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Museums and Sustainability in science & education of natural & cultural heritage.

Promoting and guarding sustainability in science & education of natural & cultural heritage are the core responsibility of museums, especially natural history museums.

But how can museums play a mayor role in this process?

The core document for the protection of heritage is the “Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage” of the UNESCO from 1972. After 33 years of its implementation the World Heritage List (July 2005) includes 812 properties forming part of the cultural and natural heritage which the World Heritage Committee considers as having outstanding universal value. The World Heritage List include 160 natural, one among these is the “Messel Pit Fossil Site”, accepted 1995.

There are clear defined regulations for most processes, like “Evaluation of nominations by the Advisory Bodies”: ICOMOS is responsible for cultural heritage, IUCN for natural heritage and both together for mixed properties. ICOMOS and IUCN, as well as ICCROM are advisory bodies to the World Heritage Committee.

The process for nomination of a property of the World Heritage List is excellent defined in the comprehensive “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention” and works very well.

But what about sustainable development, protection and management?

What is the role of ICOM, the role of museums worldwide in the area of cultural and natural heritage management and sustainable development?

“ICOM is the international organisation of museums and museum professionals which is committed to the conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. [...] Created in 1946, ICOM is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) maintaining formal relations with UNESCO and having a consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council. It carries out part of UNESCO's programme for museums. [...] The 21,000 members of ICOM in 140 countries participate [...] in the activities of 113 National Committees and 30 International Committees.” [<http://icom.museum/mission.html>]

One of these International Committees is the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History - ICOM-NATHIST [<http://nathist.icom.museum>]. This committee is working on issues of Intangible natural heritage or Illicit traffic of movable heritage like meteorites and fossils. There is a working group on “The art of taxidermy and its cultural heritage importance”, dealing also with habitat dioramas which are threatened in many museums. And there was a concept developed for promoting and guarding sustainable development in science & education of natural & cultural heritage, focused on the role of museums.

This concept is based on the management and sustainable development of “Messel Pit Fossil Site”, which is considered as example of best practice and could be a model not only for other World Heritage Sites but also for National protected sites, for geological and paleontological sites as well as for archaeological monuments.

“The world famous fossil site "Grube Messel" is the first UNESCO world natural heritage in Germany. The exhibition deals with the origin of the former fresh water lake and the history of the Messel pit. It also gives an insight into modern methods of investigation and

preparation. Spectacular are the extraordinary well preserved fossils, which can give you an accurate insight into life about 50 million years ago.” [http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/720]

December 1995 was the inscription under the criteria: Natural Criteria (i) [now (viii) according Operational Guidelines 2005]:

“(viii) to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features”.

The owner of the site is the State of Hesse (Hessen, Germany).

The responsibility for the care, preservation, operation and sustainable development was assigned by the State of Hesse to Senckenberg Society of Nature Research. Senckenberg [www.senckenberg.de] runs a Research Institute and Natural History Museum.

Senckenberg (as operating museum) is also responsible for

- Excavation
- Preparation
- Research
- Collection
- Exhibition
- Education

and for the documentation of all fossils which were removed from the site.

At Senckenberg (as operating museum) there is a documentation center: all fossils originating from the Messel site are recorded and documented, where ever in the world they are housed.

All fossils are property of the State of Hesse, and are removed as “movable heritage” only on loan, permanent loan for scientific research or exhibition.

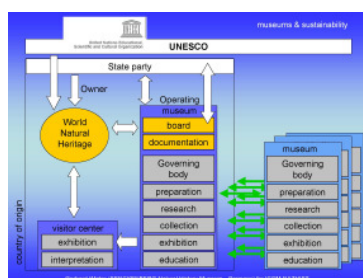
All activities are supervised by a Scientific Advisory Council (“managing board”) for the “Messel Pit Fossil Site” and all scientific institutions – national or international – are welcome to contribute to the sustainable development of this fossil site.

They can forward a application to carry out excavation at Messel site. If the application complies with the valid rules and is approved, the institution can excavate and fossils found by their party, must be must be recorded at the documentation center at Senckenberg. The fossils can be taken away on loan (permanent loan) for research or exhibition.

Only type specimens have to be returned.

Other museums or institutions can join in and this model gives the best opportunity for a sustainable development of the site, increase of scientific knowledge and brings fossils as „ambassadors“ for the country of origin creating interest of scientists as well as by tourists in other countries all over the world.

This is the base for a typical win-win-situation on all levels for those which are involved.



[museums_and_sustainability.jpg]

The local presentation of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Messel is carried out by the Cultural Advisory Council which is responsible for the presentation of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Messel especially:

- maintaining an information and communication center
- conducting guided tours for visitors in the Messel site
- development of public awareness

These activities are run by the “Welterbe Grube Messel gGmbH” [<http://www.grube-messel.de>].

All activities to create a “tourist hot spot” are developed in close cooperation with the operating museum.

The World Heritage Site Messel is part of a Geopark, the “Geo-Naturpark Bergstraße-Odenwald” which is included in the UNESCO “Global Network of Geoparks” – a new initiative to safeguard and develop geological heritage sites.

“Geoparks are areas where the geological heritage of the Earth is safeguarded and sustainably managed. We also must recognise that success will only be achieved through strong local involvement. The initiative to create a Geopark must therefore come from local communities/authorities with a strong commitment to developing and implementing a management plan which meets the economic needs of the local population whilst protecting the landscape in which they live. Prerequisite to any proposal is the establishment of a fix management body.” [<http://www.unesco.org/science/earth/geoparks>]

Even in cases of illegal/illicit traffic of Messel fossils as movable heritage this concept can be helpful. By designing a operating museum by law, this museum can take up negotiations based on the ICOM Code of Ethics, if international laws are too difficult to comply. [http://icom.museum/ICOM/code2004_eng.pdf]

The ICOM definition of a museum is:

“A museum is a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, the tangible and intangible evidence of people and their environment.”

According to this, Natural History Museums are the guarantees for sustainability – sustainable development in science and education of natural & cultural heritage, based on their collections as archives of life. They are not only the “hottest hotspots for diversity of bio-, geo- or palaeo-specimens” in the world, but also reliable partners in the field of protection and development of natural heritage for all engaged therein.

Therefore the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History (ICOM-NATHIST) proposes the close cooperation between UNESCO – especially geopark section – IUCN and ICOM for a general concept for a sustainable development creating more win/win situations in the field of geo- and palaeodiversity for a sustainable development.

A powerpoint presentation to this paper is available as pdf-file under:
nathist.icom.museum/museums_and_sustainability.pdf

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