

# The UNESCO Thematic Initiative on Astronomy and World Heritage

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**Abstract.** Properties with a relationship to science are amongst the least represented on the UNESCO World Heritage List and the values of these properties, located in all the regions of the world, are not sufficiently recognised. The UNESCO and IAU encourage the States Parties to the World Heritage Convention to actively participate in the development and implementation of the Thematic Initiative “Astronomy and World Heritage” aiming to provide an opportunity to identify the properties connected with astronomy and for keeping their memory alive and preserving them from progressive deterioration, through the inscription of the most representative properties on the World Heritage List.

**Keywords.** UNESCO, World Heritage, cultural sites

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## 1. Introduction

The Convention concerning the protection of cultural and natural World Heritage of 1972 provides a unique opportunity to preserve exceptional properties world-wide and to raise awareness about scientific concepts linked to these properties<sup>†</sup>.

The mission of UNESCO regarding World Heritage consists in assisting the States Parties to this Convention to safeguard sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, to support activities led by States Parties in the preservation of World Heritage, and to encourage international cooperation in heritage conservation<sup>‡</sup>.

The World Heritage Committee adopted in 1994 the Global Strategy whose objective is to promote activities for a representative and balanced World Heritage List, to fully reflect the cultural and natural diversity of heritage of outstanding universal value.

Considering that properties related to science are among the most under-represented on the World Heritage List and recognizing the absence of an integrated thematic approach for sites which have a symbolic or direct connection to astronomy, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, in close consultation with States Parties, has elaborated the Thematic Initiative “*Astronomy and World Heritage*”.

## 2. Astronomy and World Heritage

The cosmos has captivated the imagination of civilisations throughout the ages. The efforts of those cultures to understand or interpret what they see in the sky are often reflected in their architecture, petroglyphs, and other cultural representations.

<sup>†</sup> Convention concerning the protection of cultural and natural World Heritage, 1972, 17th session of the General Conference, <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/convention-en.pdf>

<sup>‡</sup> Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, 2008, WHC/08-01, <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/opguide08-en.pdf>, and Strategy for a Balanced, Representative and Credible World Heritage List, 1994, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/globalstrategy>

Sites relating to astronomy stand as a tribute to the complexity and diversity of ways in which people rationalised the cosmos and framed their actions in accordance with that understanding. This close and perpetual interaction between astronomical knowledge and its rôle within human culture is a vital element of the outstanding universal value of these sites. These material testimonies of astronomy, found in all geographical regions, span all periods from prehistory to today.

The main objective of the Thematic Initiative *Astronomy and World Heritage* is to establish a link between Science and Culture towards the recognition of scientific values of cultural sites linked to astronomy. The identification, preservation and the promotion of these properties are fields of action in the implementation of this programme. It provides an opportunity not only to identify the properties but also to keep their memory alive and preserve them from progressive deterioration, through the recognition and the promotion of their scientific values and through nomination and inscription on the World Heritage List of the most representative properties.

### 3. Implementation strategy

In May 2007, the Executive Board of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) unanimously adopted the proposal to establish an official partnership with UNESCO within the framework of this UNESCO Initiative in order to assure its implementation<sup>†</sup>.

Jointly elaborated Implementation strategy of the Initiative was examined by the World Heritage Committee at its 32nd session (Québec, Canada, 2008). In signing the Memorandum of Understanding in October 2008<sup>‡</sup>, aiming to carry out this implementation strategy, UNESCO and the IAU underlined the fundamental rôle that culture plays in scientific progress and science; and in our cultural enrichment. This is a step towards the recognition of the importance of the astronomical heritage world-wide, in terms of its enrichment of the history of humanity, the promotion of cultural diversity and the enhancement of international exchange.

Its aims are to share best practices, increase the role of the World Heritage Convention and provide an opportunity to raise public awareness –especially among the young– about astronomical heritage. This will allow us to enhance the links between science, education, culture and communication.

The significance of this collaboration lies in three essential questions:

- (a) How to identify astronomical sites of Outstanding Universal Value?
- (b) How to protect and promote them?
- (c) What benefits can States Parties and communities draw from adopting this path?

### 4. Thematic study on Astronomical Heritage

The first milestone for the identification of the sites within a framework of the Thematic Initiative *Astronomy and World Heritage* is the development of a methodological approach aimed at the consideration of sites associated to astronomy on the base of the World Heritage criteria<sup>¶</sup>.

<sup>†</sup> UNESCO Thematic Initiative *Astronomy and World Heritage*, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/astronomy>

<sup>‡</sup> Memorandum of Understanding UNESCO-IAU, 2008, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/498>

<sup>¶</sup> Science and technology, an expert workshop within the framework of the global strategy for the global, balanced and representative World Heritage List, WHC.08/32.COM/INF.10A, 32nd session World Heritage, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/32COM/documents>

The Global Thematic Study on astronomical heritage is under elaboration jointly by the Advisory Body of the World Heritage Committee – ICOMOS and IAU Working Group. This study, as a support for the preparation of possible nominations for the World Heritage List, will provide a survey of the question in the perspective of identification and evaluation of the astronomical and archeoastronomical sites.

## 5. Conclusion

The Director-General of UNESCO in his address on the occasion of the Opening Ceremony of the International Year of Astronomy in January 2009, underlined that “*the sky belongs to everyone, and everyone has the right to enjoy the wonders it holds, to seek to discover its greatest mysteries. Astronomy brings us together, across borders, religions and beliefs, it is an instrument of peace and understanding among peoples.*” †.

An appeal was also launched by the Director-General of UNESCO to the States Parties to the World Heritage Convention to actively participate in implementation of the Initiative *Astronomy and World Heritage*.

To join our common efforts in order to promote the identification and preservation of astronomical sites and technological heritage through public awareness-raising campaigns and international projects is a crucial and vital step in safeguarding them for future generations.

UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre, in close cooperation with the International Astronomical Union (IAU) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) will pursue its efforts in the implementation of the UNESCO *Astronomy and World Heritage* initiative.

† Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the International Year of Astronomy, UNESCO, 2009, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001792/179258e.pdf>