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## HOW IS CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTING CULTURE?

Climate change is one of the greatest threats facing culture today. In every part of the globe, World Heritage properties are suffering from the effects of climate change – from increasing fires to floods, droughts, desertification and ocean acidification. The uprooting of communities due to climate change threatens entire ways of life, including the practice and transmission of living heritage. Oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, festive events and traditional knowledge, including crucial knowledge about the environment, are all vulnerable in the face of climate change. Climate change is also contributing to lost economic opportunities in the cultural and creative industries and cultural tourism. In sum, climate change is disrupting the lives of communities across the globe, dramatically limiting their ability to access and benefit from their culture.

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## WHY IS CULTURE IMPORTANT FOR ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE?

Culture is a powerful resource for addressing climate change impacts. Natural heritage sites serve as vital “sinks” for greenhouse gas emissions, and are key for the protection of biodiversity. Intangible cultural heritage practices have proven to be highly effective tools for helping communities prepare for, respond to and recover from climate change-related impacts and emergencies. This can include the transmission of traditional food security strategies and knowledge about changing weather patterns, as well as the use of traditional architecture that can withstand natural disasters. Cultural heritage sites can also serve as a refuge, both physical and psychological, for surrounding communities during and after emergencies. Creativity is essential for finding new solutions to environmental challenges. Artists and creators have an enormous role to play in inspiring climate action.

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## HOW IS UNESCO ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE FIELD OF CULTURE?

- i. **Safeguarding cultural heritage and biodiversity.** UNESCO designated sites, including UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, Global Geoparks and World Heritage properties, protect approximately 10 million square kilometres of cultural heritage and biodiversity around the world – an area equivalent to the size of China.
- ii. **Monitoring the impact of climate change on World Heritage.** UNESCO monitors the impact of climate change on World Heritage properties and is in the process of updating its Policy Document on the Impacts of Climate Change on World Heritage.
- iii. **Responding to climate emergencies.** Following the destruction of cultural heritage in Tonga in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Gita, UNESCO’s Heritage Emergency Fund supported a comprehensive damage assessment of the country’s cultural heritage.
- iv. **Building capacity to mitigate the impact of climate change on heritage and communities.** Following fires in Mount Kenya National Park, UNESCO organized a capacity-building workshop on climate-related disaster risk management for site managers. In 2018, UNESCO launched a major project to counter climate change through culture in the Lake Chad Basin. From 2015 to 2016, UNESCO supported an International Assistance project to safeguard the living heritage of the pastoralist Samburu community in northern Kenya, which is under stress as a result of climate change.
- v. **Spearheading climate research.** UNESCO recently released the first global scientific assessment of the impact of climate change on World Heritage coral reefs. In 2016, UNESCO published “World Heritage and tourism in a changing climate”.
- vi. **Sounding the alarm on the international stage.** UNESCO highlighted the threat climate change poses to cultural heritage at the UN Climate Action Summit in New York and COP25 in Madrid. In February 2020, UNESCO convened its first Reflection Group on Culture and Climate Change.

# CULTURE & CLIMATE CHANGE

## KEY MESSAGES



The UNESCO is the only United Nations organization with a mandate that encompasses both science and culture. UNESCO designated sites, including UNESCO World Heritage properties, Biosphere Reserves and Global Geoparks, protect approximately 10 million square kilometers of cultural and natural heritage around the world. UNESCO has a series of conventions, monitoring mechanisms and capacity building programmes that aim to address the impact of climate change on people and culture.



Climate change is, without question, the defining challenge of our time. No sector is immune from its effects, and this includes culture. World Heritage sites are increasingly impacted by climate change-related disasters. Across the globe, and particularly in Small Island Developing States, climate change is threatening entire ways of life, including the practice of intangible cultural heritage. Climate change is affecting all aspects of culture, from cultural heritage, to natural heritage, to livelihoods linked to the creative economy.



Yet there is another side to this discussion: the role of culture as a resource for climate change mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation because cultural heritage, natural heritage and creativity can all contribute to addressing the root causes of climate change. Natural heritage sites are key to protecting biodiversity and mitigating greenhouse gas emissions. Integrating a concern for the environment into cultural policies can also reduce the carbon footprint of the creative economy.



Culture is also a resource for climate adaptation because cultural heritage, natural heritage and traditional knowledge all support the resilience of communities to respond to climate change impacts, including extreme weather, natural disasters and conflicts. Intangible cultural heritage practices are highly effective tools for helping communities adapt to a changing climate. Cultural and natural heritage sites can serve as a refuge, both physical and psychological, for communities during and after climate-related emergencies. Creativity is essential for finding new solutions to environmental challenges.



Despite the fundamental relationship between culture and climate change mitigation and adaptation, culture is largely absent from our discussions on climate change today. Culture is not systematically integrated into the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Paris Agreement, or the Assessment Reports of the IPCC.



UNESCO calls on countries to fully integrate culture into their climate change policies and strategies, and is working to support the inclusion of culture in global climate action.

**For more information, visit:** <http://en.unesco.org/themes/culture-sustainable-development>