



And why not? One hundred and fifty years ago, this monastery on a desolate wave-swept rock was used as a prison, it was a miniature Gothic Alcatraz. Presumably, the French authorities of the day attached no value to it except as a penitentiary. But today the Mont Saint-Michel is presented to us as a "wonder" in the fullest sense. And everyone is bound to agree, provided that he or she sees the place, can experience a sense of wonder at it, is interested in medieval Christianity, twelfth-century European architecture, and the glint of wet sand.

At any rate, this is what the World Heritage Convention implies. History has begun to take on a human face. Exchanges take place in a spirit of equality which shatters national self-centredness and disturbs us as we smugly contemplate "our" monuments, the inimitable repositories of "our" values. Here, "in the same bag", we have Aachen and Isfahan, the age of Charlemagne and that of Abbas I, Quito and Dubrovnik, Cairo and Kathmandu, because it is seemingly accepted that the Swedes (among others) will see Isfahan like the Iranians, and that the Iranians (among others) will see Kathmandu like the Nepalese.

Without Precedent

Far from being backward-looking, the Heritage Convention seems to be prophetic. But there is one point where States party to it make a particularly striking innovation. They pledge to preserve the cultural and natural property on their inventory. Each State "recognizes that the duty of ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the heritage belongs primarily to that State". Such an obligation is quite without precedent!

For we are talking about a heritage, a legacy: old towns and ancient monuments. People think that we have inherited this legacy from our ancestors to whom it was bequeathed by their own forebears and who religiously preserved it with us in mind. But this is simply not true, except for a few items on the list. National parks are fairly recent creations and have obviously been protected ever since they were established. Previously, their contents needed less protection because they were further from the reach of interference by our forefathers. In addition, certain buildings have been deliberately bequeathed to us: royal palaces, which now belong to the "nation" or the "people", churches, mosques and temples which are still in use. But all the other property on the list is there by chance — or through the tireless efforts of archaeologists who reconstruct ruins and are still today rescuing monuments from the jungle, from the earth, from oblivion.

Governments now make it their business to restore cultural monuments, and sometimes the general public rallies to the defence of buildings which have survived from their past. The reasons for this about-turn in public opinion are well known. The adoption of the Heritage Convention coincided with mounting concern about the deterioration of the environment, the exhaustion of natural resources, and the stultifying monotony of much international architecture. In more than one town and city the authorities actually began to stop demolishing. A few voices crying in the wilderness had already insisted on the value of buildings and quarters that had miraculously survived the centuries. Suddenly their cries were being echoed by millions of people. These buildings were seen to be re-

Where the majestic Colorado River passes through Arizona, the curtain rises on one of geology's most dramatic spectacles. The Grand Canyon is a great gash, 1500 metres deep, 440 kms long and between 200 metres and 30 kms wide. Significantly, although the United States withdrew from Unesco, it remained a party to the World Heritage Convention and is proud to see the Grand Canyon National Park listed as a World Heritage site. The Statue of Liberty is also a World Heritage Site — hardly a communist-inspired plot! Similarly, the United Kingdom chose to join the Convention at the same time as it withdrew from Unesco. Photo: Dean Schneider

markable by any standards, not just objects of nostalgic regard. Each one is unique and therefore irreplaceable.

These treasures are not only beyond price, they are terrifyingly fragile. They need the kind of protection they have never been given; they could not survive a few more years of neglect. Protection is becoming a permanent duty. The States party to the Convention perform this duty all the more effectively because public opinion is not only behind them but often ahead. We have decided to remove from present or future dangers the little we have salvaged from the past. In the way of "immovable" property we have nothing better to transmit to them.

The world heritage mirrors the world. Its natural glories possess a value we cherish because they are untouched by human hand, except by the hand which seeks to preserve them. ✎

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Footnote: Forest and Bird has just produced a pamphlet on World Heritage. If you would like a copy, please write with a self addressed envelope enclosing \$1 to Forest and Bird, PO Box 631, Wellington.