Landlocked Mongolia fights cultural heritage looters

Efforts stepped-up to protect smuggling of national treasures

Mongolia is the world’s 19th-largest country, with a land mass of 1.5 million sq km but has the lowest population density with just 1.7 inhabitants per sq km. It is a land of great beauty and striking contrasts, with a particularly rich and diverse cultural heritage that is under threat.

The country is increasingly subject to crimes of cultural property in all forms, be it theft, smuggling or illegal sales. According to Mongolian police, around 40 Mongolian cultural objects are reported stolen each year – of which half are usually recovered within a few years – but Mongolian and international experts agree that this represents only a small proportion of thefts of cultural objects as most cases are not reported, or are not even discovered in the case of illegal excavations of archaeological artifacts.

Spurred by a growing and lucrative international market and facilitated by advancing technologies, the illicit trade in cultural property is inflicting increasing harm on Mongolia’s unique historic heritage and cultural identity.


The illicit trade of cultural heritage is usually little known because it is not considered as high a priority compared to other crimes.

Stemming from this realization, UNESCO and the Principality of Monaco partnered to launch on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the UNESCO Convention in 2010 a two-year project on “Capacity-Building for the Fight against Ilicit Traffic of Cultural Objects in Mongolia”. This initiative aims to address the need of Mongolian institutions to improve their ability to protect Mongolia’s cultural heritage.

Between May 2010 and May 2011, a total of six training workshops were organized to raise the awareness and enhance the capacities of a wide range of professionals involved in the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural objects. Participants included school teachers, museum curators, customs and police investigators, representatives from cultural institutions and government officials.

Head of the National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) for Mongolia Damdin Tsedmaa said: “The training workshops brought together representatives from various fields but with the common objective to protect the cultural objects in Mongolia.”

The fight against the illicit traffic of cultural property involves a number of institutions as it calls for strong legislative action, public awareness, local vigilance and international cooperation. Because UNESCO believes that only concerted actions between all key stakeholders can achieve sustainable results, it is this cooperative dimension that has been promoted in all the training activities organized within this project.

The fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural objects is a relatively recent concern for the Mongolian authorities and it was therefore considered as crucial to bring about international guidance to ensure the success of the training workshops and provide opportunities for international networking.

With a combination of renowned institutions with long experience in the field of heritage protection – INTERPOL, the Carabinieri Department for the Protection of Cultural Heritage from Italy – and well-established international experts: MM. Pavel Jirasek (museum security); Patrick Boylan (ethics); and Vincent Negri (legal issues) encouraged a participatory approach which led to fruitful discussions between participants who rarely have the opportunity to interact with each other.

The fact that the “illicit owning, selling and purchasing, preservation, trafficking of cultural objects should be mentioned in the [Mongolian] Cultural Heritage Protection Law” is just one of many recommendations proposed. The project will conclude in November 2011.

In the coming months, the local project team will prepare a series of publications based on the training workshops. In particular, a training reference book, including all major documents prepared for the six training sessions, will be available in English and Mongolian to all Mongolian institutions involved in the fight against illicit trafficking.

Finally, a list of recommendations is being prepared by national experts for Mongolian authorities and all institutions sharing a common responsibility in the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural objects and this will serve as a road map for Mongolia to better protect its valuable cultural treasures in the future.

Cultural property is a treasured record of our collective past. With the illicit traffic of cultural heritage, it is Mongolia’s identity and sense of history that is at risk.