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WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACING CULTURAL PROPERTY?

Cultural property has long been the target of looting, illicit trafficking and environmental damage, but today these challenges are more daunting than ever. In the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere, the looting of archaeological sites has reached an industrial scale, carried out, in many places, by well-organized, armed groups. The illicit trafficking of these cultural objects has resulted in the destruction of numerous sites and museums, and serves as a key source of terrorist financing, as recognized by a series of recent [UN Security Council Resolutions](#). In addition to illegal excavations, underwater cultural heritage also faces growing risks from legal commercial exploitation, unregulated tourism, trawling and fishing, and climate change – with sea level rise, changes in salinity and the growth of new bacteria hastening its decay.

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WHY SAFEGUARD CULTURAL PROPERTY?

Cultural objects represent our most tangible links to the past, providing a window onto everything from the languages our ancestors spoke, the food they ate, and their most cherished beliefs and values. As a result, cultural property often forms a crucial part of our cultural identities and collective memories. A single object can embody hundreds, or even thousands of years of collective knowledge. When these objects are stolen, destroyed or removed from their historic context, this knowledge is often lost forever. UNESCO works to safeguard cultural property to ensure that future generations can continue to enjoy, transmit and benefit from their heritage.

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HOW DOES UNESCO PROTECT CULTURAL PROPERTY AT RISK?

- i. **Operationalizing its normative tools.** Together, UNESCO's 1954 [Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict](#), the 1970 [Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property](#) and the 1995 [UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects](#) work to halt the illicit trafficking and targeting of cultural property, while UNESCO's 2001 [Convention](#) aims to safeguard the world's underwater cultural heritage.
- ii. **Promoting the return and restitution of cultural objects.** The 1970 Convention's [Intergovernmental Committee](#) facilitates bilateral cooperation between Member States on return and restitution cases; UNESCO notably facilitated the return of the Aksum Obelisk from Italy to Ethiopia in 2008. In June 2018, UNESCO brought together world leaders, ministers, and museum directors for a conference on the "[Circulation of Cultural Property and Shared Heritage: What New Perspectives](#)", at a time of growing public debate on the sharing of cultural property in museums and sites located outside of the countries or communities where those goods were created.
- iii. **Providing emergency support.** UNESCO's "[Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Heritage Project](#)" has provided support for the establishment of a police database of looted artefacts and has trained customs officials in Syria and surrounding countries to fight illicit trafficking. In 2015, UNESCO deployed the 2001 Convention's [Scientific and Technical Advisory Body](#) to Panama and Madagascar to assess the state of two recently discovered shipwrecks.
- iv. **Developing policy guidelines.** With ICCROM, UNESCO published a handbook entitled "[Endangered Heritage: Emergency Evacuation of Heritage Collections](#)" to help communities and professionals to safely evacuate cultural property in crisis situations. UNESCO also launched the first "[Military Manual on the Protection of Cultural Property](#)" in December 2016.
- v. **Raising awareness of cultural property at risk.** UNESCO has launched a series of [educational materials](#) for teachers and students highlighting the need to safeguard WWI-era shipwrecks.

CULTURAL PROPERTY AT RISK

KEY MESSAGES



Cultural objects represent our most tangible link to the past, and form a crucial part of our cultural identities and collective memories. When these objects are stolen, destroyed or removed from their historic context, this knowledge is often lost forever. UNESCO works to safeguard cultural property to ensure that future generations can continue to enjoy, transmit and benefit from their heritage.



Cultural property has long been the target of looting, illicit trafficking and environmental damage, but today these challenges are more daunting than ever. In the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere, the looting of archaeological sites has reached an industrial scale, carried out, in many places, by well-organized, armed groups.



The illicit trafficking of cultural objects serves as a key source of terrorist financing, as recognized by UN Security Council Resolution 2199, which prohibits trade in cultural property from Iraq and Syria, and by Resolution 2347, the first resolution adopted by the Security Council to focus solely on cultural heritage.



Underwater cultural heritage faces growing risks from legal commercial exploitation, unregulated tourism, trawling and fishing, and climate change – with sea level rise, changes in salinity and the growth of new bacteria hastening the decay of underwater heritage.

For more information, visit: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/illicit-trafficking-of-cultural-property/> and <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage/2001-convention/>