

6.4 Crafting a Statement About the Power of Rock Art

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Rock art is a valuable, yet vulnerable, heritage of humankind. It is, however, in peril due to graffiti and vandalism, looting, and theft. It is especially subject to irreversible loss or damage caused by exploitation of mineral and natural resources. It often suffers from inadequate visitor management, poorly conceived and managed infrastructure projects, and, increasingly, by natural mechanical and chemical processes provoked by climate change. Thousands of sites have been damaged or destroyed around the world. Rock art conservation and management efforts requiring skills, expertise, and materials attract little recognition and scarce, inadequate funding.

Despite being a valuable asset, rock art is often not understood, respected, or valued by the general public. Decision makers and governments offer little support for its protection and valorization compared to other types of threatened natural and cultural heritage. Potential partners are not motivated to provide technical, moral, or financial support. Attempts to reach a wider public through museums, exhibitions, books, tourism products, radio interviews, and websites have not yet significantly raised public awareness.

In response to this state of affairs, a working group of rock art professionals and enthusiasts from every continent, brought together by Getty Conservation Institute at a workshop in California and Texas in 2018, constructed a 180-word statement aimed at demonstrating both the values of, and threats to, rock art. It was felt that a clear and persuasive case would help ensure that resources be made available to protect rock art and allow the public to appreciate and enjoy this fundamental feature of our shared humanity and cultural heritage.

In the hope that the message would be shared widely, members and friends of RAN helped to translate the text into forty-two (to date) written languages as well as American Sign Language (ASL) (fig. 6.9). While the message of universality and significance of rock art is important, RAN recognizes the differences between various cultural interpretations of the medium. The vision statement, conceived in English, is not set in stone, but rather is intended to stimulate reflection and discussion to further enrich the discourse about rock art and its future.

Why Rock Art is Powerful and Relevant Today

Rock art—ancient paintings and engravings on rock surfaces—is a visual record of global human history. It is a shared heritage that links us to powerful ancestral worlds and magnificent landscapes of the past. It tells the story of the birthplaces of art and the dawn of artistic endeavors. It creates connections to significant places and depicts encounters with the surrounding living world. Through its existence, nature and culture are connected in the landscape. It resonates with our individual and collective identity while stimulating a vital sense of belonging to a greater past. Rock art illustrates the passage of time over tens of thousands of years of environmental and cultural change. It incarnates the essence of human ingenuity and facilitates contacts today between cultures and aspects of spirituality. Rock art is artistically compelling and full of meaning. This fragile and irreplaceable visual heritage has worldwide significance, contemporary relevance, and, for many Indigenous peoples, is still part of their living culture. If we neglect, destroy, or disrespect rock art we devalue our future.

FIGURE 6.9.

The RAN statement, “Why Rock Art is Powerful and Relevant Today,” has to date been translated into over 40 languages.

Uzbek
 Dutch French Nigerian Pidgin
 Xhosa Russian Galician Turkish
 Korean Maylay
 Hungarian Arabic IsiZulu Norwegian
 Finnish Azeri American Sign Language
 Esperanto Hindi Ejagham Afrikaans Jul’Hoan
 Spanish Fulani English Hausa Māori German Welsh
 Italian Euskera Latvian Hebrew Chinese
 Japanese Kunwinjku Ateso
 Portuguese Nama Nde Thai
 Swedish Swahili