

World Heritage Site VENICE AND ITS LAGOON

Follow up to the Venice Meeting of Local Organisations with the Reactive Monitoring Mission

Supplementary information, basic concepts and constructive approaches for conservation of the site prepared specially for the Delegation by an Alliance of local NGOs and independent experts

Venice, 14 December 2015

Following our meeting in October 2015 at the UNESCO office in Venice (Appendix 1), the participating Committees and Associations (including FAI, Italia Nostra and WWF – NGOs that are officially recognised by the Italian Government) together with a number of respected independent researchers, *hereby present a shared document, as requested by the UNESCO Delegation.*

This document *states our common concerns and outlines some concrete proposals* and pays special attention to the Decisions of the World Heritage Committee in Doha (June 2014) concerning Venice and its Lagoon. The appendices provide further information to substantiate the key points, as well as specific proposals for safeguarding the site.

This action was triggered by the inertia of the Venice Municipality (Comune di Venezia) as “site manager” in its organisation of the WHC Monitoring Mission (October 2015). Over the months preceding the Monitoring Mission, many local organisations had asked to participate in the UNESCO Monitoring Mission. The only response to our many requests is the reply to FAI (Appendix 2) whereby the Commune states that only socio-economic stakeholders will be called upon during the UNESCO Mission. Following intervention from the Ministry of Culture, local organisations were invited to meet the UNESCO Delegation, but with less than 24 hours’ notice it was not possible to prepare properly and some important NGOs were unable to attend the single meeting scheduled for consultation with the civil society. It must also be noted that site visits were conducted without any participation of local organisations.

We also take this opportunity to highlight that interaction between the Site Manager and non-institutional non-economic stake-holders has been extremely limited during the preparation of the Management Plan (2013) and subsequent reports. We believe that a broader range of interactions beyond the “responsible bodies” would improve appreciation and awareness of the UNESCO World Heritage Programme and its relevance to protecting the site’s Outstanding Universal Values.

1 Preliminary considerations

We share the World Heritage Committee's concern that the Outstanding Universal Value of the site is in grave danger and is already in part lost. UNESCO's intervention is vital to saving the Outstanding Universal Value of Venice and its Lagoon, and for this we call for the site to be included in the Danger List.

In our view, the state of conservation of the site and the threats it currently faces meet the criteria for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger, in line with Paragraph 179 of the Operational Guidelines. In particular, criterion iv ("serious deterioration of urban or rural space, or the natural environment") and v ("significant loss of historical authenticity") along with "ascertained danger".

Venice and its Lagoon are a unitary system, a paradigm of a UNESCO World Heritage Site that combine, in a vital and inseparable way, unique natural, cultural, artistic and architectural heritage with the ongoing activities and characteristics of a living city. For the site's conservation as a living city, it is therefore necessary that the governance and management of the site be more integrated and participative, based on sound knowledge, attentive to the needs of residents and to the territorial context. This approach depends on institutional accountability as well as greater transparency and supported by the free flow of data and information.

2 Institutional and legal frame work

At a legislative level, the protection and correct management of the Venice Lagoon would be guaranteed by the application of existing laws. Yet ever since 1973 - when the first Special Law for Venice was introduced - the very Institutions responsible for applying and enforcing the safeguarding laws and related measures have been showing increasing intolerance of the legal frame work.

This attitude can be partly justified by the complexity and multiplicity of laws and remits of the many responsible bodies that sometimes clash with each other. But rather than lead to efforts to improve and simplify the legal framework, this situation has instead been a pretext for emergency and ad hoc measures in the form of ill-fated special dispensations (with respect to prevailing regulations), especially in the area of environmental impact assessments for interventions in the Venice Lagoon.

This approach is also evident in the city. A recent landmark case is the Fontego dei Tedeschi, an important 16th century monument at the foot of the Rialto Bridge. Property developers were granted special waivers by the Monuments Commission and favourable terms by the Municipality for the transformation of a public building (ex central post office) into a shopping mall with an extra floor in glass and steel.

The systematic quest for special waivers, combined with the practice of appointing a "single concessionaire" for large public works, has compromised efficiency in project management as well obstructing transparency, a basic condition for effective public participation on infrastructure-related choices. Rather than accelerate the completion of the works and optimise the capabilities of the respective teams responsible for planning and executing the works, this approach has led to dangerous and alarming forms of bribery and corruption, notably in the management of the MOSE project (Appendices 14-17.).

3 Current situation, issues and critical factors

3.1 Halt the degeneration of Lagoon morphology and functionality.

For over a thousand years this complex environment was attentively and actively managed in order to maintain the coastal lagoon system on which the health of Venice depends. But interventions over the past century and current uses of the Lagoon are contributing to high erosion rates and a large net loss of sediments from the system, compromising water circulation behaviour and ecosystem quality. As a result, the lagoon is progressively being transformed into a gulf of the sea, and the trend is accelerating (Appendices 3-6).

Throughout the Lagoon there is evidence that characteristic morphological features have been lost or are disappearing. These elements were cited in the 2006 UNESCO *Rapport Périodique* as needing the same level of protection as the palaces and churches of Venice.

This degradation has a strong and direct impact on the city, and is further exacerbated by the *moto ondoso* (wave motion) caused by boat traffic, stronger current flows and higher tides due to the recent MOSE construction at the Lagoon inlets, and to reduced resistance from the Lagoon (Appendix 5, 6). Air pollution is heavy, made evident by the degradation of stone monuments and buildings (Appendix 7).

Considering also the very likely scenario of generalised sea level rise and increasing frequency of stronger and extreme meteorological events, the relevance to safeguarding Venice of restoring and preserving the coastal lagoon morphology and functionality becomes even greater because these features are vital to protecting Venice.

3.2 Invert the demographic trend of falling population in Venice

The future of Venice, as a living city, cannot be guaranteed without the physical, economic and cultural links between the city, the Lagoon and its population. In 1951 Venice had 175,000 inhabitants; today the historic city has less than 56,000, with a particularly high average age. This trend is jeopardising the future of Venice — the city, emptied of its inhabitants, loses its ties with the Lagoon and risks becoming (at best) an open air museum where the civilisation that produced and kept alive this unique site will be cancelled, together with the knowledge and the craftsmanship that have been maintained and protected for centuries (Appendices 9, 14).

3.3 Limit and move away from incompatible activities.

UNESCO's prescriptions in the 2014 Doha decisions explicitly call for an end to incompatible maritime traffic in the Lagoon (large ships and tankers), and the move towards a more sustainable kind of tourism that must be compatible with, and complementary to, the fragility of Venice, the Lagoon, its culture and everyday lives of its residents. Appendices 4, 18 and 19 relate to the much laboured issues of cruise ships sailing into Venice through the Lagoon; Appendices 9 and 10 provide further details on the opportunities and threats of tourism, as well as possible policy responses.

We must signal moreover, the following emergencies:

- The continuation of destructive fishing practices that irreversibly damage the lagoon bed, and hamper the opportunities for further development of traditional, sustainable fishing (Appendices 5, 6, 10);
- Uncontrolled water traffic with inappropriate types of boats is a major source of danger, damage and pollution. All boats in the Lagoon should comply with existing emissions limits for the urban environment that are not currently enforced in Venice (including port traffic);
- Widespread transformation of the building stock from residential to tourist-types of accommodation has caused, and continues to cause, an irreversible loss of inhabitants. This process has been encouraged in the last twenty years by inadequate urban planning provisions and a combination of weak enforcement and ad hoc dispensations (Appendices 9, 14).

An emblematic case of weak governance, limited public participation and transparency as well as short-sightedness concerns the Arsenale. Ownership of the area passed from the State to the municipality in 2013. This important area of Venice, where ships were built and repaired during the Venetian Republic, must preserve its unitary identity that distinguishes its unique historic, cultural and architectural features as well as having enormous redevelopment potential.

Through the revival, planning and development of a diverse range of traditional and innovative productive activities, the Arsenale offers important potential to revitalise the city. The 30 or so local associations assembled under the umbrella of the Forum Futuro Arsenale to stimulate and promote compatible projects for the compendium and make the area better known is a prime example of "active citizenship" recognised by the Council of Europe - Faro Convention as a Heritage Community but is still often ignored by local administration (Appendices 12 and 13).

Among our many concerns, we take this opportunity to signal that a large area of the Arsenale compendium is threatened by a transformation to heavy industrial uses connected with maintenance of the MOSE System. These functions could be more efficiently located in an industrial zone like Marghera, where it would cost less to build and run, and no deviation from the existing planning regulations would be necessary. The area in question at the Arsenale, on the other hand, includes some architecturally unique stone-built dry docks - jewels of the Mediterranean - that could instead be revived for civil,

military and leisure boat-building and maintenance. This area is classified for maritime-related activities in the current Urban Plan (Appendix 13 and 14). Furthermore, it must be noted that the MOSE maintenance plan prevails from the period in which decisions were taken by the same individuals that have since been incriminated in the corruption investigation connected to the planning, building and control of the system, and it is a “logic” that has been discredited by recent magistrates investigations and court rulings.

4 Conclusions and proposals

The critical issues outlined in this document signal a need for the institutional approach to safeguarding and managing the Site to radically change. Ample possible solutions together with human resources, knowledge and potential innovations are available in Venice to facilitate this, albeit that these have often been disregarded by vested interests.

Assigning Venice and its Lagoon to the Danger List of UNESCO World Heritage Sites is a necessary step towards triggering the responses required for effectively safeguarding the site, from now and for the long-term future.

Venice’s inhabitants, albeit a drastically reduced population, are characterised by a distinctive vitality, activism, understanding and strong commitment to genuinely protecting Venice and its Lagoon and reviving it. This document, and the interest groups it represents, is a testimony.

In addition, we hereby express our concern for the lack of relevant information in the 2013 Management Plan and follow-up reports and the scarcity of contextualisation regarding the substance of institutional plans and projects — for example, the gaps (temporal and conceptual) between drafting a new Special Law for Venice, what the law provides for, the eventual passing of the Law and its actual implementation. At the other end of the spectrum, it is true new water traffic regulations were recently issued — but aside from contention over the applicability, appropriateness and effectiveness of certain measures therein, enormous pressure from lobby groups persistently blocks the introduction of the GPS monitoring system. This governance weakness is causing very significant damage to the city.

Venice is a mirror on the world not just through its high visibility in the media, but also as a microcosm of critical challenges to be found in other places. The large number of visitors to Venice who are culturally distinguished; the concentration of universities, cultural and scientific institutions; the interconnectivity between historic, cultural, natural heritage together with the necessity for a robust and effective strategic management plan for the Site offer Venice and UNESCO a clear opportunity to develop and implement a state of the art planning model. We offer our collaboration for a participative process to define basic objectives, criteria and parameters together with conservation approaches that are scientifically valid (Appendices 4 and 17).

The “Site manager” needs to further leverage its role to amplify and intensify interactions among all the Responsible Parties and between these institutions and other stakeholders (local organisations). This would improve awareness and public opinion of UNESCO’s World Heritage Programme as well as facilitating better management of the site, *per sé*.

The numerous appendices to this document reveal just some of the available knowledge and analytical capability of the civil society in Venice. With better coordination and collaboration with the research and education sector, supported by the Responsible Bodies, there is a potential to resolve many of Venice’s apparent emergencies and guarantee the Site’s future survival.

Here follows a preliminary list of specific objectives and concrete proposals:

- Enforce urban planning regulations and fiscal disincentives and incentives to favour permanent residents and compatible (traditional as well as innovative) artisanal and other productive activities together with providing services to support new residents in Venice, especially young people.
- Adopt suitable measures to control and manage tourism as well as improving coordination of visitor-related products and services provided.
- Launch and support a participative process to facilitate transparent political decision making and management, including improving public access to data regarding the city and lagoon.
- Ensure that all works in the Lagoon, especially interventions for safeguarding the site, are carried out within the existing regulatory framework, using best available professional expertise (often available *in loco*), and in the absence of conflicts of interest between the agencies responsible for monitoring and carrying out the works.
- Ensure that Strategic Environmental Assessments are carried out upstream of individual plans — notably as regards a solution to large cruiseships and other developments linked to large ship traffic. Promote the elaboration and evaluation of alternative port development plans and activities, rather than large scale commercial and cruise traffic.
- Introduce measures to combat erosion in the Lagoon including interventions to compensate the effects of MOSE inlet architecture as well as major navigation channels. There should be no further dredging in the lagoon for navigation before resolving the drastic sediment budget.
- Effectively control boat traffic (speed limits, boat dimensions, craft types, number of boats in circulation, motor emissions).
- Support traditional fishing activities and eliminate incompatible, destructive forms.
- Reintroduce tidal currents in the natural canals across the Lagoon and restore the morphological differentiation among submerged and intertidal areas.

- Restore, where possible and on the basis of appropriate research, the freshwater-marine interrelationships, including sediment inputs, that are characteristic of coastal lagoon systems.
- Direct resources more clearly towards the protection and appropriate management of the site with a long-term perspective, also with respect to impacts of climate change and necessary adaptation measures.
- Support the return of permanent residents, and vegetable growing opportunities, also on the smaller islands, coastal areas and hinterland of the Lagoon.

Essentially, these objectives and recommendations fall into a long term vision for this World Heritage Site that is based on:

- 1. Participation and transparency at the institutional level**
- 2. Measures to favour re-equilibrium of the Lagoon system**
- 3. Considerations governed by a unitary and long-term view of Venice and the Lagoon**
- 4. The necessity to repopulate Venice, the Lagoon and the surrounding area**

This document represents the shared vision of:

- **FAI delegazione di Venezia** - Francesca Barbini (President)
- **Italia Nostra Sezione Venezia** - Lidia Fersuoch (President), Paolo Lanapoppi (Vice President)
- **Venezia Cambia** - Gilberto Brait, Giampietro Pizzo (co-founders)
- **WWF Venezia e territorio** - Sonia Bernath (President)
- **We are here Venice** - Jane da Mosto (co-founder)

and several independent experts including (but not only) Prof. Stefano Boato, Prof. Luigi D'Alpaos, Arch. Barbara Pastor, Ing. Paolo Peretti, Ing. Tiberio Scozzafava, Prof. Giuseppe Tattara, Silvio Testa, Anna Zemella.

APPENDICES

Where possible, documents have been provided in English. A large number of these attachments were written expressly for the UNESCO delegation by members of the Alliance of Local Organisations.

1. Minutes of meeting 14.10.2015 with the Reactive Monitoring Mission, Palazzo Zorzi
2. Correspondence: Unesco office - Comune di Venezia and FAI - Venice Delegation
3. Italia Nostra Report for the Unesco delegation (Oct. 2015)
4. a) Aspects relating to the Lagoon with special reference to the UNESCO Doha Decisions of June 2014 — Executive Summary, WAHV Working Group on Lagoon Morphology
b) Morphology, re-equilibrium and environmental management - Full version in Italian (October 2015)
5. Examples of Sustainable Environmental Management — FAI - University of Padua — Department of Biology (November 2015)
6. Considerations of lagoon hydrodynamics and current flows in the inner canals of Venice: trends and open questions D'Alpaos, L - Università di Padova & Peretti P. - IPROS srl (November 2015)
7. Notes to the UNESCO Delegation on pollution and restoration projects for the Private Committees for the Safeguarding of Venice (October 2015)
8. Italia Nostra Report on Tourism for the Under-secretary of State (October 2015)
9. Perspectives on Tourism by Paolo Lanapoppi, vice-president Italia Nostra (La Nuova Venezia, 02.12.15)
10. Destructive fishing practices in Il Crepuscolo della Laguna, L. Bonometto *in Italian*
11. "For the city to stay alive" Silvio Testa (November 2015)
12. Introduction to the Forum Futuro Arsenale (Autumn 2013)
13. From the Arsenale to the City: our strategic vision Forum Futuro Arsenale (April 2014)
14. Overview of Urban Planning Laws — Stefano Boato (October 2015) *in Italian*
15. Lo scippo delle conoscenze e della partecipazione in Il Crepuscolo della Laguna, L. Bonometto *in Italian*
16. Public Financing - L'or de Venise Giampietro Pizzo, Venezia Camb!a (November 2015) *in French*
17. Public participation, Democracy and Transparency (Partecipazione pubblica, democrazia e trasparenza) Gilberto Brait, Venezia Camb!a (November 2015) *in Italian*
18. WWF Italia Letter to Ministers concerning procedures and criteria for an alternative route for cruiseships
19. Vogliamo Venezia/We want Venice — Shedding light on how Venetian citizens feel about the cruiseship problem (September 2015)