heritage under threat in certain parts of the world more than others? What are some examples of work being done to protect and preserve cultural heritage in your country?

- 2) What cultural heritage is under threat in your assigned country? Are there any designated World Heritage Sites in your country or global region? What (if any) are the immediate or emerging threats and how is cultural heritage being protected?

- 3) What should be done to diminish and prevent the effects that recent conflicts have caused to World Heritage Sites?

- 4) After conflicts that threaten world heritage end, what should be done to restore or continue to protect the sites that were damaged by conflict?

5) Have individuals or organizations within your assigned country either knowingly or unknowingly, helped to finance modern terrorism by purchasing or being a country of transit with reference to looted antiquities off of the black market? Please describe what you have found in your research.

6) Has your assigned country signed on to the *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*? If so, how is this enforced and regulated in your country?

7) Who can be helpful in creating solutions to this problem? Would working with museums, governments, academics, the tourism industry, or **non-governmental organizations** (NGOs) be most helpful?

8) How can protecting and preserving cultural heritage occurring outside of your assigned country's borders have an impact on the well-being of people living within your country?

9) If an individual or group of people is found to have destroyed cultural heritage, what happens to them in your assigned country?

10) Are there any international organizations or regional alliances (with neighboring countries) from which you would seek support in order to achieve your assigned country's goals?

Quick Facts

- UNESCO's strategy for protecting tangible cultural heritage focuses on least developed countries and countries in emergency situations (post-conflict or post-natural disaster), with an emphasis on Africa.¹⁴
- Currently there are more than 1,000 World Heritage designated properties in over 163 different countries.¹⁵ As of 2016, the 55 world heritage sites currently in danger span nearly every world region.
- Most World Heritage Sites are tourist destinations, and tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economic sectors, responsible for 9% of GDP globally and providing 1 in 11 jobs.¹⁶

Helpful Resources

- [The World Heritage List: Interactive Map \(UNESCO\)](#)
An interactive map containing detailed information about the world heritage sites around the world.
- [The World Heritage List in Danger: Interactive Map \(UNESCO\)](#)
An interactive map containing detailed information about the 55 properties which the World Heritage Committee has decided to include on the List of World Heritage in danger.
- [Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage \(UNESCO\)](#)
Created in 2015, these are a set of 12 overarching principles that are widely accepted as good practices for governments, organizations and individuals directly or indirectly involved with protecting and preserving intangible cultural heritage.
- [In What Ways are Attacks on Cultural Heritage, Attacks on Human Rights and Humanity?](#)
A short video of Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO as she answers a question on protecting cultural heritage for peace at a recent UNESCO Conference (3 min; June 2016).
- [Damaged by War, Syria's Cultural Sites Rise Anew in France](#)
A New York Times article explaining how 3-D technology in France is being used to bring attention to the rising threats against world heritage (December, 2016).
- [Looting and Conflict: The ISIS Antiquities Pipeline](#)
An animated, graphic rendering that illustrates how ISIS has organized and regulated looting in order to help finance their operations (National Geographic Magazine; June 2016).
- [A Few Regional Bloc Positions and Helpful Points a Resolution Should Address](#)
Refer to pages 10 & 11 for short paragraphs on the positions of Europe, USA/North America, Middle East and the Rest of the World with regards to the topic.
- [Additional Regional Bloc Positions](#)
Refer to pages 12-15 for short paragraphs on the positions of the African States, Asia-Pacific States, Arab States, European and North American States, and Latin American and the Caribbean States.
- [The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict](#)
*The convention text itself provides helpful examples of existing preambulatory and operative clauses. The list of **state parties** to the convention can be found [here](#).*
- [The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage](#)
The convention text itself provides helpful examples of existing preambulatory and operative clauses.
- [The Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property](#)
The list of state parties to the convention can be found [here](#).
- [The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions](#)

¹⁴ [Tangible Cultural Heritage](#). UNESCO, 2015

¹⁵ [World Heritage and Tourism in a Changing Climate](#). (2016)

¹⁶ Ibid.

Glossary of Terms

- **Antiquities:** objects, buildings, and works of art from the ancient past.
- **Archeological Sites:** the location where archeological digs are taking place.
- **Blasphemous:** speaking badly about a religion or god.
- **Bureaucracy:** a system of government in which most of the important decisions are made by state officials rather than by elected representatives.
- **Convention:** an agreement under international law entered into by States that establishes rights and obligations.
- **Conservation:** refers to the process of looking after a site so as to retain its special values. Conservation may include maintenance, preservation, restoration and reconstruction.
- **Climate change:** a long-term change in the earth's climate, especially a change due to an increase in the average atmospheric temperature.
- **Cultural heritage:** the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations and maintained for the benefit of future generations.
 - **Intangible cultural heritage:** Such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.
 - **Tangible cultural heritage:** includes the heritage you can touch like buildings and historic places, monuments, artifacts, etc., which are considered worthy of preservation for the future. These include objects significant to the archaeology, architecture, science or technology of a specific culture.
- **Deter:** to discourage someone from doing something, typically by instilling doubt or fear of the consequences.
- **Developing countries:** a poor agricultural country that is seeking to become more advanced economically and socially.
- **Developed countries:** Nations that has a lot of industrial activity and where people tend to have higher incomes.
- **Extremism/Extremist:** a person who holds extreme political or religious views, especially one who resorts to or advocates for extreme action (or extremism).
- **Gross Domestic Product (GDP):** one of the primary indicators used to gauge the health of a country's economy. It represents the total dollar value of all goods and services produced over a specific time period.
- **Human Migration:** the movement of a person or group of people from one place to another.
- **Indigenous:** being a member of the original inhabitants of a particular place.
- **Industrialization:** the process in which a society or country (or the world) transforms itself from a primarily agricultural society into one based on the manufacturing of goods and services.
- **International regime:** international treaty and/or collections of rules.
- **Implementation:** the process of putting a decision or plan into effect; execution.
- **Islam:** One of the three largest religions in the world. Followers of Islam are known as Muslims. Known to be one of the most peaceful religions.
- **ISIS:** A militant group of individuals who hold a rigid and extreme view of Islam and are trying to create an Islamic government throughout the world. Also known as *Daesh* or *ISIL*.
- **Jurisdiction:** the extent of the power to make legal decisions
- **Legislative:** having the power to make laws.
- **National sovereignty:** the authority of a government to care for, protect, and provide for its people without other countries or the U.N. interfering.
- **Non-governmental organizations (NGOs):** a non-profit, citizen-based group that functions independently of government.

- **Oral traditions:** a community's cultural and historical traditions passed down by word of mouth or example from one generation to another without written instruction.
- **Restitution:** giving something lost or stolen back to its proper owner.
- **Sanctions:** punishments or penalties imposed upon another country.
- **Sustainable tourism:** responsible travel that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves education.
- **Sustainable development:** economic development or growth that is conducted without the total reduction of natural resources or harm to the natural environment and local people.
- **Sustainable development goals (SDGs):** A universal set of goals, targets and indicators that UN member states are expected to use to frame their agendas and political policies over the next 15 years.
- **States Parties:** States which are bound by certain Conventions and among which a Convention is in force.
- **Taliban:** Islamic extremists waging a political and religious war in Afghanistan
- **Transnational:** between nations.
- **Trafficking:** the illegal movement of objects, people, etc, in a particular place or for a particular purpose.
- **Transcends:** to go beyond the range or limits of something.
- **The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):** an organization that contributes to peace and security by promoting education, science and culture.
- **Urbanization:** the process of making an area more urban or city-like.
- **Underdeveloped:** having high rates of poverty and few industries.
- **World Heritage Site:** a natural or man-made site, area, or structure recognized as being of outstanding international importance and therefore as deserving special protection. Sites are nominated to and designated by the World Heritage Convention (an organization of UNESCO).
- **World heritage fund:** a trust fund composed of contributions, including those made by the Member States. The Fund provides the financial resources for different types of international assistance.