

# World Heritage Site VENICE AND ITS LAGOON

## Follow up to the Meeting at Palazzo Zorzi with the Reactive Monitoring Mission

*Supplementary information and basic concepts for Conservation of the Site prepared by a supplementary Alliance of local NGOs and independent experts*

1 December 2015

Following our meeting with the UNESCO delegation on 14 October at Palazzo Zorzi UNESCO Venice Office (Appendix 1), the participating associations, together with a group of independent researchers that share their expertise to support the aims of the various associations, hereby present a shared document, as requested by the delegation outlining common concerns and agreed proposals. This summary note provides an overview, also with regard to the key decisions of the World Heritage Committee at Doha (June 2014). The appendices provide further information to support the key issues and specific proposals on the conservation of Venice and its Lagoon.

This initiative aims to overcome the inertia of the Venice Municipality (Comune di Venezia) as “site manager” in its organisation of the WHC Monitoring Mission. The associations that participated in the meeting with the delegation were only notified the previous day, in spite of numerous solicitations with the Unesco Office of the Municipality and at the Ministry for Culture over preceding months. Emblematic of the approach is the correspondence with FAI (Appendix 2) in which the Comune states that exclusively socio-economic stakeholders will be called upon during the Mission. It must also be noted that representatives of some of the most important local NGOs were unable to attend the meeting at such short notice and the site visits were conducted without participation from the civil society.

We also take this opportunity to highlight the paucity of interaction of the Site Manager with non-institutional stakeholders, other than those connected to economic interests of the site, throughout the process of preparation of the Management Plan (2013) and subsequent reports. We believe that this is obstructing a greater 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 WHC’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 save 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 combines, in a vital and inseparable way, unique natural, cultural, artistic and architectural features with the ongoing activities of a living city. For the site’s conservation as a living city, it therefore requires an approach to governance and management that is **integrated and participative**, based on sound knowledge and attentive to the wishes and requirements of its citizens and territorial context. This approach depends on **transparency and the free flow of data and information**.

## 2 Current situation, issues and critical factors

### 2.1 Halt the degeneration of Lagoon morphology and functionality.

Following over a thousand years of attentive management of the complex environment to maintain its specific features as a coastal lagoon system, interventions over the past century and current uses of the Lagoon are contributing to the erosive trend and net loss of sediments on a large scale, 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, 4a and 4b, 5, 6).

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

This degradation reflects directly and forcefully on the city of Venice, further exacerbated by *moto ondoso* (wave damage) of boat traffic, with the stronger current flows and climbing water levels due to generalised sea level rise through climate change as well as reduced resistance from the Lagoon (Appendices 6, 7). Pollution is impacting on the city directly and is especially evident in the degradation of stone monuments (Appendix 8).

### 2.2 Limit and move away from incompatible activities.

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

Additionally, the following emergencies must be signalled:

- destructive fishing practices that irreversibly damage the lagoon bed as well as obstructing the opportunities for further development of traditional, sustainable fishing (Appendices 5, 6, 11);
- uncontrolled water traffic, including not prohibiting inappropriate types of boat, is a major source of pollution. Furthermore, existing regulations either do not respect standards of environmental protection for cities and/or are not effectively enforced in Venice;
- transformation of the building stock from residential to tourist-types of accommodation has caused, and continues to cause, an irreversible loss of Venetian citizens. Also in other sectors, Venice's urban planning provisions are inadequate and/or too weakly implemented (Appendices 12 and 14).

An emblematic case concerns the Arsenale, the huge area of the historic city where ships were built and repaired during the Venetian Republic and could now offer important opportunities for revitalisation of the city through the revival, planning and development of a diverse range of traditional, typical and innovative productive activities. The 30 or so local associations assembled under the umbrella of the Forum

Futuro Arsenale is an example of “active citizenship” recognised by the Council of Europe - Faro Convention as a Heritage Community (Appendices 11 and 13).

However, a large area of the Arsenale compendium is being threatened by a transformation to heavy industrial uses connected with the operation and 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 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 used again for civil, military and leisure boat-building and maintenance. This area is anyway classified for boat-related activities on the existing Urban Plan (Appendix 12 and 14). Furthermore, it must be noted that the industrial conversion plan dates back to 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 MOSE system, and it is a “logic” that has been discredited by recent discoveries of the magistrates and judicial system.

### 2.3 Invert the demographic trend of falling population in Venice

The city, emptied of its inhabitants and their knowledge, breaks its ties with the Lagoon. A connection that has been maintained and protected in the forms of life in and of Venice. The future of Venice, as a living entity, cannot be separated from the physical, economic and cultural links between the city, the Lagoon and the population. In 1951 Venice had a population of 175,000; today the historic city has less than 56,000, mostly elderly. This trend is taking away Venice’s chances of a future – other than as a splendid open air museum detached from the civilisation from which it all originated (Appendix 11).

## **3 Institutional and legal framework**

At a legislative level, the protection and correct management of the Venice Lagoon would be possible and guaranteed by existing laws. Yet ever since 1973 - when the first Special Law for Venice was introduced - there has been increasing disregard for the legal framework on the part of the same institutions responsible for applying it.

This phenomenon, partly justifiable by the complexity and multiplicity of laws that sometimes conflict with each other, rather than trigger efforts to improve, simplify and improve the applicability of the legal framework, has typically provided a pretext for emergency or urgent measures in the form of ill-fated special waivers and abrogations in many kinds of situations, especially in the area of environmental impact assessments for protected areas notably the Venice Lagoon.

This approach is also evident in the city: via special waivers, property developers were able to transform a 16th century monument that belongs to a part of Venice’s most significant history -Fontego dei Tedeschi - into a shopping mall with an extra floor in glass and steel.

The systematic quest for special waivers, combined with the practice of constituting a “single concessionaire” for large public works, has resulted in a lack of transparency that should be indispensable for responsible project management as well as instrumental to participative decision making in collaboration with the local population. Rather than accelerate the completion of the works, this approach has allowed corruption to penetrate - notably with the management of the MOSE project (Appendices 15 and 16)

## 4 Conclusions and proposals

The critical issues briefly outlined above signal a need to radically change direction, and there are ample possible solutions and human resources, known techniques and potential innovations that have so far been suppressed by vested interests. The people of this Site are characterised by a distinctive and characteristic vitality, activism and strong commitment to genuine safeguarding of Venice and its Lagoon. This document, and the dimensions of the interest groups it represents, is testimony.

We express our concern for the lack of objective information in the 2013 Management Plan and follow-up reports and the scarcity of contextualisation regarding the actual substance of institutional plans and projects referred to. For example, the gaps (temporal and conceptual) between a Senator drafting a new Special Law for Venice, what the law will provide for, the eventual passing of the Law and its actual implementation. At the other end of the spectrum, it is true that the Commissioner who took administrative control of Venice between the arrest and resignation of the previous mayor (mid 2014) and election of the new mayor (spring 2015) issued new water traffic regulations - but aside from issues regarding the applicability, appropriateness and effectiveness of certain measures therein, enormous pressure from the lobby groups (transport firms, water taxi cooperatives etc.) persists against the introduction of the GPS system that could monitor traffic and limit boat speeds. This governance weakness results in very significant damage to the city.

The high visibility of Venice on the world's stage, the large number of visitors who are culturally distinguished, the concentration of scientific institutions, the interconnectivity between historic, cultural, natural heritage together with the necessity for a robust management plan for the Site together offer Venice and Unesco a clear opportunity to develop and implement a state of the art management model. We offer our collaboration to develop a people-centred participative process to define basic objectives, criteria and parameters together with conservation approaches that are scientifically valid (Appendix 17).

The "Site manager" could further leverage its role to amplify and intensify interactions among the institutions of the Pilot Committee and between the institutions and other stakeholders. This would develop awareness and public opinion in favour of Unesco's World Heritage Programme as well as facilitating better management of the site, *per sé*.

In the light of spirited debate in the city, as reflected in the numerous appendices to this document, certain objectives and proposals emerge clearly:

- 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.
- 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.
- Favour the elaboration and evaluation of alternative port activities rather than large scale commercial and cruise traffic; 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 ships.

- Halt erosion processes in the Lagoon with measures to compensate the effects of inlet architecture and main navigation channels. Until there is a greater understanding of current trends and future prospects, there should be no further dredging in the lagoon for navigation.
- Reintroduce tidal currents in the natural canals across the Lagoon and restore the morphological differentiation among submerged and intertidal areas.
- Effectively control boat traffic (speed limits, boat dimensions, craft types, number of boats in circulation, motor emissions).
- Restore, where possible, the freshwater-marine interrelationships that are characteristic of coastal lagoon systems.
- Support traditional fishing activities and eliminate incompatible, destructive forms.
- Adopt suitable measures to control and manage tourism as well as improving coordination of products and services provided.
- Implement urban planning regulations, fiscal disincentives and incentives to favour permanent residents and compatible (traditional as well as innovative) artisanal and other productive activities as well as services to support young people who come to Venice and stay here.
- 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:

- **Participation and transparency at the institutional level**
- **Measures to favour re-equilibrium of the Lagoon system**
- **Considerations governed by a unitary and long-term view of Venice and the Lagoon**
- **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)

Venezia Cambia - Gilberto Brait,. Giampietro Pizzo

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, Ing. Paolo Peretti, Ing. Tiberio Scozzafava, Prof. Giuseppe Tattara, Dott. Silvio Testa

## **APPENDICES**

Where possible, documents and files have been provided in English.

1. Minutes of meeting 14.10.2015, with the Reactive Monitoring Mission, Unesco - Palazzo Zorzi
2. Correspondence: Unesco office - Comune di Venezia and FAI - Venice Delegation
3. Italia Nostra Report for the Unesco delegation (Oct. 2015) (problematiche complessive)
4. a) Executive Summary: aspects relating to the Lagoon with special reference to the UNESCO Doha Decisions of June 2014 WAHV Working Group on Lagoon Morphology  
b) Morphology, ri-equilibrium and environmental management (Morfologia, riequilibrio e aspetti ambientali) Full version
5. Examples of Sustainable Environmental Management (Esempi di Gestione Ambientale Sostenibile) FAI
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
7. Notes on pollution and restoration projects (Nota su inquinamento e interventi di restauro) Private Committees for the Safeguarding of Venice
8. Italia Nostra Report on Tourism for the Under-secretary of State Rapporto di Italia Nostra sul turismo
9. Committee for Sustainable Tourism Summary on Flow management and governance of tourism in Venice (Gestione dei flussi e governance del turismo a Venezia)
10. Destructive fishing practices (La pesca distruttiva dei fondali) in Il Crepuscolo della Laguna, L. Bonometto
11. "For the city to stay alive" (Perché la città resti viva) Silvio Testa
12. Appeal for the Arsenal of Venice (Appello per L'Arsenale) Forum Futuro Arsenale and other associations
13. From the Arsenale to the City: our strategic vision Forum Futuro Arsenale
14. Urban Planning Laws (Stefano Boato)
15. Lo scippo delle conoscenze e della partecipazione (Da Il Crepuscolo della Laguna, L. Bonometto)
16. Public Financing - L'or de Venise Giampietro Pizzo, Venezia Camb!a
17. Public participation, Democracy and Transparency (Partecipazione pubblica, democrazia e trasparenza) Gilberto Brait, Venezia Camb!a
18. WWF Italia Letter to Ministers concerning procedures and criteria for an alternative route for cruiseships