# The World Heritage List and rock art

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**Abstract.** Current developments in the priorities determining admission to UNESCO's World Heritage List are discussed against the background of revisions in archaeological knowledge and changes in the concept of 'universal outstanding values'. In particular, this List is in danger of being perceived as not representative and balanced, and therefore not credible. Such concerns have been expressed since about 1994, and are now being addressed by UNESCO. This paper contends that pre-Historic properties are better suited than Historic ones for emphasising the unity of humanity, because the latter often lend themselves to political, ethnic, cultural or religious schisms.

**Introduction**

The greatest problem of global rock art is its rampant destruction, which occurs throughout the world and is in most cases attributable to a lack of appreciation of the intrinsic values of this irreplaceable cultural resource. Most rock art researchers would agree that an effective strategy of enhancing the much needed protection and conservation of rock art is through improving public appreciation of its value and significance. Of all the potentially available means of accomplishing such improvements in the status of the world's rock art, the perhaps most effective is through securing a more favourable representation of it on UNESCO's World Heritage List. This issue is addressed here.

One of the most interesting questions about rock art the author has been asked in recent years concerns a comparison of French and Australian attitudes to rock art. In a paper he had referred to the marked imbalance between the attitudes of researchers to French and Australian Pleistocene rock art. Noting that there is far more such art in the latter country, and that all of it is of Middle rather than Upper Palaeolithic traditions, he observed that no scholar has investigated the Antipodean corpus with even remotely the zeal lavished on European Upper Palaeolithic art (Bednarik 2008a: 179). Indeed, there has not been a single book or scholarly article dedicated solely to the Pleistocene art of Australia until 2010. One of the referees of this paper, R. G. Gunn, posed a fascinating question: why is there such an incredible disparity? It is in the answer to this question that one needs to look for the explanation why Australian rock art is being subjected to such extensive destruction, often even from professional archaeologists (Bednarik 2008b). Indeed, the answer to Gunn's query is capable of revealing the direction Australian rock art researchers must take if they are to improve the status of their rock art. They must learn from their French and Spanish colleagues how these managed to so effectively project their concerns into the mainstream of society — which is something Australian rock art researchers have so far failed to achieve. The issue is of course complex and involves many factors, but it is also reflected, among other things, in the number of Pleistocene rock art sites on the World Heritage List (henceforth called the List). There are dozens from Europe listed, but not a single one from the rest of the world, which seems to reinforce the false notion that Pleistocene rock art is a feature primarily or exclusively of western Europe.

Thus there appears to be a reciprocity between the perceived ranking of a cultural resource and its representation in the List. The present imbalance is the result of misconceptions: the perceived value of Pleistocene rock art is determined by its great antiquity, yet archaeologists are largely unaware that rock art of similar or even greater age occurs widely outside of Europe. Most of the individual European rock art sites on the List, especially if the recently admitted seventeen Cantabrian sites are included, are listed for their Palaeolithic attribution — although, interestingly, the Côa valley sites were included on the false assumption that they are of the Pleistocene (and another site, Siega Verde, is currently under consideration as being Palaeolithic, although it is clearly not; Bednarik 2009). The few non-Palaeolithic rock art sites of Europe on the List are the Valcamonica complex, the Levantine art sites in eastern Spain, and the Scandinavian sites of Alta and Tannum. By comparison, none of the extra-European rock art corpora are thought to be of the Pleistocene, or even likely to be so. Tassili n'Ajjer and Tadrart Acacus in the Sahara are certainly Holocene, as are the southern African sites Chongoni (Malawi), Drakensberg (South Africa), Kondoa (Tanzania), Matobo (Zimbabwe) and Tsodilo (Botswana). The same applies to the only American rock art sites on the List, Cueva de las Maños (Argentina), Nasca (Peru), Serra da Capivara and Sierra de Francisco (Mexico). Kakadu in Australia comprises Holocene art, as does Tamgaly in Kazakhstan. In the case of Bhimbetka (India), Pleistocene rock art is present (in Auditorium Cave; Bednarik 1993), but the nomination of the site complex made no mention of it (Ray and Ramanathan 2002a, 2002b).

This well illustrates the deep misconceptions about the known global distribution of Pleistocene rock art. This phenomenon is far more common outside of Europe than it is in that region, and particularly Australia harbours many thousands of such sites. Moreover, while there is only one known site of rock art of a Mode 3 technological tradition (Middle Palaeolithic; cf. Foley and Lahr 1997) in Europe, *all* of the Pleistocene rock art of Australia, and even its early Holocene occurrences, are clearly of Mode 3 industries. Indeed, in Tasmania, these continued right up to and beyond European contact, hence *all* Tasmanian rock art is 'Middle Palaeolithic' (Bednarik et al. 2007). Which is well expressed by its great similarity with that of the sepulchral block from La Ferrassie (Bednarik 2008c). Very similar traditions extend even well into the Lower Palaeolithic period, in India and Africa (Bednarik et al. 2005; Van der Peer et al.

2003; Bednarik and Beaumont in prep.), yet there persists an entirely unfounded belief that Franco-Cantabrian art marks the origins of palaeoart and the introduction of symboling. This archaeological fantasy, one of several on the general subject, ignores the common occurrence of symbolic productions up to hundreds of millennia before the advent of the Upper Palaeolithic. Others include the belief that figurative art is cognitively more sophisticated than non-figurative (cf. Bednarik 2003 for correction), or that palaeoart was introduced by invading Africans who 'replaced' the resident population of European robust humans (so-called Neanderthals). The latter fallacy's (Bednarik 2008d) absurdity is illustrated by the lack of evidence that any of the many early Upper Palaeolithic technological traditions were actually by anatomically fully modern humans. If the observation that most of the Upper Palaeolithic art in Europe is most probably by children and adolescents, based on the empirical evidence as it stands (Bednarik 2008a), is added to this list of misconceptions about Pleistocene palaeoart, the full extent of their consequences begins to emerge. The falsifiable proposition that this corpus is largely the work of young people coincides with the observation that figurative graphic art may be considered juvenile by traditional societies (Sreenathan et al. 2008), in contrast to the more 'adult', ceremonial non-figurative art forms. It also confirms that the process of human gracilization is best viewed as foetilization or neoteny: anatomically modern humans are essentially a neotenous form of primate, in all probability the result of cultural selection ('unintended domestication'; Bednarik 2008d). These perspectives are utterly revolutionary for palaeoanthropology, but since they are based on a dispassionate review of the evidence rather than interpretational fads, they might be worthy of closer consideration.

None of these issues seem to be directly related to the World Heritage List, but if it is true that there is a reciprocal relationship between perceived importance of a cultural resource and its representation on the List, then there does exist a definable connection. In one direction, the priorities archaeology, especially Western archaeology, has created, are reflected in what is sufficiently important to be inscribed; in the other direction, what is inscribed defines for humanity what is important. This has then two effects: firstly, it establishes relative cultural importance, and secondly, it determines the level of protection required — not only for the particular resource, but also for its generic type. It is therefore essential that concepts determining significance be well-informed and as objective as possible. That, however, is not apparent if it is considered that most prominent concepts held about Pleistocene palaeoart are false and based on shallow information and interpretation.

**New initiatives by UNESCO**

UNESCO has recently begun to appreciate the severe imbalances inherent in the World Heritage List's cultural section (Sanz 2008). The World Heritage Centre in Paris has accepted that the UNESCO World Heritage Convention faces several challenges (and opportunities) hardly envisaged when it came into force in 1972. Most particularly, this concerns the *credibility* of the List. It is now recognised by this body that two forms of over-representation on the List have emerged: that of Historic[1] sites relative to pre-Historic sites, and that of European monuments relative to those of the rest of the world (Sanz 2008: Figs 4–6). Efforts and negotiations are currently underway to render the future List more representative, balanced and credible. This revisionary view emerged previously, for instance in the course of a conference held by UNESCO and the Musée national de Préhistoire from 5 to 9 September 2005, during which this author presented a strong plea for the listing and protection of the massive rock art monument of the Dampier Archipelago of Western Australia. Together with other highlighting of the global struggle to protect and preserve pre-Historic sites and properties, such as emerged from a study of Caribbean site issues, this has led to a re-assessment of the processes of listing properties, culminating in a conference held in early November 2008 in Paris.

In this re-assessment it is considered necessary to not only increase the number of types, regions and periods of cultural property that are under-represented, but also to espouse the changes since 1972 in the concepts of what constitutes cultural heritage of *outstanding universal value*. This involves a shift in priorities, away from a primarily architectural perspective of 'monuments', towards a view that is anthropologically informed and of universal validity to a genus that has occupied this planet for a couple of million years. In that sense UNESCO now wishes to establish an action plan facilitating the nomination of insufficiently represented types of properties, i.e. pre-Historic sites, rock art sites, and sites related to human evolution (hominin find sites).

In reviewing the World Heritage List (851 listed properties in 141 countries as of June 2008) there are only 77 sites that comprise, among their specific values, pre-Historic elements. A further 170 such sites occur on the 'Tentative List', which is of properties that have been nominated or are being considered currently for inclusion in the List. Nevertheless, this Tentative List still perpetuates the imbalances of the past, which include the near-absence of rock art sites from North America, Australia, Asia and the Arab States. At a rough estimate, these four world regions comprise between 70% and 80% of the planet's surviving rock art, and yet this is represented by merely seven sites nominated for their rock art. There are several glaring regional absences among the rock art sites listed. The huge corpus of Middle Eastern rock art, comprising the Arabian Peninsula and extending into Iran and Pakistan, is unrepresented. Those of the Sahara and India are underrepresented (three in total), while eastern Asia and Siberia provide no examples. In the rock art-richest country, Australia, only one property has been nominated for its rock art, although there is so much rock art that its incidental occurrence in properties nominated for other reasons has been noted (Blue Mountains, Purnululu, Uluru-Kata Tjuta). However, the perhaps largest rock art

1 In this paper the term 'Historic' is capitalised when it refers to a specific historical period of time defined by a minority of humanity using an untestable criterion to determine reliability of transmission, namely the introduction of writing; see also 'pre-Historic'.

concentrations of that country, in the Pilbara and Kimberley, have been neglected.

There are also notable chronological trends. For instance, not a single pre-Historic site from the Arab States has been inscribed in the period from 1985 to 2000; and seven out of the ten pre-Historic sites of Africa were only inscribed since 1999. Moreover, there remains a great over-representation of 'architectural' monuments or whole towns of relatively recent periods, especially from Europe. On the other hand, prime candidates such as the hominin sites of Bilzingsleben (Germany) and Dmanisi (Georgia) remain unlisted. The new initiatives being considered by UNESCO promise positive changes in the priorities determining inscriptions on the List.

**Traditional bias**

All properties proposed for World Heritage listing need to be nominated by national governments, and it is reasonable to expect that such nominations are likely to reflect the priorities, views and philosophies of those governments. Inscription of a property tends to lead to significant increase in its visitation and in its potential to attract international as well as local cultural tourism. Indeed, there have been instances of such great changes in visitation patterns that soon after inscription, governments have had to impose tourism quotas. For instance, the rock art complex of Bhimbetka (India) attracted almost no visitors until its inscription in 2003. But within a year of it, the number of visitors had to be limited to 1600 per day, because of overcrowding of the available area of visitation. Needless to say, tourism potential is a prime consideration of governments in submitting properties for listing, and rightly so. On the other hand, inscription of a property confers an international 'seal of approval' — not just of the specific site, but also of the particular universal values for which its nomination was made and accepted. The effect of this process on the public's perception of the importance of cultural features is profound, and is indeed *one of the most significant outcomes of inscription*. It literally shapes public attitudes, and in that sense the List provides to UNESCO a means of moulding public sentiment about what is of profound importance, what constitutes universal value, what defines cultural worth objectively.

In practice, however, there can be significant differences between the priorities of governments (and the lobby groups that may be the drivers of nominations) and those of any endeavour to create or maintain *objective universal values*. If the process is driven primarily by the Member States — the nominators — then it is to be expected that distortions will inevitably occur. Every Member State has its own agenda in creating national images or symbols, reflecting nationalistic sentiments rather than objective ones. Any asymmetries repeated many times would amplify systematic biases. This factor was very probably involved in creating the imbalances in the current List. The question then arises: to what extent should UNESCO guide the Member States in order to achieve maximal representation of *objective* universal values? This issue, clearly, is the crux in any endeavour to correct the imbalance in the List, and to render it representative in the sense of the intent of the original *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*.

This imbalance applies to the themes, to representation of geographical regions as well as chronological entities, and it has been recognised by UNESCO for at least fourteen years. On 20–22 June 1994, an expert meeting was held in Paris on a global strategy to 'fill the gaps' and to render the List more representative (UNESCO 1994). It was already then noted that Historical periods were significantly over-represented at the expense of pre-History, and that Europe was over-represented in relation to the rest of the world, especially some specific regions. This meeting recommended that these imbalances be corrected by increasing the number of properties of specific types, regions and periods that are under-represented. It also noted that the notion of cultural heritage had changed with time and it advocated the adoption of new concepts of this idea, in accordance with developments of knowledge and scientific thought, especially in anthropology. In particular, it was thought that the architectural notion of monuments or sites of importance needed to be reviewed in favour of a more universal construct of cultural values.

It is very probable that these same issues do not apply — or apply only at a much diminished level — to the natural heritage properties also covered by UNESCO's Convention: there is probably much greater consensus here about what constitutes *universal* values. In the cultural sphere, a wider range for differences needs to be anticipated, because any society, at any point in its history, will develop biased viewpoints about what is of the utmost cultural importance to it. Cultural heritage, through its very nature, can become the subject of biases of political, religious, ethnic or cultural nature. In extreme cases, this may be expressed in the dynamiting of giant Buddha statues in Afghanistan (the very event that prompted UNESCO's *Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage*, 17 October 2003) or the deliberate shelling and destruction of a listed property in Dubrovnik.

**Why pre-Historic properties are better candidates**

Numerous Historic sites of great cultural importance to specific groups around the world have also been claimed by opposing groups. These differences are most often inspired by religious or ethnic schisms, but political or cultural divisions may be involved as well. Confrontations arising from competing claims have far too often led to bloodshed and significant loss of life, to feuds extending over generations, centuries, even millennia. These disputes may concern priority of occupation of a site, and they always involve contentions about historical detail. The parties disagree fundamentally and rather fervently about the relevant history, so much so that they are sometimes prepared to slaughter their opponents, or to die for their convictions.

This state is attributable to complex circumstances, but at the root of it is the contentiousness of all of history. Histories are merely distortions of what happened in the past, and there are numerous reasons for this. To begin with, histories

tend to be written by their winners; even the intellectual frameworks or reality constructs in which they are conveyed derive from them rather than the losers of history. The voices of the indigenous peoples, the colonised, the defeated and the marginalised participants of history are drowned out by the dominant paradigms. Also, all histories are tainted by cultural, ideological and many other biases, and of course by political, ethnic and religious imperatives. This applies to modern history, of the last century or two, as well as to previous centuries, and it applies in all parts of the world; it may be very subtle, or it may be anything but subtle. Moreover, the states of the world are political entities, whose paramount compulsion is self-promotion. Even if that were not the case, the speakers of different languages do not even exist in the same reality construct; their respective worlds are distinct worlds because they are partially determined by language (Sapir 1929: 209).

Seen in this context, the endeavours of UNESCO, and of the United Nations generally, are a valiant effort to surmount the barriers cultivated by the nationalism inherent in the concepts of all nation states. Yet it is the Member States who submit properties for listing, and it comes as no surprise that these submissions have been much biased in favour of Historical monuments: they are the ones underpinning the favoured histories of the states. *The key issue addressed here, however, is the question: does this best serve UNESCO's charter of overcoming barriers?* Bearing in mind that Historical sites and monuments do lend themselves to misuse by religious, ethnic and political interests, it would be greatly preferable to favour pre-Historic heritage properties over Historic ones. Not only are such monuments much better suited for emphasising the ultimate unity of humanity; they are usually well beyond the reach of sectarian interests to appropriate them; they are 'neutral'. They express all that UNESCO seems to stand for.

Although pre-Historic sites and monuments occur on the territory of states, and nations may express a degree of pride in that, their inherent values could not plausibly be corrupted to serve religious, ethnic or political agendas. Typically, these places relate to people who have long been replaced by other ethnic groups or societies, or at least by colonising populations. Not only do these sites constitute symbols reminding us of the inherent unity of humans — thus unifying rather than dividing — such places also serve to remind us of the immense duration of the human quest. They may even humble us to remember that our species' tenancy of this planet is temporary, and may be terminated if we break the conditions of the lease.

Of all the pre-Historic site types, those with rock art and stone arrangements (called 'megaliths' in Europe, but occurring widely in the remaining continents) are by far the best candidates available. This is because general pre-Historic site types, such as ancient occupation places, tend to offer few if any tangible, visible features to the non-specialist. Much the same also applies to find localities of important hominin remains; their significance relates more to the historical event of discovery, and hardly to any tangible aspect of the place itself. Stone arrangements and rock art, on the other hand, are easily appreciated by any visitor; they can be spectacular, they are often photogenic, their significance is readily communicated to visitors — but most importantly, they elicit our respect for the ancestors and they prompt cultural humility, placing contemporary society into a much deeper historical context than the self-congratulatory monuments of more recent times.

**The way forward**

There are, however, certain impediments to the successful nomination of such pre-Historic sites to the List. Of particular importance is UNESCO's finding, from its 1994 meeting, that the weakness of nominations of rock art sites is often the inadequate documentation and analytical criteria provided for a broad comparative assessment. The rock art specialists of the world, comprising the membership of the affiliates of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO), certainly need to take note of this criticism. This is not because they are responsible for the preparation of nominations, but because greater input is required from them. In formulating nominations for UNESCO listing, Member States tend to employ either bureaucrats from government agencies involved in cultural heritage management, or corporate archaeological consultants. The subsequent assessment, however, involves usually rock art specialists, whose expectations are often not met by the submissions.

Here it needs to be said that rock art and stone arrangements, while apparently related to general archaeology in the sense that they usually refer to early societies, are inadequately catered for by that discipline. There is no real connection between rock art and archaeology until the only bridging factor, the age of the rock art, has been determined. Moreover, nearly all archaeologists of the world lack any specialised understanding of rock art, and of such crucial factors as its age estimation, its geochemistry, geomorphology, preservation, management, interpretation, forensic study, or indeed any other aspect that might facilitate its scientific consideration. In some cases these encumbrances have even led to the nomination of rock art sites based on falsities (Côa, Siega Verde). It is therefore perhaps of limited benefit to entrust the preparation of nominations of rock art properties to archaeologists of government agencies.

A better way would be to have this work done by rock art specialists, especially those who have a comprehensive understanding of long-term management of such properties, and of the considerable commitments acceptance of such submissions would entail. With soon in the order of one thousand sites and monuments on the List, UNESCO cannot effectively supervise their day-to-day management, which remains the responsibility of the nominating Member States. To some degree, the credibility of the List depends not only on it being representative and balanced; it also depends on the commitment to the guarantee of perpetual best-practice maintenance and protection, because without it listing can easily become a factor of detriment to the site. This is particularly the case with rock art monuments, which are often very susceptible to degradation through pressures of visitation. It is then clear that the nomination process should

involve specialists of the relevant knowledge, and of a full understanding of what acceptance of the nomination would entail in perpetuity.

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Citation details of this paper:

Bednarik, R. G. 2010. The World Heritage List and rock art. *AURA Newsletter* Volume 27, Number 2, pp. 16–20.