

WORLD HERITAGE

Windows on Japanese Culture

World Heritage sites are thought to have “outstanding universal value” for humankind. Sites are registered in accordance with the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention) adopted at the 1972 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) general meeting. They are divided into three types: cultural heritage, natural heritage and mixed heritage that possess the characteristics of both. There are now 190 countries that have signed on to the World Heritage Convention, including Japan. A total of 962 properties, such as the Egyptian pyramids, the Palace of Versailles (France) and the Grand Canyon (United States), are registered on the list of property.

In November 2012, the Closing Event of the Celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the World Heritage Convention was held in Kyoto, and announced “the Kyoto Vision” setting forth the direction of the Convention in the next decade. “The Kyoto Vision” emphasizes the importance of sustainable development through conservation of World Heritage, and communities’ roles in conserving it. Ensuring that economic effects of this conservation are equally distributed to local people should lead to their participation in the efforts; and this is the essence of community participation in sustainable development.

“Most countries are a signatory to the World Heritage Convention, which is the most successful among all the conventions adopted at UNESCO,” says Dr. Koichiro Matsuura, who was UNESCO director-general in 1999–2009.

While in office, Dr. Matsuura put a great deal of effort into endorsing and observing the Conven-

tion for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Adopted at the 2003 UNESCO general meet-

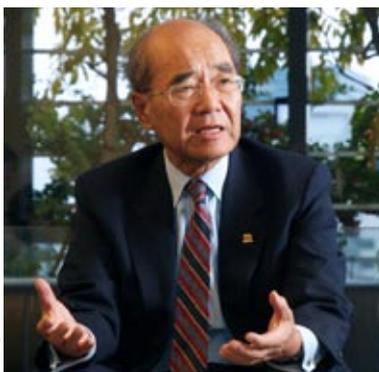
ing, the Convention aims to conserve “living heritage” such as festivals, traditional music and rituals in the same way World Heritage is conserved, according them treatment as humankind’s assets.

Yet neither the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage nor the conservation of World Heritage can occur without the involvement of citizens of these areas. Many heritage properties have been created and for many years conserved by local people. It is difficult for outside specialists alone to conserve them in terms of both finance and manpower. To conserve World Heritage, “the Kyoto Vision” calls for ensuring sustainability of local communities through intangible cultural heritage.

World Heritage Properties in Japan

Japan ratified the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 1992. After that, Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area and Himeji-jo (Himeji Castle) became Japan’s first cultural heritage and Yakushima and Shirakami-Sanchi were inscribed on the natural heritage in 1993. Japan now has twelve cultural heritage properties and four natural heritage properties. In addition, twelve Japanese cultural properties, among them Mt. Fuji, Kamakura and the Tomioka Silk Mill, are included in the Tentative List.

One of the characteristics of World Heritage properties in Japan is that wood plays an important part. Horyu-ji, Himeji-jo, the Historic Monuments



Dr. Koichiro Matsuura,
former director-general
of UNESCO (1999–2009)

of Ancient Kyoto, *gassho*-style houses in Shirakawa-go and Gokayama, Itsukushima Shinto Shrine, Shrines and Temples of Nikko, and Chuson-ji Konjikido in Hiraizumi are all made of wood, and then so of course are the natural heritage properties such as Yakushima and Shirakami-Sanchi. Conserving wooden heritage, which is more susceptible to decay and damage, is not as easy as conserving the stone-built sites typical of Western countries, chiefly those in Europe. Despite this, Japan is striving to hand down its World Heritage to succeeding generations by leveraging techniques cultivated for many years for the restoration of trees and paper. Two of Japan's World Heritage properties are currently undergoing large-scale renovation—Himeji-jo, which was built in the early seventeenth century, and the East Pagoda of Yakushi-ji temple, which was built at the end of the seventh century and is one of the Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area. Renovators of these sites try to as much as possible to use the same materials, techniques and designs as those used when the buildings were first constructed.

“Japan has conserved its historic architecture, sites, cultural landscapes and intangible cultural properties through a variety of laws,” Dr. Matsuura says. “World Heritage is common heritage to all of humankind. Each state party to the World Heritage Convention is also obligated to conserve World Heritage sites in other countries.”

For this conservation, Japan has engaged in many

different activities leveraging its knowledge and techniques for the restoration and preservation of cultural properties. One such activity is the Japanese Funds-in-trust for the Preservation of the World Cultural Heritage, which was established in UNESCO in 1989 with the aim of supporting efforts to preserve cultural heritage around the world. Sites the fund supports include Angkor in Cambodia. Japan sent restoration specialists to Cambodia, who joined with local workers in restoration efforts and successfully transferred skills to local engineers. Japanese specialists were also sent to the Bamiyan valley in central Afghanistan, where two giant stone Buddhas had been destroyed by the Taliban, joining efforts there to restore the wall paintings and other cave remnants.

“Japan has numerous technical and academic specialists, and they can be better utilized for the benefit of World Heritage,” Dr. Matsuura says. “Nearly forty countries have no World Heritage properties. Japan has a particular role in helping developing countries obtain World Heritage registration and then in conserving these properties.”

This month's Cover Story introduces the weather, climate, history and culture of Japan through explanation of World Heritage properties in Japan and those included in the Tentative List of World Heritage properties.



MAP OF JAPAN'S WORLD HERITAGE SITES

- World Cultural Heritage
- World Natural Heritage

