Rock Art: Protection and Development

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Introduction

The present condition of a specific body or rock art in a region, the resulting problems, and thus the preservation techniques to be developed, are all determined by a number of factors.

Among these are:

1. the environmental characteristics of the site: the climatic conditions (temperature range, rainfall regime, humidity pattern, evaporation rate, occurence of dust storms, salt-laden winds, etc.), the accompanying flora and fauna (lichen, algae, bushes, insects, birds, wild animals, etc.) and hazards such as bush fires and floods.
2. the properties and characteristics of the rock utilized by the artists: including its slope, structure, friability, porosity and chemical composition, as well as the characteristics and behaviour of its groundwater.
3. the age of the rock art concerned and its specific features: e.g. the technique employed (pounding, polishing, etc.) and the depth of engravings; the pigments, primer, medium, etc. used in paintings.

However, these factors, while very important and presenting many technical problems of conservation, certainly are not the only ones determining how long a specific body of rock art in an area will survive. The most discouraging and irreparable damage is frequently caused by

4. man himself — the most rapid and destructive agent we know. It is often far more difficult to influence his cultural values, greed, insensitivity, misdirected attention and sometimes plain stupidity, than it is to solve the purely technical problems which up to now have received most attention.

Reasons for human interference

A first step in approaching this problem is to understand its causes: why do people damage rock art?

1. *Because of a lack of interest in, and appreciation of, the value of rock art.*

   Examples are:

   a. Development projects. These often interfere with sites, and sometimes even destroy them completely, through road building, dam construction, mining operations, etc.

   b. The local population and casual visitors, who use rock art sites, e.g.

   — for shelters or picnics, thus damaging the paintings and engravings by drawing on them or using them as targets and through the heat and soot of their campfires.

   — as kraals for animals who rub against the rock surface.

   — to dry dung, used as fuel, against the rock walls.

   — to build huts under the overhangs, the walls and plaster covering and so damaging the rock art.

2. *Because the art contains or represents something of value in the local culture.*

— In Lesotho, red paint has been scraped off and alledgedly used in initiation schools.

— In W. Arnhem Land, the latest efforts by Aboriginals to restore the paintings using commercial blue pigment actually damaged the originals.

This, however, creates another problem: to what extent do we have the right to interfere in living cultures?

3. *Because of a misdirected interest in rock art, caused by publicity.*

   a. well intentioned attempts to protect the art which have frequently ruined it in the process.

   — Paintings have been covered with linseed oil, shellac and p.v.c.,

   — names have been removed with white spirits and detergents,

— rock art has been chipped out, and removed to museums, resulting in the art being damaged and the remains at the sites destroyed. Furthermore, in the museums the rock art has sometimes been neglected or improperly treated.

b. uncontrolled tourism: people walk on engravings, dampen paintings with anything, even oil, to intensify their colours. They touch, rub, and scratch their names on the art.

c. greed: rock art is removed by private collectors or by those wishing to make a quick profit.

Factors influencing the degree of interference

The amount of damage done by man is obviously related to a number of factors, among them:

1. *accessibility:* the amount of damage done by man decreases with increasing inaccessibility, although this is a relative concept. Hardly any site is at present totally inaccessible. After all, the artists got there once, and tourists go to astonishing limits in their efforts to get at the rock art sites.
2. *population density:* rock art in regions with low population densities, e.g. deserts, survives better than in densely populated areas, where it hardly ever escapes damage.
3. *publicity:* one of the greatest threats to rock art. Even easily accessible sites in densely populated areas may be in perfect condition, if their location remains a total secret. Lascaux is a good example of this, if one considers its inaccessibility up to 1940, and the effects of publicity during the following 20 years.
4. *standard of living:* level of economic development, is also a factor involved, as it directly affects the amount of tourism. Through tourism, publicity increases and accessibility improves. In addition, with a higher standard of living, people are better informed and more aware of rock art, while they can better afford, and become more inclined, to visit distant places which feature exotic rock art.

   However, a higher standard of living and the expansion of tourism also increase the capacity to protect the sites as they generate the attention, interest and capital required to pass the laws, to set up the institutions and organizations, and to take the preservation and conservation measures needed for adequate protection.

Elements of a protection programme

How can rock art be protected against the damage done by man?

Legal protection. Laws, declaring rock art sites national monuments and enabling the authorities to take the measures necessary for their protection, are a first prerequisite. However, legal protection by itself does not bring about actual preservation. Often, neither the authorities involved, nor the public, are aware of the details of the laws, or even of their existence.

Law enforcement. The enforcement of preservation laws hardly ever takes place anywhere, and maximum penalties are often ridiculously low anyway, if we take into account recent inflation trends. Besides, the effect of criminal sanctions is often counterproductive because they tend to create antagonism, especially among the local population.

Education and appeals to preserve the national heritage are, of course, valuable. Nevertheless, they certainly do not entirely solve the problem as some most embarrassing examples prove. Moreover, they stimulate publicity and draw attention to the rock art and so increase the number of visitors to often unprotected sites. Selected examples from the available literature[1-6] show a great similarity in the problems involved in the conservation of rock art both in Australia and Southern Africa. Adequate protection against man's destructive tendencies apparently only exists

a. at unpublicized, little known sites, difficulty of access, in sparsely populated areas;
b. at well known, easily accessible sites in popular, well developed tourist centres;
c. inside museums, at least where the rock art is properly cared for.

Experience shows that in the long run isolation without secrecy is insufficient, and fences without caretakers are useless.

Ideally we therefore need:

a. complete secrecy about locations in the case of unprotected sites.
b. caretakers and fences for all known accessible sites.

While this is obviously unrealistic in view of the number of sites involved, a more pragmatic protection programme should at least include, in order of priority (?):

1. no publication in any form of the location of unprotected sites;
2. no treatment whatsoever of the painted or engraved surfaces, until definite preservation techniques, consolidants, cleaning agents, fungicides, etc. have been tested and recommended for the specific site involved by acknowledged scientists;
3. systematic comprehensive surveys recording all sites before further damage is done by people or through natural causes;

4. the protection of sites through the establishment or expansion of national parks, protected areas, wilderness reserves, etc.;
5. the controlled development of tourist facilities, after adequate conservation measures have been taken, at selected sites that warrant it economically, and involving the local population as much as possible;
6. the deliberate removal by experts of rock art impossible to protect at some better-known isolated sites, to central places that possess the funds, personnel and storage facilities required.

Development, an asset

The introduction of such a protection programme should not be seriously hindered by its costs, since it would not be prohibitively expensive, at least not for the richer, more developed countries. They can afford to record, protect and develop their rock art as they already possess the necessary organizations, such as National Monuments Commissions, Parks Boards and Museums, which have adequate budgets, manpower, expertise and the authority to take the necessary actions.

Moreover, in those countries the protection of rock art through the development of tourism can be achieved with relatively small investments generating satisfactory returns, as the necessary infrastructure of roads, hotels, etc. already exists and the size of the potential tourist market is relatively large because of the high standard of living. In addition, private enterprise will also have the incentive to initiate the development of sites, with the authorities merely producing the necessary guidelines and exercising controls.

However, the poorer developing countries, as well as some less developed regions in the richer countries, face the dilemma that they often possess the greater wealth in rock art, which they can least afford to protect adequately. They frequently lack the institutions, expertise or budgets needed, while their tourist potential is small and the investments required are large because of the low standard of living and a poor existing infrastructure. This leaves it entirely to their governments to introduce and fund the projects needed. Nevertheless, these governments cannot be expected to properly care for their rock art without outside help, in view of their priority needs, funds and manpower available.

So many more urgent matters and more direct needs demand attention and compete for funds that the survival of rock art does not arouse much concern and certainly cannot be called a priority matter. Nonetheless, a rock art protection programme may also succeed in the less developed countries if outside technical and financial assistance is forthcoming and the local population becomes motivated and involved. Protection through development is feasible and can be effective. A more materialistic approach regarding rock art as an economic asset because of its tourism potential, and developing it as such, could give the local population the economic incentive to look after this nonrenewable resource. It would also bring about the much needed interest in the protection of rock art at various levels by virtue of its contribution to employment creation and the development of the local and national economy.

Conclusion

Protection and development are thus not contradictory. On the contrary; it is clear that

a. with economic development the capacity to protect rock art improves;
b. with the development of tourism the incentive to protect it increases.

The contrast is therefore not between protection and development but between states and organizations who are willing and able to protect and those who are not. Those who cannot afford to look after the protection of their rock art must be helped by those who are capable and should be willing. The responsibility is an international rather than a national one, and assistance — technical as well as financial — is the only way in which the rock art in many parts of the world can be saved.

References

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