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Integrating natural and cultural approaches in heritage conservation: Introduction to A Practice Note

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ABSTRACT

During the first years of Covid, 2020–2023, a group of seven colleagues across three continents—working outside of institutional contexts—prepared a Practice Note on *naturecultures*. The Practice Note draws together the long-time work, experience, and thinking of the authors, all of whom work in the field of heritage conservation. It gives focus to the improved integration of nature and culture, and cultural heritage and natural heritage, in the work of caring for and safeguarding important places. By promoting awareness of diversity and mutual respect for multiple views and understandings, the Practice Note is concerned with working together, fostering dialogue, and creating long-lasting and equitable approaches to conservation. In this introduction, we outline the purpose, origins, and the making of the Practice Note.

INTRODUCTION: SITUATING THE PRACTICE NOTE

A great deal of thinking and work has been undertaken in the academy and professional practice to better understand the interconnections between culture and nature in the fields of heritage studies and heritage conservation. This can be seen, for example, in the concept and practical application of "cultural landscape" (Harmon 2007; Head 2010; Harrison 2015; Barrett and Mitchell 2016; S. Brown 2019, 2023; Harrison et al. 2020; Smith 2023) and the IUCN protected area category of "protected landscapes and seascapes" (J. Brown, Mitchell, and Beresford 2005; J. Brown 2023). Both constructs have heralded important mindset shifts in heritage practices. This work recognizes that the separation of nature and culture is a dualism largely arising from modern Euro-North American philosophies and doctrines (cf. Descola 2013)—a separation that is "foundational to Western modernity and thus seminal to the West's encounter with the non-Western world" (Byrne, Brockwell, and O'Connor 2013: 1). This separation is reinforced in many local, national, and international systems for heritage protection. Despite important shifts toward more inclusive and diverse concepts of heritage, there is often an enduring nature–culture binary (or at least a sliding scale in the degrees to which people and the natural environment are conceptualized as interconnected) that can result in adverse outcomes "on the ground."

Over the last decade, a number of global programs have been undertaken that are aimed at bridging the divide between ideas of culture and nature in heritage practices (Buckley and Badman 2014). Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of the Advisory Bodies to the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 1972): IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), and ICCROM (International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property). Two programs evidencing this collaborative work are *Connecting Practice* (a collaborative project, launched in 2013, that aims to define new methods and strategies to

better integrate natural and cultural heritage within the World Heritage system)[1] and the *Nature-Culture Journey* (a continuing set of dialogues and events, commenced in 2016, undertaken as a global partnership between IUCN and ICOMOS and, on occasion, joined and promoted by other organizations (Mitchell, Brown, and Barrett 2017; Mitchell, St Clair et al. 2018; McIntyre-Tamwoy and Badman 2020; Ishizawa, Inaba, and Yoshida 2022; Mitchell 2023).[2]

The authors of the Practice Note, which is published in full following this introduction under the attribution to and copyright of Heritage Octopus Collective, had the benefits of being involved in Connecting Practice, the Nature-Culture Journey, the ICCROM–IUCN World Heritage Leadership program, and other such initiatives. The global community of practice grew as these initiatives developed, and continues to grow today. The aim of better integrating natural and cultural heritage is one that has garnered widespread appeal to those working in the field of heritage practice—especially site managers, professional practitioners, and communities local to heritage places. Many have sought ways and methods they can apply to better connecting natural and cultural heritage in their work. A commonly asked question is: "How can I make a start?" That is, there is a desire for guidance on integrating natural and cultural approaches in heritage conservation—at the level of individuals, heritage places, and institutions.

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Being aware of this need was the spark of an idea to develop *something* that shared the collective knowledge and experience of our group. In fostering this idea, we made a decision to step away from our institutional "personalities"—i.e., from our work with ICOMOS, IUCN, and ICCROM, as well as various government agencies, philanthropic organizations, and universities. We sought to resist the tendency to codify good practices—a process that typically is neither nuanced nor accounts for diverse contexts and can close off innovation. However, stepping away has not been as simple as we had anticipated.

PRACTICALITIES AND WORK PROCESS

To capture some of what we have collectively learned and experienced, we decided to produce a Practice Note, an approach inspired by Australia ICOMOS's series of Burra Charter Practice Notes (Australia ICOMOS, n.d.). We wanted to produce something concise and accessible, knowing that site managers, heritage practitioners, and communities have a lot to do, with many responsibilities and pressures—and, thus, limited time.

Over a series of 36 Zoom meetings (May 2020–October 2022), we established, or more correctly evolved, a number of objectives for the Practice Note.

- To work within existing conservation frameworks rather than up-ending them.
- To focus on the interface between natural and cultural heritage practices, rather than on heritage practices in general.
- To promote learning-by-doing, rather than pretending that there are perfect answers.
- To encourage creativity, continuous experimentation, and carefully implemented change, recognizing that practice can create the conditions for subsequent shifts in heritage conservation.
- To provide practical advice and encourage dialogue and knowledge sharing—being mindful of the broad array of potential situations and contexts.
- To focus on the possibilities offered by *naturecultures* to achieve conservation outcomes that are effective and inclusive, and capable of responding to present and future challenges.

- To do all this within a short-ish Practice Note, not a book or a manual!

Throughout the Practice Note, we use the conjoined noun *naturecultures*, a term coined by Donna Haraway (2003) to recognize that the human, non-human, more-than-human (e.g., spirits, creation ancestors, divinities), and landscape realms are intimately bound (i.e., integrated or entangled); while "nature-culture" with a hyphen is used to imply nature *and* culture as separate domains. There have been other efforts to find words that break down the separation, such as "biocultural diversity," but we preferred the provocation of "*naturecultures*."[3]

THE VIEWS OF CRITICAL FRIENDS

By January 2022, the Practice Note was in a form ready for wider critique. We opted to invite 25 "critical friends" to review the text and provide their reflections, according to six questions:

- How would you use this Practice Note?
- Would you recommend this Practice Note to others?
- In what situations would you recommend it?
- What are the strengths of the Practice Note?
- Have you identified any weaknesses in the draft Practice Note?
- Are there new points or issues that you think should be included?

The use of "critical friends" demonstrates the rapidly growing community of practice in this area of heritage thinking—people that are immersed in practice yet looking to transcend definitional and disciplinary boundaries. In brief, the feedback received confirmed many of the issues we had already recognized, exposed some blind spots, and suggested some better ways of articulating key points.

> We do not consider the Practice Note "finished." We expect that there are further and deeper steps and new tools to be fashioned.

We recognize that our critical friends are generally well versed on issues concerning improved integration of heritages across binaries such as nature/culture, tangible/intangible, and official/unofficial (S. Brown 2023b). There are other people we would also have liked more feedback from: for example, *heritage place managers* (whether of World Heritage Sites, nationally and locally registered places, or intangible practices) with training in, and a focus on, either cultural or natural heritage; as well as *heritage site managers* (for whom heritage might be a relatively minor consideration in their work) who need to interpret advice they are given that comes from either natural or cultural heritage specialists.

FORMAT

After incorporating the feedback of critical friends, in October 2023 we concluded our group work on the Practice Note. Although now in a fixed form, we do not consider it complete or "finished." Our intention has been to distill and share experience. The steps that we have presented are one way of approaching the work of integrating natural and cultural heritage practices. We expect that there are further and deeper steps and new tools to be fashioned, extending far beyond the efforts and imaginations of the Practice Note's seven creators.

The layout of the Practice Note is as follows.

1. *Why this Practice Note?* Outlines the purpose and scope and provides meanings for six key terms used through the document.

2. *Context.* A brief overview of the history of the separation of nature and culture in Western thinking, and its prevalence in the field of heritage.

3. *Getting ready: What do you need to know before taking action?* Key themes or topics to bear in mind when working on improved integration of natural and cultural heritage. These are: Heritage places and values; Rights; People and communities; Working across disciplines and knowledges; Adaptive management; Sustainable development; and Futures.

4. *Taking action on nature-culture interlinkages.* This is the core part of the document and comprises three major sections (Getting started; Digging deeper; Moving forward), each with three key steps. Users should be able to dive in wherever they wish, according to their needs. For users, there isn't a beginning or an end, but different needs or priorities that emerge and mutate. To help users find the best entry points for them, the steps are organized around the kinds of questions they might pose (see Figure 1 Roadmap in the Practice Note).

> We have returned many times to the question of audience: who is this for, and what do they want? At this stage, the intended range of users is very broad, encompassing heritage place managers, practitioners, communities, and educators.

5. *An invitation.* We encourage users of the Practice Note to share their experiences as widely as possible with different practitioners, communities, academics, and organizations.

6. *Resources.* This section comprises selected references on Nature-Culture Journey, Connecting Practice, Tsukuba University teaching reports, Useful links, and Other published books and papers.

7. *Authors.* Something about us (the self-styled "Heritage Octopus Collective") and how we can be contacted (Naturecultures.practicenote@gmail.com).

DILEMMAS AND COMPROMISES

The Practice Note is a product of our dialogue, including some struggles with the linearity of text, and some consensus-finding compromises. We therefore acknowledge some important limitations. The most obvious of these is that we have worked in English, even though not all of our group are native speakers, acknowledging that language diversity is key to expanding mindsets and understanding the diversity of people-nature concepts and relationships.

The format of a Practice Note does not easily adapt to our intentions to use an open and non-prescriptive voice. For example, having worked in other programs that have struggled with the task of explicitly and didactically defining terms, we have tried to avoid using an authoritative tone (for example, by using a first person narrative mode), but found it impossible to completely avoid explaining what we mean when we use certain words. We also wanted to avoid portraying the processes of discovery and innovation as simple, linear, and unidirectional. Yet, after sketching other possibilities, we opted to describe a number of "steps," which works against this intention.

The brevity and wide scope of the Practice Note posed challenges about what to include and what to exclude. We have returned many times to the question of audience: who is this for, and what do they want? At this stage, the intended range of users is very broad, encompassing heritage place managers, practitioners, communities, and educators. In our experience with other international *naturecultures* programs, people in these roles are looking for practical, jargon-free advice and good examples that can be adapted to different contexts.

We also acknowledge that the Practice Note does not offer a very radical manifesto that would match the adventurous definition of *naturecultures* offered by Donna Haraway. To be helpful

in the short term, the Practice Note works within existing conservation frameworks, but aims for creativity and collaboration.

We, the authors of his Practice Note, are delighted with its publication in this special issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*. Our intention is to now step away from it, allowing others to take it further, adapt it, and use it as they see fit.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ENDNOTES

1. Buckley and Badman 2014; IUCN-ICOMOS 2015; Leitão and Badman 2015; Leitão et al. 2017; De Marco et al. 2019; Leitão and Brown 2023a, 2023b.
2. These include education and capacity-building programs initiated by ICCROM, the UNESCO World Heritage Center, and the University of Tsukuba, Japan.
3. For a discussion, see ICOMOS 2021.

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