

# Preserving cultural sites

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**T**HERE is much excitement over the listing of George Town and Malacca as Unesco World Heritage Sites. Going by reports, there will be a three-day celebration by Penangites, while Malacca will celebrate the event next month and perhaps on a grander scale.

While Malaysians have every reason to rejoice, a reader wants to know what the significance is as these two sites are based in our country and have been ours all this while.

In order to appreciate the subject of World Heritage Sites, it is necessary to refer to the Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The seeds for this were perhaps laid towards the end of World War I which saw the emergence of an international movement to protect heritage.

People saw the damage and destruction caused by the war. But the idea to protect heritage did not attract sufficient attention until some 40 years later.

## The trigger

The pursuit of heritage protection was triggered following the decision to build the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, which would have flooded the valley containing the Abu Simbel temples, a treasure of ancient Egyptian civilisation.

In 1959, after an appeal from the governments of Egypt and Sudan, Unesco launched

## What it means to be listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

an international safeguarding campaign. Archaeological research in the areas to be flooded was accelerated. The Abu Simbel and Philae temples were dismantled, moved to dry ground and reassembled.

The campaign cost about US\$80mil, half of which was donated by some 50 countries, showing the importance of solidarity and shared responsibility in conserving outstanding cultural sites. Its success led to other campaigns to save Venice and its Lagoon (Italy), the archaeological ruins at Moenjodaro in Pakistan, and the restoration of the Borobudur temple compounds in Indonesia.

This in turn led to Unesco initiating, with the help of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the preparation of a draft convention for the protection of cultural heritage.

To this was added the initiative by the United States to combine conservation of cultural sites with those of nature. In 1968, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) developed similar proposals for its members.

The proposals reached the 1972 United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm, and led to a single text that was agreed upon by all parties concerned. The Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage was then adopted by the General Conference of Unesco on Nov 16, 1972.

## The Convention

The Convention recognises that natural and cultural heritage are being threatened with destruction by the traditional causes of decay and changing social and economic conditions, and that protection of this heritage would remain incomplete because of the scale of resources required and the insufficiency of economic, scientific and technological resources of the host country where the property to be protected is situated.

It provides for the international community to participate in the protection of cultural and natural heritage of outstanding and universal value. In this cultural category

would be monuments which are architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and paintings, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science.

It could combine buildings made up of groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, homogeneity or place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value. It could also be sites which are works of man or the combined works of nature and man.

Alternatively, for a site to be considered as natural heritage, it could contain natural features consisting of physical and biological formations or groups of such formations which are of outstanding universal value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view.

Or it could be made up of geological and physiographical formations which constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty. It could also include such areas which are precisely delineated.

## Funding

Article 15 establishes a fund called the World Heritage Fund. However, Article 25 of the Convention requires as a general rule for

ARTICLES OF LAW

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