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Perspectives on a Sustainable
Management of Palaeolithic
World Heritage Sites

1 The Côa Valley Prehistoric Rock Art 20 Years after World Heritage Nomination – Past Heritage, Present Issues, Future Perspectives

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The Côa Valley rock art complex, discovered in 1994, has been in the last two decades the centre of attention of a global protection, conservation and archaeological research project (Fernandes 2004). This venture also aims to promote and create tourism and educational offers based on the unique rock art heritage inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Since 2010, when the nearby Spanish rock art site of Siega Verde, also dated to the Ice Age, was added to the nomination as an extension of the Côa Valley, the inscribed property has gained a transnational nature. This joint heritage conservation and management project contributes to fostering sustainable development dynamics in a disadvantaged interior area of Portugal but also in the neighbouring Spanish region of Castilla y León. Although the Côa Museum (figs. 1 and 2), opened in July 2010, has been dedicated to the rock art from the valley, the last 17 km of the Côa River, where over 80 rock art sites comprising a total of more than 1200 engraved schist out-

crops are located, can be called the true museum (figs. 3 and 4). This territory of circa 200 km² constitutes the Côa Valley Archaeological Park. The chronology of the Côa rock art imagery ranges from the Upper Palaeolithic (the oldest dating around 25,000 BP) up until the 1950s. Periods of artistic importance also include the Neolithic and the Iron Age. Together, the Côa Valley Archaeological Park (created in 1996) and the Côa Museum have become a major regional tourist attraction and draw tens of thousands of visitors to the region each year (Fernandes 2010).

Of the park's more than 80 rock art sites, three are open to the public: Canada do Inferno, Penascosa and Ribeira de Piscos. Access to the sites is restricted to guided tours carried out either by the park's professional guides or by authorised private local tour companies. All guides receive specific training on Côa rock art and other natural and built heritage of the region (Fernandes 2004). Understanding the park as the real museum means that

1 The Côa Museum, a remarkable architectural piece designed by Portuguese architects Camilo Rebelo and Tiago Pimentel sitting above the confluence of the Côa River with the Douro River.

2 Reconstruction of an Upper Palaeolithic encampment on display in the permanent exhibition at the Côa Museum.



the Côa Museum should be regarded as a large interpretation centre and the gateway for visitors coming to the region. The permanent exhibition at the museum comprises replicas of engraved panels, drawings and photos of rock art motifs, multimedia presentations and Upper Palaeolithic materials unearthed during excavations (fig. 5).

The situation of the Côa Park Foundation at the beginning of 2017

Following the opening of the Côa Museum, a new episode in the long history of the Côa Valley was initiated in 2011, when management responsibilities for the ensemble (park and museum) were transferred from the “Heritage Management Government Institution” IGESPAR to the newly created Côa Park Foundation. The foundation inherited the safeguarding, conservation and management legal duties, which hitherto had been carried out IGESPAR. Regrettably, this transfer coincided with the most severe impact of the financial crisis that affected Portugal amongst other European countries. Therefore, and despite all efforts by the initial





3 Engraved aurochs (large ancestor of modern bulls) motif in Canada do Inferno Rock 1.

Board of Directors, ever since its creation, the foundation had very limited financial means to pursue its activities and, thus, overall influence. By 2016, this situation led to a state of technical bankruptcy, seriously compromising its operation. The dire financial state of affairs transversally afflicted all operational areas of the foundation resulting in a lack of effective human resource management, non-involvement in national or international cooperation networks, the absence of any prospect of income from funding programmes, of an integrated cultural programming plan, and of any strategic plan to increase the touristic appeal of the park and museum. Overall, it was impossible to maintain a continuous trajectory of sustained growth in visitor numbers and revenues.

Implementing solutions

After taking charge in June 2017, the first step of the newly appointed Board

of Directors of the Côa Park Foundation was to link the weaknesses and threats identified in a “SWOT” exercise with existing strengths and opportunities. The relevance of the historical, cultural and natural heritage for the property’s World Heritage status was identified as the perhaps most important strength without losing sight of the biodiverse habitats and wealth of landscapes, their flora and fauna as well as the historical legacy of the recent history of the preservation of the rock art. Various opportunities were also recognised. These included amongst others a growth of tourism demand along the Douro River, of which the Côa is a tributary, such as river cruises, which could boost visits to the museum and, to a lesser degree, to the park. At the same time, tour operators showed increasing commitment to providing unique, authentic and sophisticated visiting experiences to their customers, such as the ones provided by the Côa Park Foundation.

At the beginning of 2018, after completing the said analysis and designing an overall revitalisation process, the first set of measures was implemented as the stepping stone of an overarching strategic plan for the operation of the foundation from 2018 to 2022. Amongst these, the most important measures have been a revision of the admission fees for both the park and the museum; new opening and closing times at the museum, which is currently open for a more extended period, including lunch hour, every day of the week; new timetables and procedures for visits to the rock art sites, such as reaching an agreement with private local tour operators to strengthen their offer of visits to those rock art sites that are open to the public; and the reorganisation of the foundation's functional units and the redefinition of staff member duties.

Other measures included the acquisition of an audio-guide system in several

languages for museum visitors; the creation of a scientific advisory board to help define and follow-up on the research policies to be adopted by the foundation; and the implementation of an open science policy by using the Open Access Scientific Repository of Portugal (RCAAP) in particular.

These were just the first stepping stones of a wider plan comprising ambitious goals to be completed by 2022: duplicating the annual number of visitors to the park totalling 14,000 and reaching over 60,000 visitors at the museum; attaining half a million euros in operating revenues (up from initially 217 000 €); more than doubling the number of associated partners marketing the foundation's tourism offer; increasing the number of students benefiting from the foundation's regular and seasonal activities; and maintaining the current level of

4 Penascosa Rock 3 at night.





5 Displays in one of the museum galleries.

visitor satisfaction at over 90% (Fernandes 2018).

Conclusions: expected overall results of the proposed actions

Upon completion of the strategic plan for 2018 to 2022, several outcomes are deemed as achievable in the wake of the implementation of the actions noted above. The first is the wide recognition of the Côa Valley Archaeological Park and Museum as a common heritage, central to the sustainable development of the region.

A second result consists in the consolidation of the Côa Valley Archaeological Park and Museum amongst the national and international scene through a holistic vision, which not only safeguards but also values the in-

tegrity and the fragile essence of a unique and inimitable heritage, recognised by the UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Furthermore, it is expected to strengthen the park and museum's rapport with local and regional communities. As the archaeological park is located between the regions of Trás-os-Montes and Beira, which possess unique heritage values such as the Alto Douro Wine-making Region or the International Douro Natural Park, the common endogenous, material and immaterial resources present across the built, natural and cultural heritage, will be used towards this goal.

To deepen the available integrated knowledge about the Côa Valley Archaeological Park and its overall heritage, in particular, the rock art but

also ecological diversity features is also an important anticipated end result. The aim is to understand the history and current context of the park from the perspective of continuous recognition, safeguarding and promotion favouring also local involvement and participation.

Finally, it is expected that the strategic plan positions the Côa Valley Archaeological Park and Museum as a wide-ranging reference case-study for integrated heritage management.

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3.1 Bataille, The Palaeolithic Serial World Heritage Site

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3.3 Fatás Monforte, La cueva de Altamira

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4 Museo de Altamira.

4.1 Ontañón-Peredo, Which scientific questions

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5 Proyecto de investigación GARMA XXI.

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4.4 Bardisa/Mauriac, Lascaux – Chauvet

1 Perazio Engineering.

2 Ministère de la Culture.

3 DRAC-CRMH de Nouvelle Aquitaine.

4.5 Zhitenev, Kapova Cave

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