

# Editorial Issue 2/2024

## Community in Water and Heritage Management

Carola Hein, Zuzanna Sliwinska, Carlien Donkor and Matteo D'Agostino

In recent years, community engagement has become a cornerstone in peace-building, decision-making and sustainable development. It also plays an increasingly significant role in heritage management and the processes involved in heritage listing. The 1972 World Heritage Convention, Article 5, proposed adopting a policy of integrating cultural and natural heritage in the life of communities. In 2007, "Communities" was added as the "Fifth C" to the Strategic Objectives to "enhance the role of communities in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention" (UNESCO 2007). The 2011 UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach further strengthened commitment to community engagement by emphasizing the importance of community values and the need to learn "from communities about their histories, traditions, values, needs and aspirations, and by facilitating mediation and negotiation between groups with conflicting interests" (UNESCO 2011). This shift reflects a broader recognition that effective heritage preservation requires integrating local knowledge, practices and cultural values.

Sophisticated water management systems, adapted to specific geographical and climatic conditions, often incorporate centuries of accumulated knowledge. The traditional water-sharing system of the Balinese Subak exemplifies the human capacity for environmental stewardship, aligning with values of kinship between people and the natural world. However, rapid industrialization and urbanization have significantly altered many traditional communities' ways of life and their relationships with local environments, including water systems. The advent of "modern water" (Linton 2013), understood as water disconnected from its social context, has disrupted traditional practices. Additionally, new legal frameworks have changed community dynamics.

Climate change exacerbates existing challenges through flooding, storm surges, rising sea levels and prolonged droughts, threatening heritage sites and communities. The combined effects of modernization and climate change – changing cultural priorities, community dispersion and displacement and damage or limited access to sites – impair communities' ability to pass down the knowledge and practices related to water use and management in harmony with local environmental cycles.

Heritage plays an important role in community building, fostering a shared identity, a sense of belonging and collective responsibility. Strengthening communities through active participation in heritage management and adopting a more inclusive approach can help recognize and integrate

diverse knowledge systems, drawing upon collective historical wisdom. Taking inspiration from traditional water systems and practices and preserving them can establish a foundation for collaborative and effective water initiatives that honor diverse cultural perspectives and provide sustainable pathways for the future. An example of this approach is community archaeology, which involves local communities in researching, excavating and interpreting archaeological sites and artifacts. This participatory approach redefines the role of heritage in community life. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all traditional practices are inherently sustainable, as they can be tied to societal roles and functions that perpetuate gender inequalities and forms of discrimination.

The 10th World Water Forum (10WWF), held in May 2024 in Nusa Dua, Bali, highlighted the importance of citizen participation and the development of communities of practice (10th World Water Forum Secretariat 2024; PortCityFutures, n.d.). The forum provided an opportunity to showcase the work of the UNESCO Chair Water Ports and Historic Cities and to exchange ideas with representatives of other international programs and projects aimed at ensuring sustainable and just water futures through interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation (Donkor et al. 2024b). Our team co-organized and coordinated several events, many of which are reported on the PortCityFutures blog entitled “10th World Water Forum: Our Collective Journal and Key Takeaways, Part I” (Donkor et al. 2024a). One of the team’s activities was an official special side event, SE37 Promoting the Values of the Subak System for Sustainable Water and Heritage Management, organized in collaboration with colleagues from Udayana University, University of Indonesia, Reservoir, Bale Bengong and Capybara Unit Visual.

The SE37 event aimed to move beyond simply representing local communities by facilitating meaningful exchanges around shared interests and highlighting opportunities for collaboration. A site visit to two Subak locations and an in-situ workshop gave participants firsthand experience of the Subak cultural and physical landscape and its social organization. On-site discussions emphasized the importance of involving local communities in all stages of development, from strategy formulation through to the monitoring phase and beyond, to avoid top-down solutions that may not fit local contexts and challenges.

*Blue Papers*, Volume 3, Number 2 (2024), brings together 15 articles, several of which discuss community roles in developing or preserving water heritage sites.

In Part I, “Challenges, Concepts and New Approaches,” Tino Mager opens the issue with a call to incorporate water management strategies in the management plans of World Heritage properties to address climate change threats. His article underscores the critical importance of historic water management in addressing local challenges across past, present and future contexts. Martine van Lier discusses the examples of six Dutch harbors, highlighting the role of local maritime heritage practices and slow tourism in driving sustainable development and supporting climate adaptation efforts. Li Lu and Haoxiang Zhang focus on the built heritage of the Master of the Nets Garden in China, using spatial, empirical and experimental analysis to examine human-water relationships and offering a methodology that can be applied to other small-scale sites.

Social justice is a key theme in the contribution of Lauriane Verhoog, who employs a cross-dimensional approach rooted in geohistory to advocate for greater recognition of the water-related heritage of coastal communities along the Mozambique Channel. Similarly, Federico Camerin emphasizes the need for inclusive heritage management in Venice, especially in response to recent proposals that threaten local communities. He discusses the potential for repurposing heritage sites to tackle urgent issues such as mass tourism, housing shortages and environmental protection.

Part II features several case studies with a particular focus on water communities in the Indo-Pacific region, along with their struggles and strategies for facing climate change and exclusion from urbanization processes.

Through their interactions with water, communities have shaped unique territories. However, modernization and urbanization have led some water-centric spaces to be neglected. The case study of the Antalaotra people of Madagascar by Lauriane Verhoog explains how ethnic marginalization failed to acknowledge the past trade networks across the Indian Ocean, which brought prosperity to the area; her article makes a case for a more inclusive national narrative. Salma Begum paints a picture of a monsoon-led landscape in Bangladesh, focusing on the liminal spaces known as *ghats*, which represent important cultural and functional interfaces between land and water.

Kelly Shannon and Bruno De Meulder describe the intricate relationship between the sociocultural practices of floating villages and the Tonlé Sap Lake in Cambodia, which is endangered by climate change, calling for coordination between Indigenous knowledge systems and practices and modern development proposals.

Swagata Das, Kelly Shannon and Bruno De Meulder emphasize the significance of Indigenous knowledge systems in navigating environmental challenges and preserving cultural heritage. They focus on *char* dwellers in the Brahmaputra River, exploring how they maintain unique spatial practices amid political marginalization. Di Fang and Kaiyi Zhu examine Malaysia's Sama Dilaut sea nomads, highlighting their struggle to uphold their traditional way of life in the face of urbanization and Western influence.

Traditional knowledge and ancient water management systems are at the heart of the contribution by Pierantonio La Vena and Bhatta Ram, who analyze the efficiency of the *khadeen* system of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan and the threats posed to it by mining activities and urban developments. Vu Linh, Bruno De Meulder and Kelly Shannon focus on Khmer communities and their complex hydrosociology in the Phnom K'to (Cô Tô Mountain) area of Vietnam's Mekong Delta, presenting their water management practices as potentially helpful in the struggle to address climate change threats. Wei Lei, Kelly Shannon and Bruno De Meulder analyze the case of *weitian* (polder) systems in the Yangtze River Delta, revealing both the benefits and shortcomings of their transformations and emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that facilitates development while preserving the region's unique deltaic conditions and water towns. Ouafa Messous focuses on Figuig Oasis

as a model of ecosystemic resilience against water scarcity and climate change, highlighting the potential of integrating ancient water management practices with modern governance.

Finally, in their interview with Feng Gu, a former director of the China Grand Canal World Heritage Application Joint Office, Kaiyi Zhu and Qingyong Zhu explore how the Grand Canal's inscription has catalyzed collaborative efforts across eight Chinese provinces to enhance the protection of its historic landscape, cultural heritage and surrounding cities while promoting integrated cultural, ecological and economic development.

## References

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