

Fact sheet 15

‘Outstanding universal value’: global significance, authenticity and UNESCO criteria for establishing World Heritage Status

Three of the key criteria important in the establishment of significance, such as scale, importance, uniqueness or representativeness can also be articulated within the concept of ‘outstanding universal value’ - UNESCO’s criteria for assessing values of a cultural resource in terms of World Heritage Status. Based on the concept of authenticity, it has taken some time and much debate into how these key criteria could be applied to cultural landscapes which are dynamic and comprise material culture that can represent several historical periods. After the Nara Conference on authenticity (UNESCO 1994) a more open and flexible approach to the concept of authenticity and cultural landscapes as representing ‘the combined works of nature and man’ allowed for the distinctive character and components of a landscape across multiple periods to be recognised. Such modification of this key criteria allowed for the inclusion of ‘industrial landscapes’, that may have evolved over several millennia, to be considered as World Heritage Sites.

The concept of ‘outstanding universal value’ has thus become an important method in terms of how we can articulate global values in a statement of significance. Such a method has recently been used in the assessment of significance of two ancient quarry landscapes: the Northern Faiyum and the Aswan West Bank. Key to this methodology was how we conceptualize the significance of the transformed landscape across time and its social construction. Theoretical approaches from social archaeology and landscape archaeologies allows us to get at aspects of the ‘human experience’ of quarrying in the past and its significance in terms of time-depth. Practical and theoretical methods to get at time-depth and to characterise the historical significance of dynamic landscapes have also recently arisen from ratification of the European Landscape Convention in 2004.