

UNESCO Background Guide

Georgia Tech Model United Nations

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Topic 1

Protecting National Monuments from the Threat of Natural Disasters

Introduction

Culture is a fundamental aspect of human society, encompassing shared beliefs, values, and practices that define communities and connections. Despite its significance, cultural differences can lead to contentious disputes and conflicts, and, additionally, cultural artifacts are often vulnerable to natural processes. As such, preserving and protecting cultures and their physical representations, such as national monuments, is crucial for global citizens and the United Nations. In Topic One, this committee is tasked with honing in specifically on the environmental threats to the tangible representation of culture, namely national monuments.

In attempts to help with clarification, categorization, and overall awareness, there are various sources that look to define and list key cultural sites and locations around the world; in particular, the UNESCO World Heritage Sites and the independent World Monuments Fund. Having been founded immediately in the aftermath of the bloody and horrific Second World War in 1945, the

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) looks to move the world closer to international peace with efforts to encourage cooperation, communication, and understanding to increase respect between cultures and increase the drive towards sustainability and development.¹ In order to aid in the realization of this goal, UNESCO established the World Heritage Sites, which initially consisted of twelve sights and has since expanded to 1157 properties in over 150 states across the world.^{2, 3} The convention divides the categorization of these heritage sites into three sections: cultural, such as the Great Wall of China; natural, such as the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia; and mixed, where elements of both culture and nature are intertwined in one sight, such as the Forests of Calakmul in Campeche, Mexico. In terms of the protection of these sights, the convention maintains a list of properties that it considers to be in danger from various threats, ranging from accelerated deterioration, war, development encroachment, as well as environmental factors such as fires, earthquakes, water levels, etc.⁴ Currently, the list places 55 properties under this label of being faced with threats potentially devastating to their continued existence, including the hotly contested Old City of Jerusalem and the Historic Center of Odessa, as it is caught in the midst of a war of aggression.⁵ Furthermore, these endangered sites either fall under the category of ascertained threats (those that are specific and imminent) or potential threats (those that have the possibility of causing damage).⁶ Outside of the United Nations, there is also the World Monuments Fund, an independent body that compiles a World Monuments Watch every two years to raise awareness for and encourage the protection of sites nominated by individuals and organizations and approved by a vetting council and panel of experts.⁷ In 2022, their list focuses on threats such as climate change, excessive tourism, crises, and general underrepresentation, and includes such places as the Koagannu Mosques and Cemetery in the Maldives, threatened severely by the rising sea levels from climate change.⁸



Fig. 1. Location of World Heritage Sites

¹ UN, "UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization"

² Britannica, "World Heritage Site"

³ Britannica, "World Heritage List"

⁴ UNESCO, "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage"

⁵ UNESCO, "List of World Heritage in Danger"

⁶ UNESCO, "World Heritage in Danger"

⁷ World Monuments Fund, "World Monuments Watch"

⁸ World Monuments Fund, "2022 World Monuments Watch"

History

While various cultural and historic sites and monuments have captivated the public eye for centuries upon centuries, provisions for ensuring their protection and longevity have only been established within the last century and a half. Beginning the development of these international laws and norms was an 1874 meeting of fifteen European states in Brussels, Belgium wherein they decided that works of art and science must be protected during war and that their deliberate destruction would be deemed illegal.⁹ A quarter of a century later, the Hague Convention (1899, revised 1907) furthered this idea by requiring that extraordinary care and consideration be taken both by the offensive and defensive forces in times of war to protect cultural, historical, scientific, and charitable buildings, as well as hospitals. The offensive forces were to do all in their power to avoid inflicting harm on these sites, while the defensive forces were to clearly indicate which buildings fell under those categorizations so as to alert their enemy combatants of their significance. A further development was made with the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict which, while attempting to achieve what its name lays out, has ultimately seen violations on numerous occasions such as in the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s and during the Taliban presence in Afghanistan in 2001.¹⁰ In terms of the development of a general provision to safeguard monuments, sites, and culturally significant locations, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage was established under UNESCO in 1972, also establishing the list of World Heritage Sites referenced previously. This came in large part out of a response to concern from Egypt and Syria to protect ancient Nubian monuments that were at risk of being destroyed from the construction of the Aswan High Dam. This two decade long Nubian campaign helped portray not only the need for a more general framework to protect monuments, but also the great cooperation and progress that can be fostered internationally around this field. Furthered by the advocacy of Joseph Fisher and Russell Train, as well as threatening floods to the culturally rich city of Venice, Italy, the international community ultimately came together to establish the 1972 Heritage Convention.

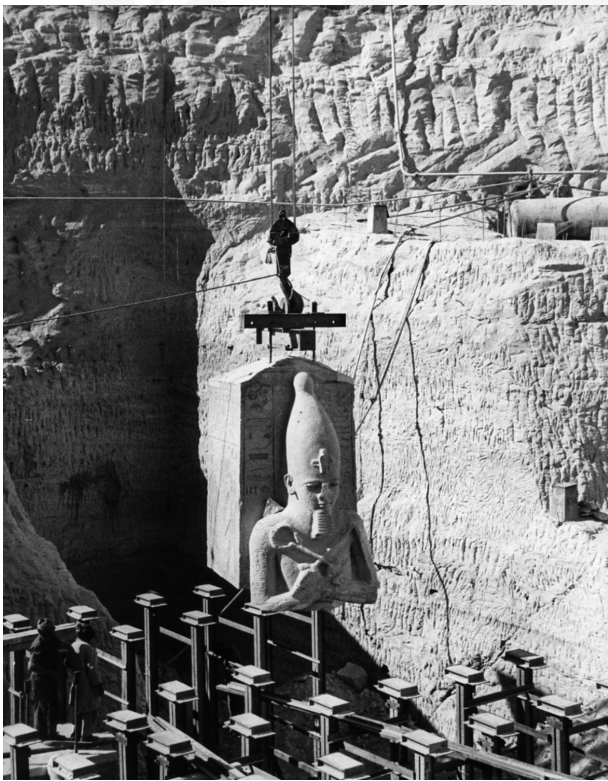


Fig. 2. Efforts to save historic Nubian monuments at the Great Temple in Abu Simbel, Egypt. (Nenadovic, 1966)

to establish the 1972 Heritage Convention.

⁹ Fiankan-Bokonga, "A Historic Resolution to Protect Cultural Heritage"

¹⁰ UN, "World Heritage Site"

Current

Despite general advancements in intergovernmental cooperation and interstate peace in the decades since the Second World War, protection efforts for world monuments still leave much room for improvement, as the relentless forces of nature are set to impose devastating damage unless action is taken. One of the primary reasons that the environment poses such a powerful threat is due to the existential threat of global climate change. While natural disasters may at first appear to be freak incidents over which humans have no control, a closer look reveals that humans do in fact contribute to the Earth's climate processes. In fact, these human actions are detrimental to the health of the planet, and, thus, to national monuments as well. By engaging in industrial activities that emit Greenhouse gasses such as carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, the Earth's average temperature warms, leading to an increase of extreme weather conditions such as hurricanes, droughts, and wildfires, a phenomenon that's known as climate change.¹¹

From the rising sea levels and receding coastline causing concern for the Statue of Liberty in the US and the Fortress of Cartagena in Colombia, to the increasing rainfall and subsequent erosion affecting the Easter Island Statues of Rapa Nui National Park in Chile, and the more intense droughts increasing the vulnerability Mesa Verde National Park in the US, climate change and its various effects prove to be a major threat to the cultural monuments of the world.¹² In particular, the



Fig. 3. Historic city of Shibam, Wadi Hadhramaut, Yemen. (Gao, 1999)

Middle East is especially prone to climate change due to being victim of especially high temperature increases.¹³ The ancient city of Babylon in Iraq is collapsing from an increasingly more arid climate and seeping groundwater; the Wadi Hadhramaut site in Yemen is facing dissolution from increased rainfall deteriorating their mudbrick composition; and stones in ancient buildings in Egypt are falling apart as a result of the heat and humidity. In terms of current international agreements and resolutions, Resolution 2199 from the UN Security Council was adopted by 15 states in 2015 in order to ban the trade of cultural items from Iraq and Syria in an attempt to guard against profiting from looting,

¹¹ Shaftel, Holly, et al., eds, "The Effects of Climate Change"

¹² Erin Blakemore, "Five Landmarks Threatened by Climate Change"

¹³ Catherine Schraer, "Middle East's Ancient Monuments the Most Endangered on Earth"

especially that done by terrorists.¹⁴ Additionally in 2017, Resolution 2347 was passed unanimously which again focused on halting trafficking as well as protecting those cultural artifacts via a new network in support of their safety. A year prior, 2016 also saw the creation of a cultural emergency task force by Italy in conjunction with UNESCO. Regarding accountability, the first sentencing for destroying cultural property was to Miodrag Jokić for his actions in Yugoslavia, as he received seven years in prison for his actions in Dubrovnik. Later in 2016, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued the first sentencing that labeled crimes against cultural sites under the designation of a war crime when they gave Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi nine years for his actions in Timbuktu.



³ IEA (2020), Global EV Outlook 2020, IEA, Paris <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-ev-outlook-2020>, License: CC BY 4.0

Directives

As esteemed members of the United Nations, representing the crucial UNESCO committee, you have the responsibility to protect and maintain the cultures of the world, including the ever-threatened physical sites and monuments, not only for the people of the world today, but for their posterity and the future generations. As such, it may be useful to consider the following questions when regarding your plans of approach:

- Does your nation have any monuments or sites whose continued existence is threatened? If so, are there any domestic policies in place to try and protect them?
- What are some ways to increase awareness and focus on the crucial issue of cultural preservation that may otherwise get lost in discussions of such grand issues like climate change?
- While there has been much written about protecting monuments from events such as war, there is less regarding natural disasters. How can the unique characteristics of natural disasters be addressed in any resolutions?
- How can your proposed solutions allow for tailoring to specific instances of threats while still bringing the world together and being a product of international cooperation and agreement on a broader scale?
- How can nations be incentivized to help other countries lacking in resources preserve their cultural monuments?
- Remember your country's specific context and mindset on the issue in order to provide for an accurate embodiment of them in your delegation. Note that no hate of any kind will be tolerated, including racism, sexism, or any other prejudice.

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Topic 2

The Preservation of Endangered Languages

Introduction

Language is one of the integral components to identity; the pride surrounding language is palpable as it underscores a unique history, tradition, and values to whichever group it belongs. UNESCO's World Atlas of Languages serves as a compendium, or collection of sorts, to document and provide information about the some seven-thousand languages across the world, including their unique structures, styles, functions, usages, and more, as gathered from surveys across governments and various organizations throughout member states.¹⁵ The Atlas explains language with four key characteristics: first, it is a vessel for human heritage; second, it holds key knowledge; third, it allows for communication; and lastly, it is a resource that must be treated responsibly and with respect. Unfortunately, however, the strength of the significance of linguistic diversity is being met with an even greater force that poses a major threat to the future of language survival across the world.

¹⁵ UNESCO, "The World Atlas of Languages"

While in the past, more direct and blatant efforts of oppression were taken against minority languages, today's threat is more passive, coming from general trends of globalization, urbanization, climate change, and migration.¹⁶ The development and propagation of these prominent lingua-francas, or languages used commonly across the world, are displacing the indigenous languages as these popular languages allow for easier interactions in this ever-interconnected world. For example, oftentimes parents, with the good intention of helping set their children up for a better future, don't teach them their native language as they feel that proficiency in the dominant language will better propel them to prosperity.¹⁷

In discussing languages at risk, it is important to understand some general terminology. As per the Linguistics Society of America, an endangered language is one at risk of dying out, wherein they fade out of use by their communities as more prominent languages take over, until its last speaker dies, bringing the language with it.¹⁸ One should note that ancient languages such as Latin or Greek are not in the same category, as instead of being outright supplanted by other distinct languages, they simply changed until they themselves had branched off and evolved to become entirely new languages.

Overall, the importance and weight that languages carry for cultural identity, traditions, and insight into history and even greater understanding of the human mind is critical and it is of the utmost importance that they are not lost to time.

History

The areas of languages and culture were yet more victims to the horrors and tragedies of colonialism and imperialism that transpired in several preceding centuries to today's current state of endangered languages. One of the more famous examples is the exploitation and oppression that the various Native American groups were faced with, first by European settlers and then later by Americans expanding into the frontier. Throughout this time, Native Americans whose communities were being enveloped by white ones were forced to assimilate and shed their traditional culture. Boarding schools were one of the primary means to facilitate this assimilation, as the Indian Civilization Act of 1819 made English-only schools for Native American children who subsequently lost their indigenous languages in favor of English as a result.¹⁹

¹⁶ Strohlic, "The Race to Save the World's Disappearing Languages"

¹⁷ Nuwer, "Languages: Why We Must Save Dying Tongues"

¹⁸ Woodbury, "What Is an Endangered Language?"

¹⁹ Baldwin, "Analysis: How Indigenous Languages Can Be Preserved, and Why Those Efforts Help Revitalize Culture"

This history of colonial oppression was also paralleled in other areas of settling and displacement such as Latin America and Australia. After the Spanish conquered the great Incan and Aztec Empires in the 16th century, they began a period of colonial rule that lasted for some three centuries. In this time, Spanish became the dominant language as more and more Spanish settlers populated the region, and the indigenous minorities and their minority languages were relegated to the side. Even today, this inequity has



Fig. 5. Assimilation of Native Americans in the Carlisle Indian School, circa 1900. (Johnson, 1901)

persisted as indigenous peoples of Latin America often feel isolated for speaking their native languages. The statistics show that they do in fact receive worse healthcare and economic and educational opportunities, with a majority of the Peruvian population without healthcare being Quechua speakers, in spite of only being a small minority of the total population.²⁰ In Australia, colonialism brought death, destruction, and oppression as well. Events such as the Black War, wherein the Europeans murdered nearly all of the indigenous Tasmanians, as well as kidnapping Aboriginal children in order to assimilate them, have resulted in linguistic decimation, as only 100 of the original 250 are being spoken, and of those, only 13 are continuing to be taught to the youth.²¹

China as well is a focal point around the concern for language preservation, with the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party avoiding democracy, violating human rights, and ignoring cultural uniqueness. When the Communist revolutionary forces, led by future chairman (leader) Mao Zedong, were victorious in their efforts to control China, they engaged in the consolidation of much territory, including taking forcible control of Tibet in the early 1950s.²² In the ensuing decades, China enacted a policy some have deemed “erasure” whereby they heavily focus on the promotion of their national common language of Putonghua (which was first created in 1949), and then a subsequent focus on only certain minority languages.²³ In addition to not supporting these minority languages enough, the government only recognizes one minority language for each of its 56 subnational groups, despite each one consisting of far more than that. These other minority languages, such as Manegacha in Tibet, are at risk of being completely overrun.

²⁰ Casma, “Discriminated against for Speaking their Own Language”

²¹ Griffiths, “Indigenous Australians Had Their Languages Taken from Them, and It’s Still Causing Issues Today”

²² BBC, “Tibet Profile - Timeline”

²³ Roche, “Articulating Language Oppression: Colonialism, Coloniality and the Erasure of Tibet’s Minority Languages”

Current

The current outlook for language preservation appears bleak, as although estimates vary, the UN projects that on the low end, 50% of current languages will be extinct by the end of the current century, with that number having the potential to be as high as even 95%.²⁴ In the 60 year period between 1950 and 2010, the world lost 230 languages, and that trend looks to be increasing today with hundreds upon hundreds of current languages dwindling down to their last 1000 speakers or less.²⁵ Minorities are at the greatest risk, due to being prone to assimilation and being overlooked by the dominant languages and groups in the regions they reside. There are at-risk groups all across the world, such as the Native Americans, Aborigines, and Asian minority groups as discussed earlier, but also including tribes in Papua New Guinea, Africa, and even Europe.²⁶ Despite being associated with promulgating their own linguistic domination via colonialism, Europe itself is home to marginalized and oppressed groups that vie for representation as well, such as the Irish, Basque, and Provençal.

Despite the seemingly dire straits in which the future of linguistic diversity appears to be, there may be cause for a more positive outlook. There are numerous efforts already in effect to help preserve and save dying languages: Daniel Bogre Udell and Frederico Andrade have started Wikitongues with the goal of archiving each of the world's languages; the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages is working towards building Talking Dictionaries to increase the ease by which endangered languages can be learned and spread²⁵; and the Rosetta Project seeks to create open access digital language libraries.²⁷ Furthering these sentiments, the United Nations passed a resolution to officially make 2022-2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, representing the success of both the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues as well as the prior International Year of Indigenous Languages that took place in 2019.²⁸



Fig. 6 Map of dying languages.

²⁴ UN DESA Indigenous Peoples, "International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022 – 2032"

²⁵ "The Race to Save the World's Disappearing Languages"

²⁶ "What Is an Endangered Language?"

²⁷ Wood, "1,500 Endangered Languages Could Disappear by the End of the Century"

²⁸ UNESCO, "About the IDIL 2022-2032,"

Directives

Once again, the weight of UNESCO falls on your shoulders as it is up to you to continue the positive efforts that have been made in the past to protect and preserve the linguistic diversity across the world. Understanding the nuances and complexities behind oppression and the significance of language's connection to culture is critical for your drafting of future plans and recommendations to avoid the impending fate of extinction awaiting many languages. As such, it may be useful to consider the following questions when regarding your plans of approach:

- What is your country currently doing to protect its minority languages?
- What are some potential methods of preservation that can be implemented on a wide scale (e.g.: digital software, public awareness guides, etc.)?
- How does your country's specific situation and history lend itself to providing solutions and ideas to the committee?
- Are there ways that additional problems can be solved while working towards language preservation, such as providing native language education in various other fields, such as STEM?
- Remember your country's specific context and mindset on the issue in order to provide for an accurate embodiment of them in your delegation. Note that no hate of any kind will be tolerated, including racism, sexism, or any other prejudices.

In more specific causes for positivity, there have already been instances of reviving languages either from extinction or from the brink of it. The Miami people originally of Ohio and Indiana have seen a revitalization of their Myaamia language due to the efforts of preservationists like Daryl Baldwin and programs like the Myaamia Heritage Program that works in conjunction with Miami University in Ohio to teach the language to eager students.²⁹ Additionally, efforts are being made to increase the presence of children speaking Cherokee in the Eastern Band (the traditional home of the group in the eastern United States) by Tom Belt and others by increasing the presence of Cherokee in schools across the region.³⁰ These efforts have already shown to be successful in their attempts to re-establish Cherokee in the youth, and such progress is only slated to grow, as more movements of language preservation gain traction and are pushed into the spotlight.



²⁹ "Analysis: How Indigenous Languages Can Be Preserved, and Why Those Efforts Help Revitalize Culture."

³⁰ "Languages: Why We Must Save Dying Tongues."

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