Travelling on the CultureNature journey to New Delhi, India

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Abstract

The CultureNature Journey held at the 19th General Assembly of ICOMOS in New Delhi, India in 2017 was the first such event hosted by ICOMOS and was jointly organised by ICOMOS and IUCN. It followed the success of the inaugural Nature Culture Journey held in Hawai‘i in 2016 as part of the IUCN World Conservation Congress. As the use of the word ‘journey’ implies, these events were not isolated conferences but form part of a long period of learning, sharing and development. The Journey has its roots in research spread across continents and conducted by a diversity of specialists whose work has acted to meld and mold a new approach to the conceptualisation of the interconnectedness of culture and nature in heritage places. The device of the ‘journey’ is carried through to reference participants as travelers on a shared journey towards a common goal. We deliberately combine the words ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ without a space between them so that they are one new conjoined noun that describes the intertwined character of the concepts and methods we explore on the Journey. This paper describes the Journey at the ICOMOS General Assembly in 2017 and hopefully will act as a catalyst for the further evolution of the Journey.

Introduction

The Nature Culture/CultureNature Journey is an ongoing global partnership of ICOMOS and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) which emerged from their collaboration on the Connecting Practice Project (Leitão et al. 2017; IUCN & ICOMOS 2015). The CultureNature Journey event at the General Assembly in New Delhi in 2017 followed the successful debut Journey event, the Nature-Culture Journey, held with the support of US ICOMOS at the IUCN World Conservation Congress (WCC) in Hawai‘i in September 2016. In the enthusiasm that abounded at the successful conclusion of that event, ICOMOS delegates took up the gauntlet thrown down by the Journey travelers to host the next event. From the WCC floor in Hawai‘i, ICOMOS delegates petitioned the Indian National Committee of ICOMOS to include a similar Journey event at the 2017 General Assembly, the planning for which was already well underway. ICOMOS resolved to reverse the words of the Journey title to reflect the change in the host organisation from one World Heritage Advisory Body (IUCN) to another (ICOMOS). Although this adds some complexity to referencing the overall Journey it reflects the shifting emphasis and inputs that characterise the different events. While ideally there will be equal inputs from members of both Advisory Bodies in the future, the reality is that ICOMOS symposia will have more ICOMOS delegates, and IUCN symposia will attract more IUCN participants. As long as the criteria for collaboration between ICOMOS and IUCN in the development of the sessions offered at each event is met, it is interesting to note the differences that arise from the shifts in host organisation.
To understand just why the Journey has been such a success and embraced by both IUCN and ICOMOS members, it is important to acknowledge the legacy of work by individual members. When the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 1972 it sprung from two separate movements: the first focusing on the preservation of cultural sites, and the other focusing on the conservation of nature. Including provisions for protecting both natural and cultural sites in one convention was innovative in itself (Slatyer 1983). At that time there was little thought given to whether the convention addressed the needs of local communities or Indigenous peoples, or to how these two fields of heritage conservation related to each other. There was an inherent assumption that the places included on the World Heritage List were being preserved for the greater good and future generations even if this was, at times, against the local interests of current populations. The application of the convention has evolved since its inception (Cameron & Rössler 2013) and there has been considerable debate over whether World Heritage designations empower or inhibit the aspirations of local communities. It is often claimed that World Heritage listing provides a ‘status’ that can affirm and support the cultural identity of local communities and provide local communities with income and or prestige (see for example Lekhakula 2000, p. 22). Increasingly, we hear the terms ‘World Heritage’ and ‘UNESCO’ being referred to as ‘brands’ (Meskell 2014, p. 218), and we see evidence that World Heritage listing can also provide the conditions in which commerce thrives at the expense not only of the significant cultural or natural heritage values for which the place was listed, but also in ways that undermine the cultural identity and in some case the wellbeing of local communities (Disko 2012, p. 17).

Over the past decade many people have worked to highlight and/or address a variety of issues in heritage conservation and management (McIntyre-Tamwoy, Best & Fahey 2010; Wild & McLeod 2008; Pannell 2006; Bridgewater, Arico & Scott 2007; Lynch, Fell & McIntyre-Tamwoy 2010; Persic & Martin 2008); equity and recognition of community and other values (Brockwell, O’Connor and Byrne 2013; Brown, Mitchell & Beresford 2005; Davidson-Hunt et al. 2012); and Indigenous rights and interests (Beltrán 2000; UNESCO 2018; McIntyre-Tamwoy 2012; Meskell 2013) that arise from a western heritage system that historically has seen heritage places characterised as either natural or cultural.

One of the most significant initiatives was the introduction of the concept of cultural landscapes into the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention in 1992. This initiative ‘made people aware that sites are not isolated islands, but that they have to be seen in the ecological system and with their cultural linkages in time and space beyond single monuments and strict nature reserves’ (Rössler 2006, p. 340). This has been credited as being a major evolutionary step in the thinking around protected area management (Rössler 2006; Taylor & Lennon 2011, 2012).

The decades following its introduction saw a raft of academics and practitioners focusing on the definition, description and management of cultural landscapes as a step to a more holistic approach to the recognition of significant places that embody both cultural and natural values embedded in protected areas (Rössler 2005; Taylor & Lennon 2012; Wild & McLeod 2008; Mitchell, Rössler & Tricau 2009; Brown 2010; Brown 2012; Taylor & Lennon 2011; Hill et al. 2011). Despite this accumulation of focus, a level of dissatisfaction with the slow or inconsistent realisation of the promise that seemed inherent in the concept of cultural landscapes is evident (Wallace & Buckley 2015). This keeps pace alongside a growing dissatisfaction with the globalising effects of international conventions and has led to concern about the effectiveness of such instruments in protecting cultural diversity:

Global conventions, from the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) through the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) and even the World Heritage Convention (WHC), among others, have tended to create a ‘lowest common denominator’ approach to resource management, which often ignores—or even militates against—aspects of cultural diversity, including adequate respect and understanding of indigenous peoples and their rights. (Bridgewater, Arico & Scott 2007, p. 406)
Even given the robust debate, the institutions that together comprise the dual framework for natural and cultural heritage management that has been established internationally have been slow to respond. While there has been a slow, gradual awareness of what has now been termed the ‘inextricable link’ between biological and cultural diversity (Persic & Martin 2008, p. 7), an interrelated systems view has not permeated environmental legislation at the national level in many western nations where these factors are still largely considered in isolation from each other. Critiques of the narrow nature versus culture approach to protected areas have only in recent years found fertile soil and many have lamented that the cultural landscapes approach has not yielded the interconnected approach that was envisaged at its conception (McIntyre-Tamwoy 2004; Harmon 2007; Pannell 2006; Maffi 2010; Brown 2012). Not that there haven’t been gains. For example, the concept of landscape has been expanded to encompass seascapes (McNiven 2003; Greer, McIntyre-Tamwoy & Henry 2011; Brown 2013) and this has helped to develop better models for heritage conceptualisation in regions such as the Pacific where the values of terrestrial sites are set within oceans that are imbued with cultural and natural values. On the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the World Heritage Convention, while reflecting on achievements, Buckley (2014, p. 47) highlighted two points (amongst five) that required urgent and critical focus on the part of ICOMOS and IUCN in the coming decade as: enabling and incorporating rights-based approaches; and overcoming the nature culture divide.

To address the need for integrated management practices ICOMOS and IUCN developed the Connecting Practice Project. Phase I of this project commenced in 2013 and was reported prior to the Hawai’i Journey event, and the Phase II report was launched at the Journey event in New Delhi (Leitão et al. 2017). In Phase II the lessons learnt from the first phase, which focused on three World Heritage sites, were translated into practical interventions to achieve a better understanding of the interconnected character of the natural, cultural and social values of these places. This involved field visits to two World Heritage sites: the Cultural Landscape of Hortobágy National Park – the Puszta (Hungary) and the mixed site of the Maloti-Drakensberg Park (South Africa/Lesotho). Connecting Practice also reports on how to adapt the ‘Enhancing Our Heritage Toolkit’, a natural heritage management effectiveness methodology (Hockings et al. 2008), to cultural heritage sites. It is against the backdrop of this work and emerging from the discussions and ideas generated during the course of the Connecting Practice Project, that the Nature-Culture/CultureNature Journey has developed.

Why the journey?

The Journey can be seen as a grass roots movement amongst heritage practitioners that has emerged – not as an official programme, established with funding and a brief – but rather as a manifestation of the desire to work in an ‘unbounded’ fashion across organisations, disciplines and interests to explore the interconnectedness of nature and culture. It acknowledges that, despite the advances made in considerations of natural and cultural values, something is still missing. We still struggle to find methodologies and processes that respect the inputs of specialists and acknowledge scientific values while conserving equally and transparently the tangible and intangible cultural and natural values of the places we claim to conserve. Perhaps the value of the Culture Nature/Nature Culture approach is that it facilitates a similar experiential learning environment as that described by Horowitz (2013) in her personal explorations on ‘looking’ at her surroundings in urban contexts. The learning arises from our shared ability to see what is in front of us despite our ‘conditioned concentration’ that obscures it; and the power of individual bias in perception or what we call ‘expertise’ – acquired by passion or training – as an agent in highlighting elements that otherwise elude the rest of us. Heritage places may be described by specialists in terms of the technical merits of their component elements such as significant fabric or species, but for many people experiencing heritage places, they evoke a synaesthesia that is rarely captured in technical assessments. For instance, people speak of the sounds of place evoking feelings of peace, a sense of colour, smell or the visual characteristics of a landscape, eliciting physical symptoms of pain, destitution or exhilaration, and other sensory experiences.
The Journey focuses on the growing evidence that natural and cultural heritage are closely interconnected and it presents Culture Nature/Nature Culture as an approach to heritage that has emerged based on the understanding that relationships between people and the natural environment have worked to shape both our physical environment and belief systems. Since humans emerged on the planet they have been interacting with their surrounding natural environment, sometimes as participants in the functioning of ecosystems, protectors of sacred natural sites, other times shaping landscapes, including through agriculture and fishing. People have developed traditional and scientific knowledge, belief systems, and management practices, and without understanding these complex interrelationships we have little chance of achieving that elusive objective of sustainable conservation of natural and/or cultural values.

The Journey approach embraces the complexity of our heritage, which includes biological resources, genes, landscapes, geological diversity, cultural places and practices, and traditional knowledge systems. It acknowledges both that humans shape their surroundings and that nature acts on humans in a myriad of ways to produce the world’s diverse landscapes.

**Destination Hawai’i**

In 2016 the World Conservation Congress was held in Hawai’i, providing an ideal opportunity to launch the Nature-Culture Journey with the assistance of US ICOMOS. The concept involved bringing together IUCN and ICOMOS members, along with key practitioners from the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre to develop new methodologies and nuanced understandings through a series of paper sessions, knowledge cafes, case studies and workshops. The inclusion of different formats, as distinct from the traditional scientific paper format, allowed for the participation of people newly introduced to these ideas working alongside people who have been deeply embedded in them. ‘Knowledge Cafes’, although challenging to run effectively given the limitations of the venue, proved to be of particular interest to delegates, and enabled communities of interest to be grown around new research areas. Workshops provided an opportunity for IUCN and ICOMOS to involve members in ongoing projects and to share emerging outcomes. It became clear that there was a critical mass of people committed to ensuring that World Heritage processes and practice are informed by our growing understanding of the dynamic nature of biocultural landscapes (Mitchell, Brown & Barrett 2017, p. 126) and that indeed, the Journey is a vehicle through which we can continue to grow this understanding.

The participants of the IUCN-ICOMOS Nature-Culture Journey in Hawai’i developed a shared set of commitments in the document ‘*Malama Honua – To Care for our Island Earth*’. This statement of commitments ‘recognises the vital importance of the interlinkages of nature and culture and calls upon actors from both sectors to work together and adopt integrated nature-culture solutions to address urgent global challenges.’ (Mitchell, Brown & Barrett 2017, p. 127). *Malama Honua* included a request to ICOMOS to continue the Journey at its General Assembly in New Delhi India in 2017.

**Destination India**

In the immediate euphoria that accompanied the conclusion of the first Journey event in Hawai’i, ICOMOS agreed to host the next event in 2017 in New Delhi. To some extent this was a major test for the flexibility and adaptability of the Journey. ICOMOS General Assemblies are smaller affairs than the IUCN World Conservation Congress and funding is a challenge as it is provided through the registration of individual members and the host national committee and its partners. However, the ICOMOS membership – and especially ICOMOS India – rose to the challenge delivering an exciting CultureNature Journey. Harnessing the support of the Wildlife Institute India, ICOMOS and IUCN were joined by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and ICCROM on a new leg of the Journey. The image that was chosen to represent the combined values of cultural and nature in the New Delhi Journey was a stylised bodhi leaf (see Figure 1).

The three conveners Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy (ICOMOS lead for the Journey), Tim Badman (IUCN lead) and Sonali Ghosh (Wildlife Institute India/ICOMOS India) crafted an exciting stream within
the ICOMOS scientific symposium that comprised 13 workshops, 7 Knowledge Cafes, 4 paper sessions, 2 case studies sessions, several poster presentations, several interactive game sessions and an interactive questionnaire on the Sustainable Development Goals all held within a 1.5 day programme. During the Journey, a dedicated group of ICOMOS and IUCN members convened as an ‘ideas distillery’- to prepare a statement from participants based on the results of each session and the many comments collected during the Journey, led by Kristal Buckley (Australia ICOMOS), Vanicka Arora (ICOMOS India) and Rossana Merizalde (IUCN) (Figure 2).

The input from the CultureNature Journey participants was gathered through a mix of methods including both ‘old school’ physical post-boxes placed in each room and through social media. A team of emerging professionals served as a corps of reporters, co-ordinated by Nicole Franceschini. Together this reporting corps applied their energy to gathering hand written notes from the post boxes each day and attending every session taking notes and feeding them back to provide insight and inspiration to the ‘ideas distillery’. Delegates were also encouraged to send comments via Twitter and Facebook. The resulting statement was ‘Yatra aur Tammanah’ [Yatra: our purposeful Journey and Tammanah: our wishful aspirations for our heritage]: Learnings & Commitments from the Culture Nature Journey at the 19th ICOMOS General Assembly, New Delhi 2017’.

Summing up the outcomes of the culture nature journey in India

The CultureNature Journey was all about sharing ideas on conservation in order to generate new ideas; so, while the perspective of the Journey was future focused, it was very firmly rooted in current actions. The thirteen workshops were all active components of current projects and provided an important opportunity to the broader membership to provide direct input into these projects. The Knowledge Cafés were round-table discussions focusing on current challenges facing heritage practitioners in specific areas of their work, and to scope new projects and collaborations. Paper and case study sessions showcased the outcomes of research and current projects, and the case studies highlighted commonalities between projects in certain areas such as the articulation of the cultural values of water bodies and challenges in their conservation.
Many participants in the Journey were struck by the exciting chaos of interactive events all occurring within the 1.5 days of the symposium. Used to the usual ICOMOS symposium format of presentations, the CultureNature Journey format was challenging for some, requiring participants to be active collaborators rather than passive spectators. The format worked to generate a certain energy and excitement that drew participants in as ideas, messages and opinions developed a life beyond the walls of the seminar rooms through emails, Facebook and Twitter posts and the post boxes. Rather than a measured progression from one paper presentation to another there were opportunities on hand at any one time to either jump in and participate in projects, or to sit back, listen, contemplate and learn. Even languages changed depending on the topics with one workshop being entirely run in French.

The image that best represents the Journey while it was happening, is the creative chaos of Tim Henderson’s painting ‘Chaos in Antique Shade’ which while confusing is also exciting and revealing. In contrast to the quiet reflection and wisdom that is embodied in the bodhi leaf image chosen to be the logo of the CultureNature Journey in India, Henderson’s chaos brings to mind the complex swirl of creative ideas and inspiration which enveloped the travelers as the synapses in their brains kicked into overdrive. Through that exciting maelstrom of ideas ran many common threads including:

- Communities – how to engage with them, how to understand and articulate their values and different models of ownership and responsibility sharing in conservation of heritage places;
- Rights to speak for heritage – including Indigenous rights, but also the rights of other minorities and communities generally;
- Ways of interpreting and managing heritage places, including the use of emerging technologies;
- The relationships between intangible and tangible aspects of heritage and the challenges of systems and conventions that treat these as independent matters;
- Challenges around how to support traditional management practices to strengthen and sustain cultural heritage;
- Intergenerational transmission of knowledge, places and practices;
- Climate change – both in terms of its impacts and threats to cultural heritage but also recognising that it becomes an agent of revelation that may provide new opportunities (for example, through the exposure of previously hidden sites, or the opportunity to salvage information).

In distilling the essence of the CultureNature Journey in New Delhi the Yatra aur Tammanah statement identified 14 attributes that were repeated in various ways in the feedback and summaries received from delegates and around which the Journey centred. They combined eastern and western concepts and built on the Journey experience in Hawai‘i. They were: Konohiki; Ways of Doing; Virasat our received and transmitted legacies; Kuleana care responsibility and stewardship of the land sand seas; Forms of Knowledge; Spiritual and Sacred Dimensions; Vividhta (diversity) and Aadar (respect); Democracy and Local Empowerment; Landscape and Seascape; Connectivity; Relational Situational Contexts; Sustainability; Change and Resilience; Vitality.

Two images were developed by Vanicka Arora and her partner Manas Murthy from the discussions of the ‘ideas distillery’ to illustrate how these fourteen attributes acted on each other. They are:

- The Circle and the Path: the converging paths that have brought us together and the Journey that we have yet to take, the earth and the soil that sustains us and the diverse bio-cultural systems that make up our wonderful planet. (Figure 3a)
- Eternal Circle: symbolising the cycle of life death and rebirth which are the links that create a singular path and eternal Journey. (Figure 3b)
The future of the nature culture/culturenature journey

Several people have asked how is the CultureNature Journey organised within the ICOMOS structure? The answer is that it is deliberately not structured. While there is a focal point whose role is to encourage and share information – and there is a Facebook page (Culture Nature Journey @culturenaturejourney) and a dedicated website under development – there is no fixed committee or working group. The value of the Journey comes from its ability to change as needs and interest shift, remaining organic and constantly changing so that members are encouraged to come together from across the structures of National Committees and International Scientific Committees, building collaboration webs across the Advisory Bodies to the World Heritage Convention (ICOMOS, IUCN and ICCROM), so as to generate new knowledge. In this way the Journey is best conceptualised as many Journeys some from completely different starting points to a common distant destination. On this Journey, even the travelers are not constant with most of us opting in and out at certain points and joining up with colleagues/travelers along the way for long and or short stretches, taking small individual detours, and making discoveries that we can share and grow (and sometimes discard en route).

Despite this lack of permanent structure, there are common characteristics of the Journey regardless of the location and hosts and some of these are summarised in the statement of learnings from the CultureNature Journey in New Delhi. Without intending to prioritise any of the learnings over the others, I highlight here the use of local embedded language, the incorporation of visual art and images to emphasise and convey meaning, and the use of performance and participatory formats to stimulate provoke and experiment.

The use of local language such as Hawaiian words and concepts in Malama Honua and Hawaiian, Urdu and Hindi in Yatra aur Tammanah, are more than just a cute device. Rather they help plant and grow the ideas that fringe the physical and intellectual road that we Journey along, and they are carefully chosen, engendering much passionate debate, especially within the multicultural and multidisciplinary ‘ideas distillery’. The CultureNature Journey at New Delhi acknowledged that:

Languages provide us with both barriers and opportunities. Barriers because so much of the discourse – particularly in relation to World Heritage – is conducted in English, French or other languages that reflect a western ontology that separates nature from people and culture. Consciousness of the ways in which language creates our thinking, our approaches and our limitations is therefore essential; and it should be a continuing quest by ICOMOS, IUCN and all their partners in the yatra to find different concepts and words that can overcome this situation. (Yatra aur Tammanah)

Similarly, the use of imagery to help identify the Journey as it weaves between a broader symposium helps to develop an identity for the particular Journey event. In addition to the
hibiscus flower chosen for Hawai‘i, and the stylised bodhi leaf selected for Delhi, the Journey in New Delhi went a step further, with specific art works developed as part of the work of the ‘ideas distillery’ (Figure 3a and 3b) to accompany the events final communiqué. Music and dance have also played a part in both events, not just to entertain but to stimulate or provoke participants out of the state of ‘normalcy’ that often permeates academic symposia (Figure 4). From the opening ceremony, the message is delivered that participation in the Journey requires a deeper engagement, and that participants are invited as active agents in the development of ideas, methods and projects. Symposia are often about sharing and learning amongst professional colleagues, and of course the Journey is about that too, but it is also about knowledge creation brought about through the combination, and conversion of the different types of knowledge, through practice, interaction, and exploratory learning. The programme included participatory games and events, and the importance of ‘Ways of Doing’ was embraced by the CultureNature Journey in New Delhi:

At the CultureNature Journey in New Delhi, we learned about naturecultures through the value of experiences, learning-by-doing, collecting evidence and learning-by-listening. We undertake to implement these grounded approaches in ways that respect the rights and obligations of communities. (Yatra aur Tammanah)

For all those who have so far participated in the Journey, and for those who wish they had, the Journey is far from over. The enthusiasm for the NatureCulture/CultureNature Journey has grown with multiple events occurring throughout 2018 (in India, Fiji, the USA and Argentina) and more are planned for 2019 as we head towards 2020. In 2020 ICOMOS will hold its triennial General Assembly in Australia and IUCN will hold their World Conservation Congress in France, and it is intended that there will be a major shared NatureCulture/CultureNature Journey event across these two major meetings.

How long the Journey will continue beyond 2020 is unknown at this time. Perhaps, it will end by arriving at its destination, or at least a logical jumping off point where everyone will linger. Perhaps the road on which we are Journeying will dwindle into a dead-end track of sorts as the bulk of the travelers grow tired of stimulation and the work of constantly growing new knowledge and drift off along the way. For now, the energy generated through our yatra is providing a fertile ground for the development of new ideas and the progression of active projects.

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