

AL AIN CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The cultural heritage of Al Ain is rich and varied; it consists of tangible and intangible resources and incorporates archaeological sites, historic buildings, cultural and natural landscapes, ethnographic and historic collections, as well as a thriving traditional folklore. The city of Al Ain itself has ancient oases, settlements and cultural landscapes across its large breadth; it constitutes a cultural resource of great significance in the middle of a desert area at the heart of the UAE.

The significance of the cultural heritage of Al Ain, however, is still not fully articulated, it does not play the relevant role it should play in the present and future development of the area and its society. The city does not have a real “historic district”, monuments and sites appear to be isolated “objects” with no relevant impact on the spatial pattern and the overall image of the city. In addition, oases areas and desert landscapes have been affected by modernizing projects and by sprawling urban development set on the fast track since the 1960's.

The Al Ain National Museum, the oldest museum in the UAE, houses important archaeological and ethnographic collections which, if properly presented and preserved, could serve the purpose of demonstrating the diversity and significance of the country's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. In fact, it could act as an anchor for a “holistic” approach to the conservation and promotion of heritage, which includes the intangible part with its oral literature, customs, traditions and folkways, traditional beliefs, material culture and folk arts, many of which are disappearing.

The inadequate representation of the cultural heritage of Al Ain, including the tangible and intangible heritage, has called for the preparation of the present Strategy under the guidance of UNESCO. It is articulated in the vision of the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority (**ADTA**, formerly the Al Ain Economic Development and Tourism Promotion Authority, **AAEDTPA**) and of the main stakeholders concerned with heritage in Al Ain: “To conserve and develop Al Ain's heritage and local identity, making sure that social, economic and aesthetic needs and expectations are satisfied, while increasing people's sense of pride and enjoyment.” In order to fulfil this vision, the Strategy focused on emphasizing and enhancing the role of cultural heritage in people's social and economic development, while looking after the short and medium term requirements of its conservation and management.

The cultural heritage of Al Ain has a major role to play in improving and inspiring people's lives, in upgrading the quality of the living environment and in providing the resources for economic and cultural development. It is an important element of awareness, planning and construction, as well as sustainability and progress. Cultural heritage is also a powerful and important learning tool. It plays a significant role in education, training, outreach and voluntary work. In education, heritage is an essential resource for exploring and shaping national identity, for understanding history and helping to understand the present and the future. In order to take advantage of what heritage has to offer, Al Ain needs to adopt a comprehensive and sustainable development approach that balances conservation needs of its heritage

resources with the aspirations of local communities and visitors, while simultaneously taking into account the area's development interests.

There are a number of critical issues that the competent Authority responsible for implementing this Strategy needs to deal with urgently, in order to fulfil the vision that is set out in this Strategy. These issues share the same relevance and importance across the various fields of intervention identified by the Strategy's Team of Experts. They are fundamental to an integrated approach to the protection and management of the cultural heritage of Al Ain as strongly promoted by this Strategy.

First, the deteriorating condition of historic buildings, archaeological sites, collections and cultural landscapes must be addressed through a program of awareness raising and conservation work, based on priorities and regular maintenance regimes. There is also the huge task of creating capable human infrastructures for cultural heritage conservation and management within the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and consequently in Al Ain.

Second, the impact of sprawling urban and infrastructure developments on the cultural resources of Al Ain accentuated by the absence of adequate coordination between the stakeholders concerned with the protection and management of the cultural heritage. What is needed therefore is an integrated planning approach to cultural heritage conservation and enhancement whereby planning tools and strategies are developed to improve the image and condition of heritage assets, and incorporate these with all other aspects and activities of urban life.

Third, there is need for an adequate and functional regulatory process for the management and care of cultural and natural landscapes in the country. There are limited landscape preservation efforts and little awareness on the part of civil society towards conservation, sustainable development, planning and management of cultural and natural landscapes in the UAE, Abu Dhabi Emirate and Al Ain Region.

Fourth, the critical condition of the intangible cultural heritage; traditional handicrafts are on the decline or becoming extinct. There is a need therefore for support and the provision of markets and training in order to sustain small traditional businesses. Moreover, a clear framework for intangible heritage research and documentation is essential in order to focus the work of the bodies involved in the study and preservation of the intangible cultural heritage of Al Ain, and also avoid duplication.

Fifth, the quality of available data on cultural heritage is not up to the required standards. Reliable and comprehensive data and information on the nature and condition of the cultural heritage resources of Al Ain can help empower decisions in planning, conservation and management.

Sixth, the absence of up-to-date legislation for the conservation and management of the cultural heritage. There is a need for a federal law and legal reform of the Abu Dhabi Law of Antiquities to include the holistic approach that has been described in this Strategy and that is consistent with international norms in the fields of cultural heritage protection, conservation and management.

Seventh, collectively or individually, Al Ain institutions do not have a holistic mandate positioning them to meet the broad needs of protection, conservation and promotion of the city's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. A new institution is needed with the mandate to manage the cultural heritage resources comprehensively.

Eighth, there is no formal curriculum defining what elements and components of the cultural heritage need to be taught, per level of education and per grade, be it as part of the formal program or as extra-curricular activities.

Ninth, the need to foster awareness among the area's local community and key tourism stakeholders about the values of heritage in its various facets, the need to preserve it and the importance of getting their support in order to achieve sustainable and fruitful tourism development.

Tenth, defining Al Ain's tourism product and developing a strong image for the area is critical to promote the place, and change current popular perceptions of Al Ain as an unappealing tourist destination.

As a result of having identified these issues, there are a number of priorities that need to be addressed, as well as a series of detailed projects for consideration by the Authority. Priority requirements are detailed in the report and outlined below:

- 1) A conservation policy to preserve the cultural heritage currently threatened by rapid urbanization, to enhance community identity and sustain socio-economic development, while promoting cultural tourism.
- 2) An integrated and holistic planning approach that emphasizes mutual interactions and the connections between the different heritage components and their setting and environment, from the cultural, functional and spatial points of view.
- 3) A UAE "Landscape Convention" that introduces basic guidelines, promotes common awareness and contributes to the formation of local cultures, as they are important components of the UAE's cultural heritage.
- 4) A general framework for the conservation and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage and the creation of a specialized body for coordinating conservation efforts.
- 5) A data structure for Al Ain's heritage that identifies the scale and nature of the cultural heritage while enabling the tracking of change to cultural assets, and the formulation of policies based on valid data and analysis.
- 6) A comprehensive legal framework which develops through the review and updating of the existing Law of Antiquities, while integrating protection, conservation, management and promotion of cultural heritage in the new legislation.
- 7) An independent institution mandated by law for the holistic protection, management and promotion of cultural heritage and providing an institutionalized multi-sectoral co-ordination mechanism.

8) A framework for the integration of cultural heritage in the national curriculum through the organization of a general forum, and also encouraging dialogue among the main stakeholders in the field of education.

9) Baseline data and understanding of stakeholders' knowledge and attitudes towards heritage and tourism so as to better develop heritage awareness and generate information for guiding future efforts and projects.

10) A true cultural image for Al Ain that will provide the distinctive character of the place and position it on the tourist map of the Gulf area.

Prior to moving forward, a number of prerequisites should be fulfilled, in order for the proposed Strategy to be implemented in an effective way. These include:

1) A legal framework defining the components of heritage and the fields of intervention and competencies of different institutions and stakeholders, given that cultural heritage is cross-sectoral and cannot be dealt with by any one body.

2) An effective decision-making and coordinating body established by law and mandated to guide and coordinate with other public or private entities involved in the conservation and management of the cultural heritage.

3) Adequate staffing of all services responsible for the safeguarding and promotion of cultural heritage as dictated by various functional entities (conservation specialists, heritage management experts, urban planners, archaeologists, historians, inspectors and other professionals and technicians).

4) Closer collaboration between the federal and local authorities involved in the implementation of the Strategy. This coordination is needed both for implanting, as well as for implementing the legal framework.

For the priorities established by this Strategy to be effectively addressed, a number of projects linked to the critical issues and responding to priorities needs to be considered. These nineteen projects are considered as "kick-off" or "triggering" projects because they will allow other proposals contained in the consultants' reports to be implemented.

The table below indicates how the projects are distributed between the various intervention fields:

Intervention Field	Number of projects
Legislation and institutional reform	2
Research, documentation, and data management	4
Urban and landscape planning	2
Education, training and capacity building	4
Promotion of local identity and development of cultural tourism	3
Physical interventions (infrastructure and facilities)	4
Total	19

For the implementation of these projects to be effective and the Strategy to be empowered, it is necessary for the competent Authority to promote the Strategy so that it reaches and affects a large section of society and stakeholders. The Authority may promote it in two ways: the first would be a meeting of key stakeholders in the various departments, as well as in civil society; the objective of the meeting conducted over a half-day session outside the city of Al Ain would be to share the overall Strategy and especially the role of cultural heritage and gain a consensus of all the various actors before moving forward; the second would be a meeting with key editors from the diverse media organisations that cover cultural heritage issues, who would be invited to a meeting where the Strategy will be discussed.

This Strategy was developed by a multi-disciplinary team of experts under the leadership of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The team visited Al Ain three times (January, May and September 2004); it held extensive meetings with stakeholders and made site visits in Al Ain and in other parts of the United Arab Emirates. The experts were supported in their work by the staff of the Cultural Heritage Section of the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority.

Initial proposals were presented to the government in May 2004 to receive preliminary feedback and guidance. The draft Strategy was presented to the Al Ain authorities for a last round of feedback in September 2004.