

Water Management in World Heritage Properties in Times of Climate Change

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Water remembers. It is humans who forget.

Elif Shafak, *There are Rivers in the Sky*

Water management is a complex process, particularly at World Heritage sites. It leverages long-standing experience while requiring new expertise for changing conditions. Water – whether as a natural heritage, a component of built heritage, or a cultural space – embodies the collective memory of past generations. This memory lives on through our ancestors and traditional communities, who historically lived with, rather than against, water – a sustainable relationship based on adaptation, deep knowledge and minimal environmental impact.

UNESCO's World Heritage List formally recognizes and protects many outstanding examples of such ancestral water stewardship. Yet today, unplanned development, population growth, shifting value systems, widening inequality and the growing risks posed by climate change are changing this relationship. How can we manage water in uncertain times, especially around heritage sites, where governance must balance preservation with the need to adapt management strategies to address the impacts of climate change?

Building community stewardship through shared learning dialogues and participatory decision-making processes is essential for just and sustainable water governance. Such stewardship strengthens local ownership of conservation measures, ensures that diverse social groups are included in management decisions and enhances the adaptive capacity of communities to respond to water-related risks stemming from climate change. Integrating these local perspectives into heritage management plans is essential for achieving both site preservation and long-term resilience.

However, establishing community stewardship cannot be an end in itself – it needs to be supported by an engagement process that recognizes the intersectionality of gender, age, ethnicity, race, class, caste and ability – and the different interests these may bring to heritage management. Listening to this diversity of interests is as important as hearing water “speak”. It means reflecting on the words of our ancestors while acknowledging that, for a heritage site to remain relevant and actively sustained, the incentives for local guardianship must be balanced with natural flows, including the ebbs and tides of our past, present and future.

