International Overview of Cultural Routes: research and stewardship

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Abstract

Cultural routes represent a qualitative change in the concept of heritage conservation and are increasingly considered important aspects of world heritage as evidenced by being recognized as one of four World Heritage categories established to date. This paper presents the author’s observations as a longtime member of the ICOMOS International Committee on Cultural Routes (CIIC), and from research as a Guest Scholar at the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) in Los Angeles, California, on how cultural routes are regarded by countries and regions throughout the world. The research included findings on how cultural routes, with their associated features and sites, are protected and interpreted. Today, threats from energy development, urban growth, civil strife, climate change, and road construction impact cultural routes; their settings can also be affected by noise and view-shed infringements. Responses to these types of threats vary, depending on a country’s perception of the value of the routes, and on the infrastructure and financial resources available. Examples of approaches used by various countries and organizations for identifying and protecting cultural routes are presented.

Introduction

Cultural routes make up the connective web of the world’s heritage. They have long been considered key elements tying regions and empires together, but not always recognized in their own right as legitimate resources. In recognition of that importance, the ICOMOS 2008 General Assembly in Quebec City, adopted the International Committee on Cultural Routes and Itineraries (CIIC) Charter on Cultural Routes. The charter establishes the concept of a cultural route, its definition and methods for documenting, conserving and promoting these important heritage resources. Since adoption of the Charter, ICOMOS members have had spirited discussions about the scope of cultural routes and how emerging concepts in heritage identification and conservation are acknowledged within the ongoing work of CIIC, ICOMOS, and the general public.

The concept of cultural route, as defined by the CIIC, is a physical route for travel between two points, which has been in use over a long historic period. The route must also have led to cross-fertilization of cultures and produced clear heritage outcomes, both tangible and intangible, which testify to exchange and movements along the route and to the length of time it has been used. Such routes may be on land or water. Identification of a cultural route is based on an array of important points and tangible elements that attest to the significance of the itinerary itself. A cultural route refers to a set of values whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts and through which it gains its meaning and conveys its significance (ICOMOS 2008).

Cultural routes, whether still in use, abandoned and bypassed, or incorporated in part into
contemporary transportation conduits such as railroad lines or modern highways, pose challenges of preserving their character-defining features. They embody complexities of geographic distance, layering of history, and diversity of cultural themes.

Some cultural routes are internationally well known and have been in the public consciousness for centuries. These better known routes, such as El Camino de Santiago in Europe; the Silk Road, traversing more than twenty-five countries with twenty spoken languages, in Asia; the Inca Road, known by its historic name as Qhapaq Ñan, connecting the ancient pre-Colombian empire of South America; and the Sacred Routes of the Kii Peninsula in Japan, are experiencing accelerated public use; and with that use come consequences that can negatively affect their historic integrity.

This paper provides examples of how cultural routes, and their associated landscapes and sites, are inventoried, protected, and interpreted by various governments and regions around the world. Examples are taken from papers that have been published in past CIIC symposia proceedings, or in various other publications. Examples are also taken from research conducted by the author in 2010 at the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles, California. The extensive resources available through GCI allowed for a detailed – although not exhaustive – review of extant published information on the subject. Of exceptional value was the entry of citations into a database that allows for a searchable tool of over 500 publications.

Background

Cultural routes traverse space by a number of means. The most prevalent and obvious is by land: crossing terrain by foot, on animals (horse, mule, camel, elephant, etc.), wagon, automobile, or train. Water routes are also used extensively, whether they are along rivers or oceanic voyages to distant lands. Cultural routes often combine terrestrial and maritime transport as with examples such as the Camino Real Intercontinental and the Silk Road. Associated ports are key historic sites that serve as a transition between these land- and water-based routes. Blaines (2005) underscored the importance of this connectivity and wholeness of maritime and terrestrial routes when discussing the Intercontinental Royal Road in Cuba. The new concept of an air route as a cultural route is just beginning to be explored (Hubbard pers. comm. 2012).

An historic road, pathway, or trail can be considered a component of a cultural route only if the other criteria adopted by the ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes are met. These are the physical spines to which various tangible and intangible resources are connected and associated. At the 2009 CIIC committee meeting that convened at Ise, Japan, a working group was delegated the task of providing greater clarity about the relationship between historic roads and cultural routes, including the challenges of terminology and the complexity of languages used throughout the world to characterize these systems. Clearly, cultures throughout the ages and around the globe have realized the importance of what ICOMOS has now officially codified in its definition. As was stated at the Ise symposium by the CIIC president, ‘the terminology and meaning of Cultural Routes in a wide social context allow for different interpretations, all of them understandable and certainly positive’ (Suárez-Inclán 2010:93).

Cultural routes are rarely single, static rights-of-way. A ‘braiding’ effect resulting in subtle or major route deviations on land-based systems

Figure 1. Abandoned segments of the Santa Fe National Historic Trail in New Mexico, USA, with vast views in all directions. (source: Michael Romero Taylor)
usually occurs over time, based on wet/dry seasons, availability of water and pasture, conflict, erosion patterns, founding of new towns, road building technology, and economic factors. These routes may be paved with stone, asphalt or concrete, or they may have had traditional methods of engineering applied to stabilize soils as a compacted travel surface. Cultural features and sites associated with these roads, paths and trails can include: bridges, fords, rest areas, engineered ramps, villages, cities and fortifications, and they may exhibit themselves as archaeological sites that can yield information through research. In some cases, sections of roads and paths may be lost to erosion or development. Abandoned road and path segments today can manifest themselves as swales, ruts, simple dirt paths, or very subtle alignments discernible only from aerial imagery (Marriott 2010).

Many land-based routes have engineered components, such as the Roman imperial roads or the Qhapaq Ñan in South America, or they may be routes that were constructed specifically for automobile use, such as Route 66 in the United States. Many represent the most recent use within these historic corridors of travel, and are often very close to, or overlay, earlier transportation routes. An example of continuity is the Hijaz Railway between Saudi Arabia and Syria that was adapted from a pedestrian/camel caravan route to a railroad line at the beginning of the 20th century. At its zenith, it was carrying 300,000 passengers a year, built to transport pilgrims from Damascus to access Mecca. The original pilgrimage, before the train, usually took two strenuous months to complete. After the destruction of the railroad during World War I, automobile roads were established, and in the 1970s, plane transport became commonplace. In this case, one can see the evolution of a route from pedestrian and camel, to train, to highway, to planes. This is not an uncommon phenomenon, given the advance in technology and the consequent change in the way humans move across the landscape (Eman 2005; Orbasali 2005).

ICOMOS CIIC has thus far convened at least five major symposia on cultural routes, with other meetings resulting in a rich body of published proceedings, as well as numerous regional initiatives on the subject. Three cultural routes have been inscribed on the World Heritage List. Two of them are pilgrimage routes: El Camino de Santiago in Spain, and the Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range in Japan. The third, inscribed in 2010, is El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro in Mexico, which represents a milestone by the international community recognizing a trade route as of ‘universal value to mankind’, the litmus test for inscription into the World Heritage List.

A glimpse at a few cultural-route types that have been noted in recent literature, whether they are significant at the international, regional or local level, will illustrate their complexity and fluidity.

Pilgrimage routes

Literature on pilgrimage routes abounds because many are actively used and well recognized. Du Cros (2001) defines a pilgrim as ‘one who journeys, especially a long distance, to some sacred place as an act of devotion’. Many pilgrims feel that the road itself is a sacred site (Martorell 2005), and that the ultimate goal is the road. Along El Camino de Santiago in northern Spain, ‘Pilgrimage is envisaged as a sequence of movement through landscapes, in which both built sites and unaltered aspects of the physical environment, such as rivers, mountains and arid plains, are integral to the experience and meaning of devotional travel’ (Candy 2009). Pilgrimage routes sometimes are better understood and cared for by governments and institutions if their devotion and stewardship are part of the dominant social and religious fabric of the region’s inhabitants. The opposite may be true if the dominant governing political power is of a different religion than that of those making the pilgrimage.

Water Routes

Although maritime and river routes are important to the overall understanding and appreciation of cultural routes, they are difficult to characterize, inventory, and locate with any precision. Tangible elements include ports, shipwrecks, and shoreline landmarks. Intangibles include
prevailing winds, the color and texture of the waters, and the night sky. Because of their imprecise nature, they are often overlooked in the cultural routes literature. However, there are numerous citations that describe their significance. For example, in the article ‘Route of the Korean Envoys of Chosun Dynasty and their Cultural Legacy in Japan’, the importance of sea and land routes between the two countries for ceremonial purposes is key to the route’s integrity. The 2,000 km journey took a minimum of six months and comprised a fleet of fifty ships, with a stopover in ten ports (Kim 2005).

Automobile routes

CIIC is considering how to evaluate historic automobile highways/roads as components of cultural routes, either as an evolution of a route over time through technological changes, or as a more recent highway specifically designed for use by automobiles. Technological advancements in transportation, including the introduction of the automobile, profoundly influenced the character and use of many historic roads/paths/trails in the twentieth century (Marriott 2009).

History has demonstrated that routes of transport continue to be reused and attract regular reinvestment and improvements as people, modes of travel and vehicles evolve over time. For example, many of the Native American roads of the Western Hemisphere, already located along stable soils, river crossings and mountain passes, were widened by conquering Spanish, Portuguese and English colonists seeking to accommodate their larger vehicles and needs. In the United States, one Indigenous corridor, the Iroquois Road, became a turnpike in the early nineteenth century, and was paved and designated U.S. Route 20 in 1926. In England, the M-1 motorway closely follows (and at time overlays) the Roman Road from London to Hadrian’s Wall at the Scottish border (Marriott 2009). The General Royal Road in Cuba, now an automobile highway, was originally the 16th-century Camino Real connecting early gold fields, and later, agricultural lands to the port city of Havana. It was transformed into the Central Highway in 1925 by the Cuban government, following the old alignment of the Camino Real as closely as possible. As Rojas (2010) states: ‘the Central Highway is an excellent example of authenticity because it maintains in most of it, the pattern of the ancient road’. The Preserving the Historic Road conferences, which have taken place in various locations throughout the United States over the past twelve years, have been forums for the exchange of information on historic automobile road preservation; 200 papers have been presented at the eight conferences held to date (Historic Roads 2013). Presentations at these conferences have recently included routes that predate the arrival of the automobile. International interest and attention to preserving historic automobile roads is becoming more structured, especially in recent papers which have introduced a new historical perspective on how the automobile has impacted global society.

Cultural landscapes: settings and viewsheds

A cultural route usually passes through, and helps define, many cultural landscapes (ICOMOS 2002). The U.S. National Park Service (2013) defines a cultural landscape as ‘a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values.’ Key defining characteristics of a cultural landscape are its setting and views. The setting and view-sheds associated with cultural routes are becoming more important because of the effect that increased development is having on them.

Feng (2005) describes the essential role that setting plays in a cultural route: ‘… a concept of significance in defining cultural sites is their context and setting and the extent of their significance in direct relationship to a Cultural Route, could be shakkei or ‘borrowed scenery’. Shakkei is used in the Japanese garden design as: ‘a technique for enlarging the visual scale of the garden beyond its actual physical boundaries by incorporating a distant view as an integral part of the garden … it was not only scenery that could be borrowed, but forms, sounds, colours and fragrances were also incorporated ... ’
An important aspect of setting in cultural landscapes that is usually overlooked is the night sky, which has served for thousands of years as a navigational and inspirational guide for caravans, armies, pilgrims, and flotillas. The night sky is just beginning to be considered by various countries as a significant cultural resource associated with cultural routes worthy of protection. An example of identifying the night sky as important to cultural heritage took place in 1999 in the United States, when the state of New Mexico took a step to protect it from the threat of light pollution by listing the night sky as an endangered cultural property (New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance 1999).

**Intangible aspects of cultural routes**

Intangible values make up significant elements of cultural routes (ICOMOS 2003). A review of the literature shows that, for the most part, regions throughout the world understand this concept well. As Feng (2005) states: ‘All this involves the protection and conservation of a series of elements of various nature, incorporating both tangible and intangible values linked by a physical or perceived artefact, like a string of pearls’. Sometimes the tangible resources have been lost or are so altered that the main aspects for its appreciation are its intangible attributes. Feng goes on to say ‘… even though it is not necessarily existing or is preserved as a road in a clear form, its existence and value as a cultural route becomes evident when the existence of intangible heritage is traced back’.

Recommendations prepared by ICOMOS at the International Symposium for the Serial Nomination of the Silk Roads to the World Heritage List (2007) stress that ‘evidence of cultural exchange and transmission, the rituals, living cultures and ongoing cultural life of the communities along the Silk Road, corridors of movement and landmarks are also critical to the understanding of the ‘spirit of place’ …’. Martorell (2005) states that there are many intangible elements related to Camino de Santiago’s route, including the ‘hospitality spirit, born in the Middle Ages and still living today, as one of the most salient elements’. In Australia, the reliance of Aboriginal knowledge, song lines and dreaming tracks as they relate to the availability of water and other natural resources, are basic to the significance of Aboriginal cultural routes (Blair 2002).

**Identification/inventory**

*Past documentation of historic roads and cultural routes*

Historic documents have proved essential in helping find and/or confirm the location of many cultural routes. The Old and New Testaments, for example, are key documents in locating routes in the Middle East.

Using the classic Greek historian Herodotus’ writings, S. F. Starr and his team embarked on an ambitious documentation of historic Persian roads in Turkey through mapping, photography, and excavation (Starr 1962). John Ogilby’s road maps of 1685 used visual and physical landmarks to describe eighty-five routes across England and Wales (Bennis and Davidson 2005). In the 1970s and 1980s, Dr John Hyslop, with partners from various countries through which Qhapaq Ñan passes, was actively recording remnants of the great Andean road through photographs and recordation forms (Hyslop ca. 1982). In the 1980s, the U.S. government documented Chacoan Roads in northeast New Mexico that possess many morphological traits common to formalized prehistoric road systems recognized in other areas of the New World (Kincaid 1983).

**Current Initiatives for identification/documentation**

Cultural routes are complex resources that can be difficult to define and objectively describe. Accomplishing a comprehensive inventory of cultural routes is a daunting task taking up much time and resources, especially when dealing with multiple landowners and governments. Feng (2005) stresses that ‘in terms of protection, conservation and management, there should be little distinction between highly significant sites and those that provide context: both deserve identification and care in order to guarantee their preservation for future generations. Furthermore, a route cannot be separated from the surrounding landscape’.
In many cases, as noted above, it is difficult to map the exact location of route segments. As Sugio (2005) suggests: ‘there will be no other options than to indicate the approximate alignment’. She goes on to say ‘… a cultural route does not always remain complete with concrete pieces of evidence to show how and where the spread of culture occurred or the movement of people or goods happened. A route that is perceived as an abstract entity should nevertheless be recognized as a heritage property’.

Numerous countries, and organizations such as CIIC, have been developing systems for recording cultural routes (ICOMOS 2001). The explosion of technological advances that can be used for accurately locating historic road traces has greatly facilitated identification processes. With the technological ease in which primary documents, including journals and maps, can be shared through digital formats, the ability to locate, field record, and ultimately help protect cultural routes in many countries has been greatly enhanced. A systematic analysis of historic and modern topography, utilizing historic maps and modern aerial imagery with GIS (Geographic Information System) tools, is essential in establishing a proper baseline. Among other countries, the U.S. government is actively pursuing such documentation on national historic trails (NPS 2012). Isaza (2005) underscores the importance of aerial photos in showing passages of the native roads in Colombia: ‘They constitute an important tool to recognize networks to footpaths or deep marks of continuous lines that connect neighbor towns in a spatial system’.

Ground-truthing and field recording of the actual remnants of cultural routes is essential to any inventory. Specialized expertise is a requisite for the field crew due to unique challenges in field recognition and recording. Kincaid (1983) states that ‘the process of locating and recording roads had proven to be extremely complex, and it was necessary to use a variety of techniques, and information from a variety of disciplines, to identify them on the ground’. Starr (1963) cited the importance of fieldwork with local informants to substantiate findings and to lead researchers to previously unknown road segments.

Recognizing and Protecting Cultural Routes

Following the inventory/identification phase of documenting cultural routes, an analysis of their condition and threats along with a response to the threats are, ideally, the next steps. Acceptable levels of change for a cultural route are considered as well as an awareness of when too much change has caused it to lose its integrity and authenticity. When making such evaluations, it is important to distinguish between change that is a result of the historic use of the route and change unrelated to the cultural transference. Where most countries have laws in place to help protect significant cultural resources, the concept of cultural routes, with their associated fragile settings and cultural landscapes are not well understood, and are therefore susceptible to incremental change that ultimately can lead to loss of integrity. The challenge for all countries and institutions is to instill the importance of cultural routes into the minds of the public and decision makers so that laws, regulations and guidelines for managing urban areas and the rural landscape/setting can be enacted.

Figure 2. Deep, abandoned segment of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail in central New Mexico, leading from the desert into the river floodplain. (Source: Michael Romero Taylor)
As directed by UNESCO, management plans prepared by the individual responsible management authorities, are in place for the three cultural routes inscribed on the World Heritage List. There are many other management plans in place for other cultural routes, such as the one for El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail in the United States (NPS 2011).

Cultural Routes, whether they are significant at the World Heritage level, or at the national, regional or local level, often face similar threats. Development threats to cultural routes can be related to wind and solar farms, transmission lines, oil drilling, hydroelectric dams, urban growth, and road improvements that not only can cause direct impacts to the resources themselves, but can adversely impact their settings from noise and visual intrusions. In many countries war, religious intolerance and natural disasters from floods, wind earthquakes can damage cultural resources associated with cultural routes.

Responses to threats vary according to a culture’s sensitivity to the value of its cultural routes, and to its political infrastructure and financial resources. Tools used to mitigate physical impacts to cultural resources associated with routes, as well as noise impacts and threats to the view-shed, are just as varied. Mitigating measures such as avoidance, education outreach (teacher workshops, youth activities, etc.), government assistance and funding are often used to offset impacts.

The establishment of buffer zones for protection of a cultural route should be based upon a thorough assessment of the varying levels of the route’s heritage values, as well as the setting in which the route is located. For example, a thickly wooded environment would not necessarily need as large a buffer zone boundary as a route that is traversing an open landscape where the view-shed extends for kilometers in all directions. The Camino de Santiago has a protected thirty meter strip on either side of the cultural route that is broadened in certain places to include towns, villages, buildings and landscapes that are already protected for their cultural value under Spanish law. Inscribing El Camino de Santiago in the World Heritage List in 1994 has resulted in associated communities having management plans in place to protect those significant cultural values. These management plans are continually being tested by developers, town planners, and lawyers (Salinas 2010).

A cultural route that has almost every imaginable threat is the Silk Road that extends across a quarter of the globe. In the past few years, numerous cultural properties along the route have been damaged or lost, including the ancient citadel of Bam in eastern Iran that crumbled in a 2003 earthquake, and the widely publicized destruction of the iconic Buddhas of Bamiyan, destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. Many ancient oases along the route in Iran, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and China’s western provinces are in various states of neglect. Maintenance of historic resources along the Silk Route is paramount, along with the perpetuation of the traditions used to build and maintain them. Instilling in the local populace the importance of the resource plays a major role in furthering the long-lasting survival of the route (ICOMOS 2007). As stated by ICOMOS (2007), there is also a continual need to engage with communities and stakeholders to improve public understanding of the significance of the sites of the Silk Road.

Cultural routes that are significant for their religious use are especially vulnerable to threats. Du Cros (2002) states: ‘Knowing that a place is sacred, the cultural tourist many times is torn between the desire to be one with the local culture and the desire not to intrude upon it’. Included in this same paper is a discussion of the impact of the 372,000 visitors who visited Uluru in 1999 in Australia. For many western tourists, climbing the rock is a personal quest, and a sense of achievement is attained. But to Indigenous Australians, the route of the climb is sacred. The paper asks: ‘how resilient does a culture have to be to survive under the tourist microscope?’

Public awareness of a route’s significance and place in society is often the best tool used to protect the resources. Leaver (2002) states: ‘The best protection is from a strong community sense of value and pride of what the resources mean to them. This is a grass roots approach that is so much more effective than any heavy handed approach from the government … Heritage that is economically valuable will be heritage that is looked after’.
Heritage tourism and interpretation: telling the story

With a renewed interest in experiencing the outdoors and the recent focus on heritage tourism, there has been a marked increase in people wanting to get out and experience cultural routes: to walk, bike, or ride horseback along paths that were historically travelled. Tourism can be both a threat and an opportunity for conservation and the fulfillment of community aspirations. Sustainable tourism planning should be an essential and early priority within the development of management systems and must ensure the long-term protection and sustainability of cultural resources.

Blair et al. (n.d.) who write about routes in Australia, sum up experiencing cultural routes:

‘The modern travelling of routes is an important part of recognizing and understanding their significance. The cognitive and emotional appreciation of routes by the modern traveler depends very much on the way they travelled and on the access of the traveler to appropriate information and presentation. One reason why cultural routes are attractive is that they can themselves take a journey, which contributes to their independent, personal exploration and adventure with the experience of the stories and physical remains of the past. This is a unique coordination of experiences, often not available at particular, fully interpreted historic buildings and sites’.

The available literature seems to respect the need for a balanced approach in interpreting a route’s story. For example, in discussions regarding the Silk Route, it was stated that ‘interpretation and presentation of the cultural heritage of the Silk Roads should respect and reflect the cultural diversity, and should be planned to deliver a range of visitor experiences and opportunities. For both practical and philosophical reasons, it is not necessary or desirable for every site to be presented in the same way’ (ICOMOS 2007).

The ever present challenge of where visitor centers fit in is well stated by Sivan (2006):

‘The important type of visitor center is one that presents basic information and helps us organize our time to see the sites along the route in a manner that is efficient and intelligent. Above all, the centers should be original and varied. They should complement the discussions one has while discovering the resource on the ground. They should help create activities. When well planned, they can be important stops along a route’.

Design concept plans prepared to anticipate accommodation and guidance of visitors to various sites on a route are not discussed extensively in the literature. Equally lacking is mention of sign plans (if deemed appropriate) to guide visitors along the route (NPS 2013). ‘Branding’ of a cultural route that helps guide the visitor along the way is discussed to some extent. Probably the most recognized marking for a cultural route is the ‘scallop shell symbol of St James turned on its side and stream-lined to the left, which represents the roads of Europe symbolically joined and leading westward to Santiago’ (Murray and Graham 1997). The Route 66 shield logo in the U.S. is also an easily identifiable symbol.
Observations/conclusions

Since the study of cultural routes is a relatively new field in historic preservation, the amount of information available is relatively limited. However, in a remarkably short period of time focused attention has been paid to the subject – fifteen years since the ICOMOS Specialized Committee on Cultural routes (CIIC) was formed – a considerable amount of information has been amassed, mostly through the ICOMOS CIIC proceedings of its symposia. The CIIC proceedings have been instrumental in providing context and conceptualization for cultural routes. With that said, there is still a paucity of information dealing with their management in terms of preservation, protection and interpretation. According to available literature, among countries that have been active in managing cultural routes, Spain, Australia, Japan, Italy, Mexico and the United States stand out. That is not to say that other countries have not been active as well.

CIIC has been successful in creating an awareness among practitioners as to what characterizes a cultural route. It is recommended that more interdisciplinary work be implemented with historic documents, archaeological investigations, remote sensing and other tools to identify, document, protect, educate and, where appropriate, provide the public the opportunity to experience a given cultural route. The CIIC and other ICOMOS specialized committees are also encouraged to share experiences on common aspects of cultural heritage such as cultural landscapes, historic districts, and urban centers.

Some general observations about different regions yield a number of trends and illustrate ongoing needs. Australia has been very active in documenting cultural routes and raising public awareness. There have been numerous articles published in Australia, from both Aboriginal and European perspectives. Literature is limited from African countries despite the fact that highly significant religious and secular routes are located throughout the continent. Articles on slave routes tend to overshadow the importance of lesser known cultural routes. Asia has an impressive number of religious and trade routes throughout its immense regions, such as the Salt Route and the Tea Route, as well as the multi-braided Silk Route connected by land and sea. Excellent papers from Japan, China, India and Sri Lanka have been regularly published, adding important information for the international community. Europe has taken the lead in defining the concept of a cultural route from an international construct. Through its chairmanship of CIIC since its inception, Spain has been key in furthering the concept and realization of cultural routes. In many European countries there is a long history of recreational hiking trails, which often take advantage of historic trails, especially in England, where there are 1,600 km of hiking trails, many along cultural routes (National Trails 2013). Many cultural routes in Europe – some connected with other continents – have been studied and well documented. Obvious examples are the extensive Roman road network, Persian Road, Hadrian’s Wall and El Camino de Santiago. Many other European cultural routes opened by the Portuguese, Spanish, British and Dutch during colonial expansion, have also been studied and published.

In North America, El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro – three-quarters of which lies in Mexico with the remainder in the U.S. – has been the subject of much study and public awareness, especially by the Mexican government. The Mexico segment was inscribed in the World Heritage List in 2010. The United States portion, designated a National Historic Trail by the U.S. Congress in 2000, is administered through the 1968 National Trails System Act, which created a network of scenic, historic and recreation trails and which follow as closely as practicable original trails or routes of national historic significance. These national historic trails have as their purpose the identification and protection of the historic route and its historic remnants and artifacts for public use and enjoyment. Today there are nineteen officially designated national historic trails in the United States, representing exploration, immigration and commerce routes (NPS National Trails System 2013). Many of these National Historic Trails meet the CIIC definition of cultural routes.

Many cultural routes in Central and South America have been the subject of study in recent years. Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Peru, Chile and Argentina have been particularly active in their documenting and reporting. There has also been considerable study and creation of public awareness for the Estrada Real in Brazil. The most ambitious program in South America undertakes to document, preserve and nominate to the World Heritage List, Qhapaq Ñan, the Andean road extending through several countries for 23,000 km, with much of it dating back 2000 years to a period well before the Inca.
Countries tend to look at their national boundaries as the beginning and ending of their cultural routes, without understanding their geographical breadth. Cultural routes are geographically complex; they often do not conform to contemporary political boundaries, ownership, or land management boundaries. Cooperative and/or joint management is often needed for collaborative conservation (Blair 2002). Because of the complexity of land ownership and management of cultural routes that traverse long distances, protection must rest with a variety of institutions and governmental entities. There also has to exist an awareness of the property’s significance by the inhabitants of the region. Land use and heritage planning at the local levels, whether applied to towns, cities, counties or provinces, is instrumental in forming a varied set of measures to protect a route’s values.

Through a review of the literature, it is evident that many countries are not aware of the significance of the actual visible footprint of their routes. Some countries, in preparing nominations for cultural routes to be considered for World Heritage listing, have only a token section of road, trail, or path included in the tentative list of properties to be nominated. As the “connective web” that unites the globe, priority must be given to further study and research so that nations may better evaluate significant historic resources before being lost.

The study and identification of cultural routes world-wide is well on its way, thanks to the leadership of ICOMOS and progressive government actions. However, there will always be various ways in which countries and regions define cultural routes, despite the ICOMOS approved definition in the CIIC Charter. The challenge is for CIIC to further disseminate the concept of cultural routes and to keep refining its definition. Long-term management and protection is problematic, but hopefully achievable through public education, enhanced awareness of their value, and regulation of development threats. Above all, cultural routes have to be relevant to local communities through which they pass.

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