

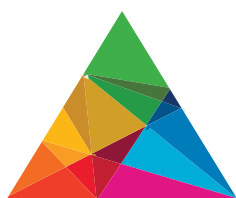


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Mountain Partnership



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International Year of
SUSTAINABLE
MOUNTAIN
DEVELOPMENT

POLICY BRIEF MOUNTAIN AND HERITAGE-MAKING

Mountains and Heritage-making

In recent decades, a rapidly growing number of mountain places, people and cultural practices have been involved in various heritage-making processes. Such recognition can offer opportunities for the conservation of mountain assets, protecting cultural landscapes, and safeguarding mountain societies. However, it can also result in excessive tourism, folklorization, weakening of social norms and values, or disruption of social-ecological dynamics.

Since the mid-20th century, it has become more and more common to qualify, institutionalize, and manage natural and cultural assets as heritage. The trend, initially fostered by Western countries and greatly backed up by Eastern Asian countries, has become global mainly through the adoption of heritage policies alongside efforts by organizations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS and IUCN.



Officially relaunched in December 2021, the World Network of Mountain Biosphere Reserves (WNMBRs) was established under the framework of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme. It focuses on creating and facilitating knowledge exchange between academia, practice, and local communities, as well as promote research activities that support management and conservation priorities, including cultural heritage, that are relevant for mountain biosphere reserves.

www.mountainbiosphere.org/en/

Through initiatives linked to the implementation of international heritage standards - mainly the Convention for the protection of natural and cultural heritage, 1972, and the Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), 2003 - most Statemembers have adopted national laws and regulations for designating and listing heritage items. Along this trend, mountain regions and people have long featured as a priority: explicitly for natural heritage since "mountains" is a "priority biome" adopted by international organizations such as IUCN for nature protection to be developed throughout the world; this is more implicit for cultural heritage since the location in mountain regions is only recently becoming a criterion for triggering a heritage-making process. However, the distinct hilly or mountainous character of cultural landscapes appears to be an added value for many (such as rice terrasses in Philippines, see Phillips 2003). Moreover, the widely recognized cultural diversity areas and the specificity of cultural practices of mountain people led to the inscription of many of them in national registers and the ICH UNESCO lists.

Mountain heritage as a leverage for action

Indeed, with the right ingredients, heritage-making:

- can lead to the improvement of protection of mountain environments through the creation of National Parks, natural reserves, etc. (Thorsell and Hamilton 2002)
- focus on the safeguarding of cultural practices and become a leverage for social cohesion through the reinforcement of collective identities, facilitating recognition of local ecological knowledge in environmental management and planning;
- incentivize the promotion of economic development based on the tourist attractiveness of sites and practices associated with heritage values, including the commoditization of handicraft products (Zhang et al. 2022);
- improve awareness of the assets and specificity of mountain regions and people in national or regional policies (Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2015).
- offer alternative landscape values and management priorities (no-go commitments) faced with extractive industries (Turner 2012)
- represent a way to include the cultural dimension in wider territorial planning and priority setting.

DEALING WITH MASS TOURISM IN GEORGIAN CAUCASUS

The Upper Svaneti region was inscribed in 1996 on the WH List for its impressive mountain scenery and authentic medieval towers and dwellings forming a unique cultural landscape. Mass tourism started a decade ago after an airport was built and existing infrastructures improved. As a matter of fact, the Upper Svaneti area became a major hotspot of tourism in Georgia which experienced one of the fastest growth in the region in the 2010's. This led to a gradual and irreversible loss of several components of the tangible and intangible heritage (Gelashvili, 2018; Applis 2019, 2020).

Several initiatives took place for preserving it: development of a spatial plan aiming at curbing uncontrolled transformations, promotion of local productions in order to better sustain local know-how and economy, marketing of other nearby destinations, all these initiatives involving local communities.

The risks of the heritagization of mountain assets

Though heritage-making have great potential for mountain communities, this process also presents certain risks:

- the long history of protection of mountain environments has shown that the creation of parks and reserves has often been done at the expense or exclusion of traditional social practices (Neumann 1995, Ross 2015, Baviskar 2003, Larsen 2017).
- the tourist attractiveness of some natural heritage sites can lead to the degradation of mountain sites or landscapes and the weakening of social practices when the number and practices of tourists are not regulated (MacRae 2017)
- the commodification of local cultures through tourism and craft commercialization always generates, but with various degrees, impacts on the self-representation and organization of related societies.

Maximizing the advantages, minimizing the risks: some examples

It is worth highlighting some examples which have tried to maximize advantages and minimize risks related to heritage-making processes:

1. Uluru, Australia

Uluru (initially named after a British colonist: Ayer's rock) has been incorporated in a national park for decades and was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1987 as a natural heritage property. Progressively, Aboriginal communities' vision and rights have been taken into account: the property has been requalified as a cultural landscape with the recognition of its cultural and spiritual value; climbing of mount Uluru by tourists has been forbidden; Aboriginal peoples have been more and more involved in the management of the property. Said quickly: Uluru is definitely a piece of heritage, but no

more a piece of natural heritage conceived according to some kind of colonial and universalist vision of nature and heritage (Palmer 2016, Walliss 2014).

2. Alpinism

Alpinism was inscribed in the UNESCO ICH List in 2019. For the alpine clubs and mountain guides associations of three countries (France, Italy, Switzerland), who were behind this nomination with the backing from the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA), it was not only a decisive means to celebrate and safeguard mountain climbing know-how as a social value and cultural asset, but also a means to express a deep concern for climate change and its impacts, mountain climbers being called to safeguard their tradition through adaptation (Debarbieux and Munz 2019).

3. Tadami Mountain Biosphere Reserve, Japan

Many mountain regions are constantly exposed to a multitude of water-related hazards including heavy rains and snowfalls leading to flooding, landslides, and avalanches. These conditions, in addition to rapidly changing climate, have incentivized community's adaptive capacities based on centuries of continuous interactions with their environment (Carnelli et al., 2020, and Šakić Trogrlić et al., 2021). Knowledge on existing risks and mitigating measures are today transmitted through tangible and intangible heritage, as it can be seen in UNESCO Tadami Biosphere Reserve in Japan (Suzuki et al., 2016; Eurac Research, 2022). Here, cultural elements such as the positioning of shrines, periodical ceremonies or traditional land-management practices are pursued with respect towards the harsh conditions of mountain forests, and are studied as a part of a research project as an opportunity for increasing community resilience (Paola Fontanella Pisa, among the authors).



Mountain protected areas and World Heritage sites face multiple governance challenges. Sagarmatha National Park and World Heritage site in Nepal is illustrative. The indigenous Sherpa culture is regularly celebrated not least in connection with climbs of Mt. Everest. However, as Stevens (2013) and others have argued, indigenous peoples such as the Sharwa maintain customary rights and longstanding conservation practices, which are often poorly recognized within the existing protected area model. Rights-based approaches may help resolve issues such as tenure, livelihood and governance, yet more systematic adoption is needed (Larsen 2022).

Picture above: Carrying the burden of heritage conservation in Sagarmatha National Park. ©istockphoto

Recommendations

- Considering the high-value and sought-after natural resources in mountain regions, and recognizing the importance of heritage values and cultural practices therein, a recognition for inevitable trade-offs and harmonization of practices is called-for.
- While emblematic mountains and specific landscape features have long featured in “natural” heritage making, a more systematic integration of both tangible and intangible heritage values in mountain territorial and development planning scenarios should be promoted across the board, both in practice and policy-making, and by the concerned communities and stakeholders.
- There is a need for enabling policies to enhance local stewardship and collective rights frameworks for mountain heritage notably in terms of commons management, customary livelihoods and social cohesion.
- Since heritage should reflect the community that lives it and should evolve with it, it is unrealistic to fix it to a static status. But we need to be aware on the potentially negative impacts of poorly-informed poorly-informed decisions or actions that leads to the loss of local identity and sense of place.
- Local knowledge and heritage play a critical role in informing best practices for sustainable development and disaster risk reduction, and should be considered accordingly.



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UIAA

International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation
UNION INTERNATIONALE DES ASSOCIATIONS D'ALPINISME



**Scientific Network
for the Caucasus
Mountain Region**



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