

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT AT THE CHIEF ROI MATA'S DOMAIN WORLD HERITAGE SITE, VANUATU

Chris BALLARD,¹ Meredith WILSON,² Richard MATANIK,³
Leisara KALOTITI,³ Topie WARRY,³ Lakaka SUPUSA,³
Salome MAX,³ Helen MAIKA,³ and Joe KALOTITI³

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Sustainable development has been a core objective for the managers of the World Heritage site of Chief Roi Mata's Domain in the Republic of Vanuatu (Figure 1). Chief Roi Mata's Domain is rare, as a World Heritage property that has been entirely under indigenous community control and leadership from inception

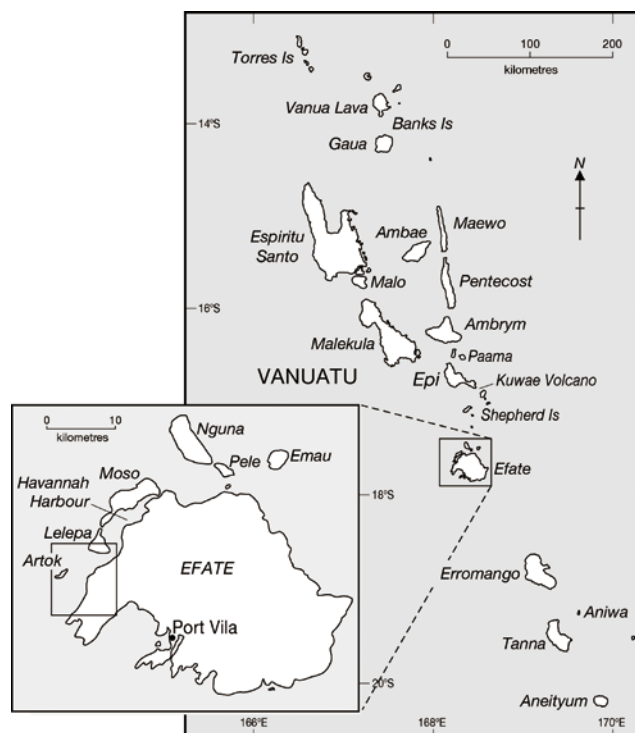


Figure 1 Location of Chief Roi Mata's Domain World Heritage site in Vanuatu (Source: ANU CartoGIS)

¹ Associate Professor, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Australia

² Heritage Consultant, Australia

³ Lelema World Heritage Committee, Lelepa Island, Shefa Province, Vanuatu

of the nomination process in 2004 and then continuously since inscription in 2008. From the outset, Chief Roi Mata's Domain has positioned local livelihoods and the transmission of living heritage at the centre of its management strategy.

While there is now broad understanding and acceptance of the central role of culture in the delivery of effective results for the SDGs (UNESCO, n.d.a.; Labadi et al., 2021; Marcus, 2021), practical evaluations of the positive and negative impacts of engaging culture in this way are not so easily identified (De Beukelaer & Freitas, 2015, p.209). Although sustainable development was not emphasized in the original formulation of the UNESCO 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Bortolotto & Skounti, 2024), it has been a topic of increasing focus for each of the different cultural and heritage conventions (see UNESCO, 2016).

Sustainable development is defined most simply as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, Chapter 2, paragraph 1). Given this strong orientation towards the future, the goals of sustainable development are particularly appropriate for consideration within the framework of heritage safeguarding measures, which also operate with longer-term horizons. Sites inscribed on the World Heritage list, for example, are targeted for preservation in perpetuity.

The goals of sustainable development—formally set out as the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs (United Nations, 2015)—should be seen not as 'separate spheres of action, but [as] highly interdependent,' overlapping with and impacting on each other, and requiring 'holistic approaches to policies' (UNESCO, n.d.b.). In this respect, the approach to the SDGs closely matches the lived experience of development, which does not distinguish between individual SDGs. Because it expresses the same vision of a holistic experience of life, living heritage or intangible cultural heritage has a particularly powerful role to play in understanding the cultural potential of the SDGs and formulating policies and strategies for their successful implementation. Not surprisingly, recent reviews of the potential contribution of cultural heritage to the implementation of the SDGs tend to feature living heritage quite prominently (e.g. Labadi et al., 2021)

This paper explores the relationship between living heritage and the SDGs within the context of a World Heritage site—Chief Roi Mata's Domain or CRMD—where community management that subscribes to and practices a holistic understanding of heritage is proving highly effective at meeting the SDGs at a local level. Several features of the management of CRMD ensure that the SDGs remain central to any planning process: first, the Republic of Vanuatu has limited capacity to invest in the management or support of CRMD, passing much of the responsibility back to

the community's own managers, the members of the Lelema World Heritage Committee, in determining priorities and finding funding; second, inscription of the site as a cultural landscape has ensured that local cultural values are the foundation of the site's Outstanding Universal Value, and that living heritage plays a central role in site management and planning; and third, ongoing challenges, including natural hazards such as major cyclones and earthquakes, and other issues such as tenure conversion of traditional lands, continue to present problems which throw the SDGs into sharp relief.

The authors of this paper include the current chair (Richard Matanik) and all current members of the Lelema World Heritage Committee, along with two external colleagues who have worked continuously with the Lelema community since 1996 (Meredith Wilson) and 2001 (Chris Ballard). The ideas expressed in this paper have all emerged through ongoing discussion and regular meetings of this group, drawing on the experience and living heritage of the broader Lelema community. We first introduce the composition of CRMD as a cultural landscape, showing how local cultural protocols ground all aspects of site management. Then we consider how the SDGs are engaged at CRMD, more or less successfully, and the ways in which the local management rubric of 'people, place and story' helps the site's managers to make progress on meeting the SDGs. Finally, we review responses to two major natural hazard challenges, Cyclone Pam in 2015, and the 17 December 2024 Efate earthquake, and reflect on how these responses illustrate the capacity and flexibility of living heritage in shaping community adaptation to new circumstances, including climate change.

CHIEF ROI MATA'S DOMAIN AS A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The cultural landscape of Chief Roi Mata's Domain (CRMD) is Vanuatu's only World Heritage site. The nomination process, which began in 2004, was led jointly by the communities of Lelepa and Mangaliliu villages (known collectively as Lelema) with technical support from the Vanuatu National Museum and Cultural Centre and the first two authors (Wilson et al., 2011). In 2008, CRMD became the first cultural World Heritage site inscribed by an independent Pacific Island state (along with the Kuk Early Agricultural site in Papua New Guinea).

The Outstanding Universal Value for which Chief Roi Mata's Domain was inscribed reflected 'the continuing association of the landscape with the oral traditions of Roi Mata, continuity of chiefly systems of authority and customary respect for the tangible remains of his life evident in the continuing *tapu* prohibitions on these places' (World Heritage Committee, 2008). The category of 'continuing cultural landscape' emphasizes the heritage values that continue to inform community life and use of the landscape today.

The cultural landscape concept was introduced primarily to reconcile natural and cultural values at World Heritage sites (Rössler, 2006), but it has also provided an opportunity to restore living heritage and community concerns to a central position (Ballard & Wilson, 2012, p.135). Cultural landscapes often physically encompass local communities within the boundary of their buffer zones (Figure 2), and depend upon those communities for their continued local conservation practices as well as the living heritage that supplies a history for and gives meaning to the landscape. With some variation according to national regimes of legislation and enforcement, local communities commonly exercise a degree of control over access to their land, and the success of conservation of the cultural landscape is thus dependent on the sustained goodwill and cooperation of the community.

Direct engagement with or leadership by local communities in the management of cultural landscapes can introduce further challenges, including meeting community needs and aspirations, especially for access to a cash economy; competing with other forms of land use, including the sale of land, tourism, and resource extraction; managing the relationship between state agencies and local

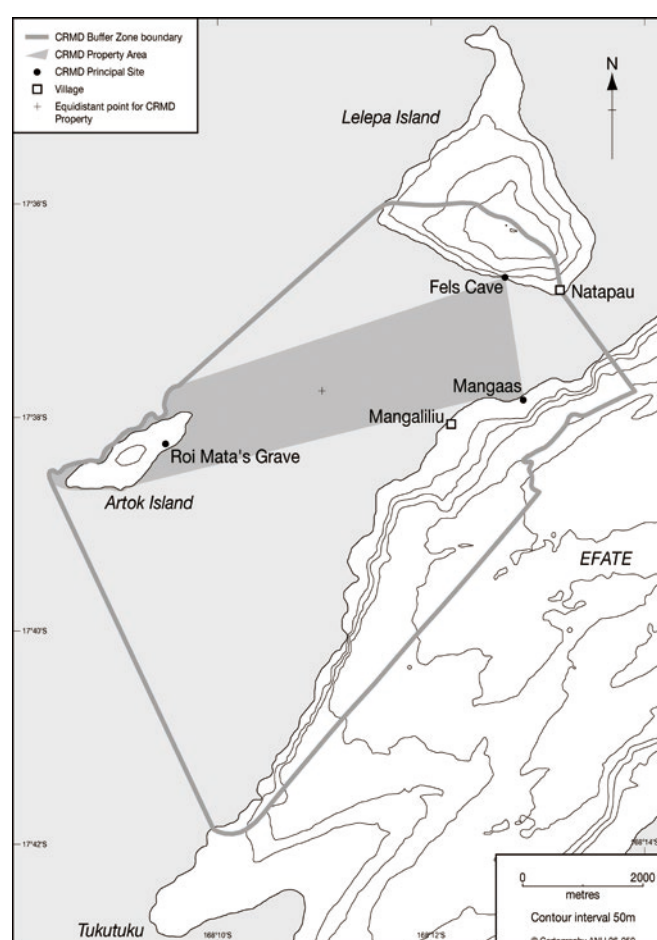


Figure 2 The Chief Roi Mata's Domain World Heritage site and buffer zone (Source: ANU CartoGIS)

communities; ensuring ongoing community commitment to the conservation project; and appreciating the dynamic quality of cultural values, which can change with time and conditions and influence the significance of the broader cultural landscape.

Chief Roi Mata's Domain commemorates the life of the last holder of the chiefly title of Roi Mata, who lived during the 16th century and died in about 1600 CE, and especially his role in promoting peace across the Efate region. The area of the designated cultural landscape corresponds broadly to his original domain, covering the nearshore islands of Artok (Figure 3) and Lelepa, and adjacent areas of the Efate mainland. Key locations within this domain are associated with his life at the chiefly residence of Mangaas, on Efate; his death in Fels Cave on Lelepa Island; and his burial, surrounded by between 50 and 300 others who accompanied him to the grave on Artok Island. Mangaas and Artok were declared forbidden zones (*fanua tapu*) at his death and were never inhabited and seldom visited thereafter. This traditional *tapu* (taboo) was originally put in place out of profound respect for Roi Mata's personal power (*natkar*) but has had the effect of conserving the locations and their immediate environments largely intact for almost 400 years. Following 'in the footsteps of Roi' (*nalfan Roi*) and respecting the *tapu* and the *natkar* of Roi Mata are local precepts that organize the lives and the landscape of the Lelema community, and thus the way that it approaches the management of the World Heritage site. It is in this sense that CRMD makes its claim to be a 'continuing cultural landscape.'

The Lelema community strongly asserted its right to determine the spatial extent of the CRMD World Heritage site, and its protective buffer zone in particular, so as to gain World Heritage status for its landscape and knowledge without limiting too narrowly its future options. Under pressure from an ICOMOS review of the draft nomination that recommended considerably expanding the area of the registered Buffer Zone, the community insisted that the key challenge of conservation (beyond the three locations directly associated with Roi Mata's life) was to ensure the continued transmission of the knowledge that gave the landscape meaning (Ballard & Wilson, 2012, pp.143–144). For this to happen, they argued, community livelihoods would have to be maintained and improved without external constraints on their use of the landscape (Trau et al., 2014).

In 2005, the Lelema community formed a committee to oversee the nomination process and planning for management of a possible World Heritage site: the World Heritage and Tourism Committee (WHTC) (later renamed the Lelema World Heritage Committee or LWHC). The LWHC consists of three women and three men, one of whom is elected as chair. The balance in gender composition and in the distribution of roles on the committee has focused attention on training and income-earning opportunities for older and younger women. The



Figure 3 Artok Island viewed from Mangaliliu Village (©C. Ballard, 2024)

LWHC has also been the hub for development of national and international partnerships, with government and private sector groups engaged in cultural heritage, tourism, education and development. Lelema dance groups developed for the Roi Mata Cultural Tour have performed in Australia and elsewhere, and LWHC members have engaged with World Heritage site managers and cultural heritage practitioners internationally.

PEOPLE, PLACE AND STORY: THE SDGS IN PRACTICE

The decision of the Lelema community to participate in the World Heritage nomination process was not based on the need to manage these key locations associated with Roi Mata, which had been very effectively preserved over four centuries by the customary *tapu*. Instead, led by Chief Kalkot Murmur, the community insisted that a successful nomination should generate economic benefits, to fund education and other development objectives. Linking World Heritage inscription to economic benefits in this way would also help greatly in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the World Heritage site and the community's central role in its management, as well as promoting cultural heritage as a viable and integral part of community life in the longer term. As Marcus notes, 'If a cultural organization or operator lacks a sustainable economic base, then they are in no position to help advance the agenda of sustainability in their work' (Marcus, 2021, p.27).

The primary vehicle of development linked to the World Heritage site has been a cultural tourism enterprise, Roi Mata Cultural Tours (RMCT), entirely owned, managed and staffed by the Lelema community, and led by members of the LWHC (Wilson et al., 2012). The tour operation has aimed to train and involve the widest number of community members, as guides, dancers and boat operators,

many of whom have gone on to work elsewhere in Vanuatu's hospitality industry. An early concern of the LWHC was to limit tourist numbers and impact, but this has opened the door to other tourism operators to work around the margins of the World Heritage-accredited tours.

The assessment of Adam Trau, an international volunteer who worked most closely with the tourism business, is that it 'occupies something of a development no man's land, failing to satisfy or be deemed a 'success' in relation to either international mainstream economics of poverty alleviation or local community expectations and cultural values' (Trau, 2012, p.160); nevertheless, 20 years after its launch, the cultural tourism business continues to operate and to generate incomes. The LWHC is now keen to expand its operations from a purely cultural tourism focus to one that integrates cultural and leisure products, such as snorkelling and diving, in order to appeal to a broader market and grow the numbers of tourists visiting CRMD. In tandem with the tour experience, Lelema women also produce and sell handicrafts to tour groups, working with both modern and traditional designs and forms, and further distributing and redirecting benefits across the community. 'Lelema conceptions and measures of development success through Roi Mata Cultural Tours, such as paying for the school fees of all community children or supplementing aid post supplies, are just as important locally as the provision of full-time employment and increases in personal and household income levels' (Trau, 2012, p.158).

In addition to these direct benefit streams and their allocation to a range of development goals, the World Heritage site contributes significantly to environmental sustainability. World Heritage status and the community's renewed commitment to conservation at the key Roi Mata locations of Mangaas and Retoka have extended the beneficial effects of the original *tapu* restrictions, and attracted new initiatives, including a Japanese-funded giant clam conservation programme, and the Nuwae clean water supply project for Lelepa Island. World Heritage status was also sought as part of a broader strategy to stem or limit the flow of sales or long-term rental of customary land within the Buffer Zone to outsiders. This strategy proved particularly important in conserving the core locations of Artok and Mangaas, both threatened by leasing, but has been less successful in the broader Buffer Zone and beyond (McDonnell, 2024).

Although Lelema community members tend to view these different challenges and opportunities through a more holistic framework that integrates the concerns and perspectives of cultural heritage, livelihoods and development, the LWHC has generated several illustrative models that enable outsiders to appreciate the way that these multiple concerns are brought together in local lives. The first of these is the metaphor of the culturally significant *nabanga* or fig tree, emphasizing the need for strong, deep roots through care for the landscape, the

community and its heritage in order to support and ensure the sustainability of the trunk of World Heritage and the many branches representing different community-led initiatives.

A second model, derived from the tree-image, is the rubric of *pipol, ples mo storian*, or People, Place and Story. In its simplest form, this is conceived as a three-legged stool representing CRMD, with people or community, place or the tangible heritage, and story or intangible heritage each contributing one of the legs essential to hold the stool upright. The strength of each leg is vital for sustainability. Loss or damage to any one of these legs threatens the whole: examples include impacts to community health, education or livelihood; damage to the environment or loss of key places or material items; and loss of language or elders or contexts for the transmission of knowledge. Sustainable heritage conservation depends as much on care for knowledge and for the livelihoods of the knowledge-bearing community as it does on the preservation of the material sites or landscapes of tangible heritage. As the World Heritage Committee notes, 'Heritage protection without community involvement and commitment is an invitation to failure' (World Heritage Committee, 2007, p.2).

STRESS TESTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY: NATURAL HAZARD DISASTERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Natural hazards have presented ongoing problems for sustainable development at CRMD, but the ways in which the community has responded to these events will now help in planning for climate change adaptation. Vanuatu is notoriously exposed to an exceptional range of natural hazards, including earthquakes, landslides, tsunamis, cyclones, drought, fire, flood, invasive animal and botanical species, and volcanic eruptions (Wilson et al., 2011; Ballard et al., 2020; Wilson, 2022). In response, over the three-thousand-year history of human settlement, Vanuatu's many different cultures have each learned to adapt and to limit their risk from these hazards, developing bodies of knowledge about the weather, early warnings, preparation, house construction and food security. Much of this extraordinary body of knowledge remains available to communities, even if it has not been practiced effectively for some time.

CRMD has been exposed to multiple hazards over recent years. A small tsunami in 1961 removed the beach on Lelepa Island that had served as the ceremonial ground where Roi Mata watched his dancers, but earthquakes and cyclones have been particularly destructive over the last 25 years. Cyclone Pam, a category 5 event in March 2015, devastated Vanuatu and destroyed most of the World Heritage infrastructure at CRMD; a subsequent assessment of damage determined that the traditional locations remained largely untouched, as they had been carefully positioned to avoid the worst winds, whilst the modern infrastruc-

ture was poorly located and exposed (Ballard et al., 2020). More significant than the infrastructure damage, which was relatively easily replaced or repaired, was the community's own appreciation of the loss of or failure to put into practice its own knowledge of cyclone risk reduction, through appropriate construction and location of housing, and community mobilization, garden and food preparation as the cyclone approached. One food security project arising directly from this experience has been a training programme led by the LWHC in the planting and preparation of wild yam, which is a particularly cyclone-resistant traditional food crop.

Living heritage evidently has an important role to play in sustainable development through disaster risk reduction at CRMD, and these same practices will also provide the foundation for the Lelema community's adaptation to climate change challenges. At present, climate change is likely to introduce changes to the frequency and intensity of cyclones, to the seasonality, intensity and duration of precipitation, and to sea level. Earthquakes have presented a different kind of challenge. A major earthquake in 2002 dislodged part of the ceiling at the entrance to Fels Cave, and this partial roof collapse has been a source of anxiety ever since for the LWHC and the community, as the cave is a major attraction for tourists and a significant contribution to local incomes. On 17 December 2024, another major earthquake struck central Vanuatu, with the epicentre located just 20 kilometres west of Lelepa Island. The cliff above and around Fels Cave collapsed spectacularly, and appears to have blocked the cave mouth entirely. This catastrophe has been only partly alleviated by a programme of photogrammetric 3D documentation of the entire cave funded by UNESCO and conducted jointly by the LWHC, the Vanuatu National Museum and Cultural Centre and the Australian National University just months earlier, in September 2024. This documentation may allow the community and tourists to 'experience' Fels cave and its remarkable rock art virtually in the future, but this blow to the integrity of the World Heritage site and to income opportunities for the community will have to be addressed in innovative ways by the LWHC and its national and international partners.

THE SDGS AT CRMD

Activities associated with cultural heritage practices and safeguarding by the Lelema community, including management of the World Heritage site of CRMD, address most of the SDGs, at least at this very local level. These activities range from poverty reduction and improved access to education and health opportunities through cultural tourism training and income (SDG1, SDG3, SDG4, SDG8), food security measures such as the wild yam project (SDG2), promoting equity of economic opportunity through the gender-balanced management committee and its focus on developing women's handicraft production (SDG5), exploring clean

water options through the Nuwae project (SDG6), improving the design and construction of sustainable infrastructure (SDG9), promoting climate change initiatives amongst the local community and beyond (SDG13), conserving both marine and terrestrial environments (SDG14, SDG15), and developing national and international partnerships that strengthen the capacity of the community to meet these goals (SDG17).

Most of these activities were already underway at CRMD before the adoption in 2015 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. So far at CRMD there has been no open discussion or planning with conscious reference to the SDGs, despite UNESCO promotion of the SDGs and ICH for the Pacific region (UNESCO Office for the Pacific States, & ICHCAP, 2016). While results measured against any of the SDGs individually might appear modest, sustained activity in each area over the past twenty years is a significant demonstration of the power of local autonomy in cultural heritage management, and of planning that is limited in ambition to what can be implemented and sustained locally. What the example of Chief Roi Mata's Domain demonstrates is that community values and leadership are essential ingredients for any action directed towards sustainable development at a local level, and that this holds true especially for cultural heritage programmes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the leadership of the late Chief Kalkot Murmur and the late Douglas Kalotiti, along with the permission and support for our work from the core area land-owners, Chief Fartepar and Chief Murmur, and from the directors and staff of the Vanuatu National Museum and Cultural Centre.

REFERENCES

- Ballard, C., & Wilson, M. (2012). Unseen monuments: Managing Melanesian cultural landscapes. In K. Taylor, & J. Lennon (Eds.), *Cultural Landscapes: Management of Their Heritage Values* (pp. 130–153). New York, Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203128190-9/unseen-monuments-chris-ballard-meredith-wilson>
- Ballard, C., Wilson, M., Nojima, Y., Matanik, R., & Shing, R. (2020). Disaster as opportunity? Cyclone Pam and the transmission of cultural heritage. *Anthropological Forum*, 30(1/2), 90–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2019.1647825>
- Bortolotto, C., & Skounti, A. (Eds.), (2024). *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development: Inside a UNESCO Convention*. New York, Taylor & Francis.
- De Beukelaer, C., & Freitas, R. (2015). Culture and sustainable development: Beyond the diversity of cultural expressions. In C. De Beukelaer, M. Pyykkönen, & J.P. Singh (Eds.), *Globalization, Culture, and Development: The UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity* (pp. 203–221). London, Palgrave Macmillan. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137397638_14
- Labadi, S., Giliberto, F., Rosetti, I., Shetabi, L., & Yildirim, E. (2021). *Heritage and the Sustainable Development Goals: Policy Guidance for Heritage and Development Actors*. Paris, ICOMOS. <https://>

- openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2453/
- Marcus, M. (Ed.), (2021). *Culture and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and Opportunities*. Voices of Culture. https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/docs/voices-of-culture/voices-of-culture-brainstorming-report-sustainable-development-goals-2021_en.pdf
- McDonnell, S. (2024). *My Land, My Life: Dispossession at the Frontier of Desire*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press.
- Rössler, M. (2006). World Heritage cultural landscapes: A UNESCO flagship programme 1992–2006. *Landscape Research*, 31(4), 333–353.
- Trau, A. M. (2012). Beyond pro-poor tourism: (Re)interpreting tourism-based approaches to poverty alleviation in Vanuatu. *Tourism Planning and Development*, 9(2), 149–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2011.630750>
- Trau, A., Ballard, C., & Wilson, M. (2014). *Bafa Zon: Localising World Heritage at Chief Roi Mata's Domain, Vanuatu*. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 20(1), 86–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.712981>
- UNESCO. (2016). Intangible Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development. Unit 8, Capacity-Building Materials. Paris, Intangible Cultural Heritage Section, UNESCO. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/capacity-building-materials>
- UNESCO. (n.d.a.) UNESCO and Sustainable Development Goals. <https://www.unesco.org/en/sdgs>
- UNESCO. (n.d.b.) Intangible Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development. <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/34299-EN.pdf>
- UNESCO Office for the Pacific States, & ICHCAP. (2016). *Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Sustainable Development Goals in the Pacific*. Apia and Jeollabuk-do, UNESCO Office for the Pacific States and ICHCAP. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245796>
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. A/RES/70/1. <https://sdgs.un.org/publications/transforming-our-world-2030-agenda-sustainable-development-17981>
- Wilson, M. (2022). Intangible Cultural Heritage and Disaster: Reflections on the IRCI project 2016–2020. In *Proceedings of the IRCI Researchers Forum: Progress and Challenges in the Research for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage—Towards a Sustainable Future, 29 October 2021*. Osaka, IRCI.
- Wilson, M., Ballard, C., Matanik, R., & Warry, T. (2012). Community as the first C: Conservation and development through tourism at Chief Roi Mata's Domain, Vanuatu. In A. Smith (Ed.), *World Heritage in a Sea of Islands: Pacific 2009 Programme* (pp. 68–73). World Heritage Papers, 34. Paris, UNESCO.
- Wilson, M., Ballard, C., & Kalotiti, D. (2011). Chief Roi Mata's Domain: Challenges for a World Heritage property in Vanuatu. *Historic Environment*, 23(2), 5–11. <https://search-informit-org.virtual.anu.edu.au/doi/10.3316/ielapa.137018054267410>
- World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future. United Nations General Assembly, 42nd Session, A/42/427. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/139811?ln=en&v=pdf>
- World Heritage Committee. (2007). Proposal for a 'Fifth C' to be added to the Strategic Objectives. Draft Decision WHC-07/31.COM/13B, World Heritage Committee, UNESCO. <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2007/whc07-31com-13be.pdf>
- World Heritage Committee. (2008). Examination of nomination of natural, mixed and cultural properties to the World Heritage List—Chief Roi Mata's Domain (VANUATU). Decision 32COM 8B.27, World Heritage Committee, UNESCO. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/1488>