Gunma Declaration on Heritage Ecosystems

The international symposium, *"Further Evolution of Authenticity through the Lens of Heritage Ecosystems: Heritage, Communities, and Sustainable Development,"* was held at the Gunma Music Center in Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture, Japan, on 10–11 January 2025. It was hosted by Gunma Prefecture, in collaboration with its partner organizations and ICOMOS Japan, with generous support from the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan.

The symposium marked the 10th anniversary of the inscription of the *Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites* on the World Heritage List. The event brought together about 80 heritage experts from 19 or more countries, including Japan, as well as members of the public from Gunma and other parts of Japan, to discuss the challenges and opportunities in heritage conservation, using this site as a case study.

The symposium also celebrated the 30th anniversary of the *Nara Document on Authenticity,* which was adopted in 1994 in Japan. Reflecting on the past three decades of ideas about heritage authenticity and their applications, participants shared their experiences and learned from one another.

I. Context

As a local context, the need for this symposium arises from the circumstances of the *Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites* which served as a center of technological innovation that transformed silk filature techniques by integrating French technology, building on Japan's long-standing traditions and technical advancements. This heritage site demonstrates Japan's significant role in the global raw silk market in the early 20th century and is recognized for its Outstanding Universal Value as evidence of the early emergence and global dissemination of silk production techniques.

However, Japan's silk industry was supported by the direct and indirect contributions of many peoples and communities in diverse professions such as silkworm egg production, sericulture, reeling, dyeing, weaving, tailoring, sales, and distribution. These connections created a robust silk ecosystem. Private silk reeling and weaving businesses continue to operate on a small scale, developing technologies and products, while new participants enter the silk industry.

The four components of this World Heritage Site were selected from over

1,200 related heritage assets. This selection process created a perception that only these four are significant heritage sites. To address this, various efforts by both public and private sectors—such as the designation of the Japan Heritage site "*Kakaa Denka* (The Peerless Wives): The Story of Silk in Gunma Prefecture", the registration of Gunma Silk Heritage sites, hundreds of interviews with silk industry knowledge holders, and the *Jomo Karuta* card game—aid in carrying forward the places and memory of the silk industry and highlight its multifaceted significance within local contexts.

In terms of administrative collaboration, existing expert and working-level meetings between Gunma Prefecture and related municipalities have been complemented by the establishment of the *World Heritage Top Leaders Conference* in 2023, involving the heads of local governments.

Amid the decline of the silk industry, once widespread in Gunma and across Japan, efforts are underway to connect the four World Heritage components with related memories, resources, and activities. New relationships can and should be developed between individuals and communities through these connections. The heritage ecosystem approach was born out of these needs.

As a global context, the symposium focused on an inclusive concept of heritage ecosystems. This concept emphasizes the importance of connecting the components that make up heritage and its related areas. These components include tangible and intangible, cultural and natural forms of heritage, as well as human and more-than-human living species and rights-holders. The concept also highlights the significance of reinforcing the linkages among them, as these elements come together and interact to create a dense web of interconnections that shape heritage and generate its various significances, such as cultural, social, environmental and economic values.

The heritage ecosystem approach provides a holistic framework to encompass and support the relationships among heritage assets, which have inherent value, aiming to enhance conservation and management strategies and practices at all levels from local to global.

The symposium focused on four themes, which generated a series of interconnected recommendations. These themes explored heritage ecosystems through the lenses of:

- Mechanisms and Systems of the Heritage Ecosystem
- Formation and Role of Heritage Communities

- Preservation and Management of Modern Buildings and Industrial Heritage
- Technology and the Future of Heritage

II. Recitals

(1) Given the current dynamics of rapid change and the multiple threats to heritage resources in the twenty-first century, it has been deemed necessary to adopt a fresh approach—one that positively contributes to integrating the ongoing use and care of heritage assets while opening heritage places to innovation and new possibilities for cultural, social, environmental, and economic sustainability.

(2) The early context for this Declaration includes national laws, regulations and traditional heritage management systems, including Indigenous Peoples' practices in deep time. In particular, the symposium drew on three decades of critical thinking regarding issues of Authenticity, Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), and the integration of tangible and intangible heritage. This body of knowledge was developed through the activities of ICOMOS, the World Heritage Committee, and UNESCO, including meetings, the creation of normative tools, and regional gatherings of heritage professionals and communities.

- International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites（Venice Charter, 1964）
- Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and National Heritage (World Heritage Convention, 1972), and its Operational Guidelines (updated to 2024)
- Nara Document on Authenticity (1994)
- Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)
- Nara+10: Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage (2004)
- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005)
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)
- Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011)

- Nara+20: On Heritage Practices, Cultural Values, and the Concept of Authenticity (2014)
- The resolutions on Indigenous Peoples (21GA 2023/15,18,21), adopted at the 21st ICOMOS General Assembly (Sydney)
- Ouro Preto Document (2024)

(3) The heritage ecosystem provides a framework in which the multifaceted functions of heritage and diverse elements, ranging from traditional to innovative, are mutually complementary and sustained. These elements include the perceptions, knowledge, expectations, identity, and pride that peoples have developed for their heritage assets of the land and society as a whole. One of the important objectives of the heritage ecosystem approach is to deepen our understanding of the values and benefits of the heritage shared by local peoples and its central role. In this way, the local and the global can be connected, and the inheritance of the past can enhance the vitality of communities both today and in the future.

(4) The heritage ecosystem approach enables multifaceted evaluation and supports diversity of heritage and layering of meanings and values. This approach can address gaps to achieve sustainable conservation, activating the three sustainability pillars of economy, society, and environment.

(5) World Heritage properties are representative selections from a broader and often interconnected heritage, chosen from a global perspective and does not capture the range of heritage assets. Recognizing and re-establishing connections with other resources that constitute heritage are essential to advancing heritage transmission.

(6) The heritage ecosystem approach is useful for understanding and addressing the challenges of integrating inheritance into heritage ecosystems, ranging from locally significant sites to those recognized globally. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how heritage shapes the identities and vitality of individual communities to create a vibrant environment where heritage plays a role in generating shared benefits.

(7) We live in a cultural, social, environmental, and economic reality that is different from the era in which the heritage assets were created. Heritage informs us about the past, inspires the present, and enables us to adapt for the future. As we look ahead, a heritage ecosystem approach can nurture/foster authenticity entailing both preserving the characteristics

and qualities of tangible heritage and understanding and honoring intangible traditions and practices. Change is a continual process; heritage ecosystem empowers communities to adapt and appropriately transform their heritage by adding values—such as cultural, social, environmental, economic, educational, and technical—in ways that strengthen its sustainability.

(8) The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) fostered the recognition of differences in societal beliefs and values, as well as the consideration of intangible heritage. The concept of heritage authenticity continues to evolve as the integration of tangible and intangible, nature and culture, local and global, and humanity and more-than-human life progresses in increasingly holistic ways.

(9) Today, heritage is often fragmented and needs to be better connected to places, peoples, and values to ensure its endurance into the future. The heritage ecosystem promotes interdisciplinary and integrated approaches to achieve this.

(10) A shared challenge for many heritage places is determining how contemporary communities can engage with and benefit from them as cultural, social, environmental, economic, educational, and artistic assets in ways that enhance the sustainability of both the community and the heritage resource. Beyond serving tourism interests, cherished heritage remains relevant to communities as a source of identities, inspiration, and meaning.

III. Recommendations

Much work remains to be done to ensure the sustainability of all types of heritage. While threats are pervasive and urgent, there are also opportunities. To call for increased commitment to developing and updating suitable heritage ecosystems for each heritage site, we, the participants gathered in Takasaki, Gunma, on 10–11 January 2025, put forward the following recommendations as a touchstone for future efforts.

This symposium adopts the following Gunma Declaration on Heritage Ecosystems, proposing recommendations that incorporate the heritage ecosystem approach to preserve, activate, and transmit our heritage from the past to the present and future generations. These recommendations are addressed

to communities and authorities at all levels, from local to international, as well as to heritage experts, heritage institutions, and international organizations, particularly ICOMOS and its partners, IUCN and ICCROM.

1. Engaging and Empowering Communities with their Multiple Values and Voices

Communities, heritage assets, and values are deeply intertwined. People define, invest in, and manage places, shaping their lifeways over time in partnership with local and regional authorities. Local knowledge, traditional skills, and cultural associations leave their imprint on heritage places and help sustain them. The full engagement of communities and rights-holders in sustaining heritage ecosystems is essential.

Accordingly, we recommend to:

(1) Explore the heritage ecosystems' structure and functions, which include the assets, connections among them, and the heritage values, with the involvement of relevant communities.

(2) Empower communities to recognize diverse values through full engagement, ensuring that varied perspectives are reflected in the understanding, protection, and management of heritage, as well as in the related traditions and knowledge.

(3) Support the understanding and continuation of local and Indigenous Peoples' traditions and practices in transmitting heritage aligning to human and planetary rights.

(4) Incorporate contemporary needs and aspirations into the heritage ecosystems while considering the needs and aspirations of future generations and communities.

(5) Recognize the extended impact and involvement of communities beyond the immediate setting of heritage places, including communities located far away which contribute to, or are influenced by, the heritage values through cultural, social environmental, economic, or historical connections.

(6) Aid in the development of transparent, open, inclusive and appropriate governance approaches.

2. Heritage Ecosystems as an Interdisciplinary Commitment

A heritage ecosystem expresses multiple heritage places, practices, and peoples from local to global. It addresses the persistence and evolution of heritage values and their continuous, responsible management and transmission into the future, functioning as an interconnected group of assets inherited from the past.

The heritage ecosystem approach provides a framework to integrate and mutually support valued heritage of various types, significance, and authenticity. It takes a holistic view of the diverse elements of heritage.

The dimensions of a heritage ecosystem may include past works of commemoration, emotion, production, inspiration, and innovation. These elements can be found in cities, towns, the countryside, seascapes, landscapes, routes, or regional clusters.

Accordingly, we recommend to:

(1) Establish various platforms for facilitating cross-sectoral discussions on the development, management, and succession of the heritage ecosystem.

(2) Link tangible and intangible heritage, honoring traditions and practices, inclusive of Indigenous Peoples, and more-than-human rights-holders in managing heritage ecosystems.

(3) Overcome existing divisions between cultural and natural heritage and more-than-human rights-holders.

(4) Explore authenticity through the lenses of heritage ecosystems.

(5) Develop means for consensus building and dispute resolution for contested heritage.

(6) Pursue a network of heritage ecosystems that transcend regional and national boundaries, and build international cooperative relationships for research, study, and protection of common and similar heritage.

(7) Research and respect traditional knowledge systems that have been passed down through the ages or lost, recognizing their importance for interdisciplinary understanding.

3. Responding to Threats and Embracing Opportunities

Threats to heritage are diverse and pervasive, requiring careful attention to the gradual degradation of heritage resources caused by factors such as population shifts, economic pressures, intensive or inadequate use, unregulated

tourism, encroachment, and the global crises of climate, biodiversity and pollution all contribute to the erosion of cultural and natural heritage. At the same time, opportunities exist to transform heritage, enabling its adaptation for resilience and contemporary functions in response to challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and civil unrest.

Accordingly, we recommend to:

(1) Identify environmental, social, and economic risks and opportunities for heritage ecosystems and anticipate their potential impacts, ensuring the participation of relevant communities throughout this process.

(2) Understand and manage processes of change and transformation in heritage ecosystems, respecting heritage values and the authenticity of heritage assets.

(3) Foster documentation of and respect for Indigenous Peoples' traditions and practices that have sustained heritage for generations and seek opportunities to apply traditional knowledge to respond to threats.

(4) Share good practices for resilience to cope with rapid change and diverse threats.

(5) Explore and advance opportunities to expand the contemporary use of heritage places in response to specific risks or to embrace new conditions, adhering to a heritage ecosystem approach.

(6) Seek and share examples that advance the relevance of heritage for today and transmission into the future.

4. New Technologies for Sustaining Heritage Ecosystems

Technology has advanced dramatically, bringing innovations to the field of cultural heritage preservation, including new discoveries enabled by advanced analytical equipment, the establishment of preservation methods, the succession of traditional industries, and support for skill acquisition. Among these, digital technologies have made particularly significant progress over the past decade.

Emerging tools such as artificial intelligence (AI), Cross Reality (XR), digital twin technologies, and other applications are enriching the possibilities for interpretation, utilization of cultural heritage and communication. At the same time, in today's era where the physical and virtual worlds coexist, we risk to blur the boundary between them.

Given the tremendous potential of technological innovations, it is essential to actively develop the command of these tools to enhance heritage conservation and transmission. Such efforts will contribute to ensuring the sustainability of heritage ecosystems.

Accordingly, we recommend to explore and test new technologies as tools to:

(1) Protect individual heritage, to ensure heritage authenticity, and to strengthen the heritage ecosystem.

(2) Interpret the value of heritage with precision and accuracy, fostering a deeper and more diverse understanding of heritage.

(3) Inspire and develop diverse forms of communication focused on heritage.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion we confirm that considering integration of multiple tangible and intangible assets and processes of heritage-making and heritage-transmitting and adopting a heritage ecosystem approach can advance heritage management and enrich the notion of authenticity. The concept of heritage ecosystem connects heritage with its social, natural and cultural environments. This concept lays the ground for integrating heritage into building the future of our planet.

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