

## Natural Heritage – Three Perspectives on Intangibility

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Natural heritage offers several perspectives from which to consider intangible heritage. The first of these, to which I will merely allude, concerns the wide range of techniques and rituals on which the cultural relationships between human societies and their natural environments are based. Conservation of these practices accounts for much of what is generally classed as intangible heritage. A reflection on intangible heritage must encompass the conservation of these processes and manifestations, even where they stem from strictly natural phenomena such as the migration of a species, since many natural phenomena are as fragile and as closely bound up with the history of our societies as is cultural heritage.

> The second of these perspectives is the emergence of ecological concepts, and in broader terms of all the scientific disciplines which, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, have focused on processes — a shift in scientific thinking which played a crucial role in constructing the present dualistic image of the museum. From being seen as “libraries of objects”, museums became, on the one hand, institutions devoted to researching, recording and conserving objects, and, on the other, places revolving around exhibitions and communication, which set out to elucidate natural and human processes. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, scientists began to focus not only on processes but also on the issue of conservation above and beyond specimens for reference purposes, and to take steps to preserve living species and spaces, so as to safeguard ecological processes. As a result, intangible heritage began to take its place alongside the museum’s traditional heritage, not only in museums of ethnology and history but also in science museums.

> Finally, as regards the conservation of natural heritage, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, parks and reserves attempted to encompass intangible aspects, which are now included in international charters on

the preservation of species, habitats and, most recently, the limitation of global climate change as a result of human activity. At the same time as acknowledging this social aspect of natural heritage, Science Centres, from the 1930s, explicitly set out to present the intangible heritage of scientific creation in what the physicist Jean Perrin (speaking of the Palais de la découverte, in Paris) referred to as “anti-museums” — to distinguish them from places which merely exhibit objects. The Science Centres’ discoveries are in danger of being forgotten, as the history of science and technology illustrates.

> In addition to the expertise in the area of conservation of material heritage which has been acquired over the centuries, we must now learn to document and conserve intangible heritage. There is a tendency, especially with regard to science, to think of this form of conservation in terms of “new information and communication technologies” and virtual exhibitions, but this is an oversimplification. Although modern information and communication technologies have much to offer, there is a vital distinction to be made between documentation of intangible heritage and its conservation as such, which is reminiscent of the distinction museums have already had to make between conservation of material evidence and conservation of the processes which have produced it.

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