

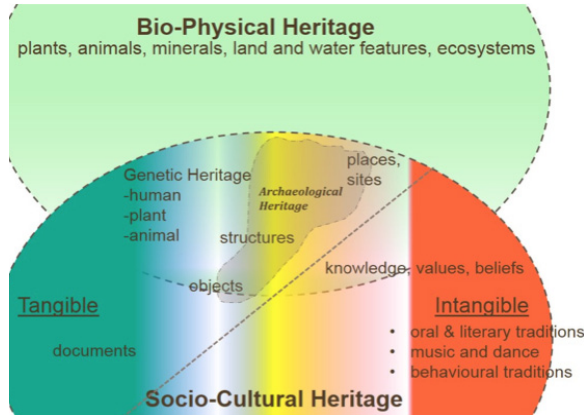


FACT SHEET

Presented by the Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage Project.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

What is it? Why is it important?



WHAT IS HERITAGE?

Don't let the 8,400,000 Google hits to this question (as of 13 October 2013) bewilder you. Simply put, *heritage is the past made present*. Heritage is anything valued by people today that was also valued by previous generations. Heritage is what we have accepted as gifts from those who came before us. Heritage is our inheritance of land, language, ecosystems, knowledge, and culture.

ARE THERE DIFFERENT KINDS OF HERITAGE?

Yes. Heritage includes land, physical and material objects, monuments, and sites, as well as intangible beliefs, customs, knowledge and traditions. Heritage may be built, written, recited, remembered, re-enacted, worn, displayed, and taught. Examples of heritage include the Flamenco dance, Plymouth Rock, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, Machu Picchu and the Inca trail system, the uniform of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the lyrics of Bob Dylan.

Heritage is everywhere. Heritage may occupy or be composed of urban, rural, agricultural, manufactured, or backcountry settings. Much heritage is deeply rooted in specific landscapes and regions (e.g., Swiss cheeses, Aboriginal Australian song lines), but heritage can also be portable (Japanese kimonos, Italian stone masonry). Heritage may bear the unmistakable signature of an individual master (e.g., Bill Reid's wood carvings; M.C. Escher's mathematical lithographs) or may have been crafted by thousands or people over many generations (e.g., Angkor Wat, the Great Wall of China). It may be central to group or regional identity because of its' natural character (e.g., California's Redwoods, Tanzania's Kilimanjaro).

WHY SHOULD I PAY ATTENTION TO HERITAGE?

Heritage is a fundamental source of individual and group identity, vitality, and solidarity. Heritage is a universal process by which humans maintain connections with our pasts, assert our similarities with and differences from one another, and tell our children and other young people what we think is important and deserves to be part of the future. Heritage is not just "out there." Heritage guides each of us from within on a daily basis. Heritage is a powerful source of practical suggestions on what to wear, what to eat, how to behave. Clothes, foods, stories, songs, and the patterned actions of the people around you influence your values and preferences. Heritage is one of the ways you determine right from wrong, beautiful from repulsive, meaningful from ridiculous, and so on. The preferences embedded in what we think, say, and do are important building blocks for communities, regions, and nations. Be mindful of your heritage, for it helps determine your destiny and that of your descendants!



IS ALL HERITAGE VALUED?

Yes and no. By definition, heritage only exists and is perpetuated by virtue of the meanings people assign to it. Different people find and apply different values (cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, scientific, economic) to otherwise identical objects and places. Heritage may be cherished and protected at all costs by one group of people while being despised or used as symbolic targets by others. For example, the colossal Buddha statues in Bamiyan Province, Afghanistan, once beloved as icons of religious faith and regional identity, were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.

Not all heritage is tied to positive values and pasts. For example the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland, and the Fort Apache and Theodore Roosevelt School National Historic Landmark, Arizona, are heritage sites that have been preserved as cautionary memorials for humankind. Negative heritage is also carried forward in stories, songs, poetry and other oral and literary traditions.

IS INDIGENOUS HERITAGE DIFFERENT THAN OTHER KINDS OF HERITAGE?

Again, the answer is yes and no. All peoples possess the inalienable right to manage their heritage, but Indigenous peoples were denied that right for a long time (and many still are). The term “Indigenous” has come to stand for peoples who have historical continuity with land and who have been affected by foreign political, legal, cultural, and economic impositions. As a result, the heritage of many Indigenous peoples has been destroyed or taken over by newcomers. For example, in 2013 developers in Belize demolished the 2000-year-old Nohmul temple without consulting contemporary Maya descendants. In the United States, the National Park Service allows rock climbing to continue on the natural formation, referred to in English as “Devil’s Tower,” despite the fact that recreational use is seen as sacrilegious by Native Americans who conduct ceremonies there. Because of the past and ongoing harms to Indigenous heritage, it is imperative that those engaging with Indigenous people and their heritage today do so with the utmost care and respect.



Casa Grande Ruins National Monument, Arizona, USA.

WHO MAKES HERITAGE?

You do! Every human has values and preferences that translate into thoughts, words, and decisions about what to keep and what to cast away or leave behind. Over the course of days, months, years, and decades, these decisions combine with the decisions made by others to result in your heritage legacy. What will you leave behind for others to value?

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

- Cultural Survival: www.culturalsurvival.org/
- IPinCH Knowledge Base: www.sfu.ca/ipinch/project-components/knowledge-base
- The Open University: www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/heritage/what-heritage
- UMASS-Amherst Center for Heritage and Society: www.umass.edu/chs
- UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: whc.unesco.org/en/about/
- WIPO - Traditional Knowledge: www.wipo.int/tk/en/

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