
World Heritage at 50: Experiences from working with INAH over 30 years

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Over the past 30 years while working at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, I have been many times in Mexico working closely with INAH. These visits included the organisation of the World Heritage Committee session, speeches at the University of Mexico, field visits, monitoring missions and other events and conferences, including one by ICOMOS Mexico on the 50th anniversary of the *World Heritage Convention* in 2020!

Mexico played an important role in the World Heritage Committee, including as the host of the 20th session of the World Heritage Committee (Mérida, Mexico 2-7 December 1996), chaired by Ms. Maria Teresa Franco y Gonzalez Salas, who was also the head of INAH at the time. Critical discussions took place at this meeting, including the inscription of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Japan), which further impacted de-

bates on sites of memory at the time of the 50th anniversary today! I also worked closely with Francisco Javier Lopez Morales as the Rapporteur of the 25th session of the World Heritage Committee, and Francisco Vidargas, his successor at Committee sessions.

My most memorable mission to Mexico was in 1999, when the World Heritage Committee had decided to dispatch a reactive monitoring mission to the Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino to review the proposal for a large-scale salt production. This mission was a major undertaking, due to the remote location of the site in Baja California and the complexity of the issues at stake. The key question was whether a major salt production would have any impact on the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). The OUV of the site was based on the biodiversity —criterion (x)— especially the key species of the grey whale. There-

fore, the mission team included Randell Reeves, a specialist from the IUCN Species Survival Commission, Cipriano Marin, a salt production specialist, and Pedro Rosabal, representative from IUCN. I headed this international team which was joined by a large team of Mexican experts. At one point I counted 34 men and myself!

To make a long story short, after field visits to different parts of the property (via 2 small planes) and considerable discussions with many specialists, site management, a number of NGOs and meetings with local communities, the mission team concluded that the integrity (a component of OUV) of the Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino would be compromised by such a large-scale project, especially through further infrastructure development. The full mission report is available online: <<https://whc.unesco.org/document/134023>>. The most amazing result was that shortly after the conclusions of the mission, the President of Mexico announced that he follows the mission's recommendations and halted the proposed project. It was one of the major success stories of the *World Heritage Convention* in the 1990s and early 2000s, much recognized by the international conservation community and by the World Heritage Committee.

The story of the safeguarding of El Vizcaino has many facets, among them is the fact that the site was first nominated as a *mixed site* to include its rock art, which later became a separate World Heritage site of the Rock Paintings of the Sierra de San Francisco. This property is one of the most outstanding collections of rock paintings in the world. They are remarkably well-preserved because of the dry climate and the inaccessibility of the site. Displaying human figures and diverse animal species it illustrates the relationship between humans and their environment over time.

Looking back, today the site could have been inscribed as mixed to underline the close interaction between people and nature over time.

Another aspect of the safeguarding of El Vizcaino is the involvement of young people, civil society and the general public: UNESCO received more than 30,000 hard-copy letters asking to intervene to save the site and the grey whales. This was the highest number of letters ever for a single World Heritage site, often from young people, students and children (with paintings of whales). This was triggered and accompanied by a major campaign by NGOs, among them the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), which carried out a multinational campaign and to save the last pristine birthplace of the Pacific grey whale.

The decision by the Mexican authorities not to pursue the salt production project can only be applauded. It has far-reaching consequences including for the climate change crisis. Today we know, that whales play an important role in the marine ecosystem to combat climate change, as they contribute to our oxygen, sustain fish stocks and sequester CO₂.

The diversity of the 35 World Heritage sites in Mexico is illustrative of the history of the country and its biogeographical region, it also exemplifies the close links between people and their natural environment. This is even visible in the serial World Heritage site of the capital city: "Historic Centre of Mexico City and Xochimilco" inscribed in 1987. Xochimilco especially showcases this interaction with its network of canals, artificial islands, and its floating gardens. It also illustrates that Mexico fully embraced the evolution of the implementation of the *World Heritage Convention* and the List: from single monuments to serial proper-

ties, from buildings to cultural landscapes. The “Agave Landscape and Ancient Industrial Facilities of Tequila” (inscribed in 2006) demonstrates the large-scale cultural landscape of blue agave and its production, today a part of cultural and national identity.

Whenever I had time, I concluded my trips to Mexico with a visit to a church in the World Heritage city to thank San Judas Tadeo, the “Saint for the impossible things”, —truly unique— I have encountered him only in Mexico!



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