

Interview with American Karalyn Monteil, Desk Officer for Africa and Latin America & the Caribbean in the Section of Museums and Cultural Objects of UNESCO's Culture Sector.

- **USUNESCO: When did you first start working at UNESCO and what position did you first occupy?**

I started working as a consultant in the World Heritage Centre at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France in October 2001. I was the editorial assistant for the UNESCO *World Heritage Review*. I was responsible for writing news articles, speeches and other communications about the World Heritage Convention or World Heritage sites. I was also responsible for assisting with media and public relations for the World Heritage Centre and helped promote the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Heritage Convention in 2002.

- **USUNESCO: What attracted you to the organization?**

I believe in the mission of the Organization and I wanted to use my strong interpersonal and written communication skills to help promote UNESCO's ideals of international cooperation and peace through its activities, especially in the field of culture—UNESCO is the only UN agency with a mandate in the field of culture. I was also interested in working in a multi-cultural environment.

- **USUNESCO: Please give us your view of UNESCO's overall mandate, as for example, in the "defense of peace", as stated in its constitution.**

UNESCO's mandate is indeed to build peace in the minds of "men" by bringing nations together to collaborate on activities around the world in the field of education, science (both natural science and social and human sciences), culture, and communications and information. Priority is given in each of these fields to Africa, youth and gender issues.

UNESCO was created in 1945, just after the end of World War II, and the founding Member States were committed to ensuring that such destruction and devastation never happened

again. (The USA was one of the original 20 founding members; today there are 200, including associate members).

One of the ways UNESCO builds peace is by promoting mutual understanding, empathy and respect through capacity-building activities that foster a better knowledge about cultures across the world, intercultural and interreligious dialogue among nations. Some of the well-known projects UNESCO has undertaken in the Culture Sector to encourage peace and reconciliation include the return of the Axum Obelisk in Ethiopia, reconstruction of the Mostar Bridge after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, rebuilding the National Museum in Baghdad following the war in Iraq, and launching the Slave Route Project to raise awareness about the slave trade and slavery around the world. In 2010, UNESCO was named the lead UN agency for the “International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures”, and has rallied its Member States to undertake a wide variety of activities for cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue.

But UNESCO is doing more than post-conflict or peace-building activities. Thanks to UNESCO, there are Biosphere reserves protecting our planet’s precious resources, there are more children—especially young girls—getting a basic education, there are entire villages in developing countries getting informed, educated, entertained and mobilized through community radio stations, and there are historical artifacts, libraries and archives being restored, conserved and inventoried. These are just a few of the numerous activities UNESCO carries out on a regular basis around the world, but they exemplify how UNESCO’s mandate is turned into action on the ground.

- **USUNESCO: Please tell us about your current work, especially any key projects that will interest our readers.**

In 2004, I moved from the World Heritage Centre and began working in the Museum Section of UNESCO; originally coordinating 25 projects financed by the US Contribution to UNESCO upon their return to the Organization in 2003. These ranged from large-scale pilot projects for safeguarding endangered museum collections in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mali, Yemen, Guatemala, among others, to small-scale museum-to-museum partnership projects in Burkina

Faso, Egypt and Haiti for example, where we paired museums from developing countries with museums in developed countries to carry-out training or other urgent conservation needs. Upon completion of these projects, in 2009 I was named the Desk Officer for Africa, and in 2010 I was also made responsible for Latin America and the Caribbean. So now I am mainly focused on collaborating with colleagues in the 15 Field Offices in Africa and 11 Field Offices in Latin America and the Caribbean in order to carry-out projects for the safeguarding of endangered museum collections and the development of museums. All of my projects emphasize capacity-building in the beneficiary countries in order to enhance the protection and conservation of their heritage.

### Haiti's reconstruction

After the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, I was named our Section's focal point for Haiti, so I have been very focused on UNESCO's efforts to accompany the Haitian government in its reconstruction efforts. This entails liaising with the international community as they work through UNESCO to contribute towards Haiti's reconstruction. I assisted the UNESCO Culture Sector with organizing the first International Coordination Committee for the Preservation of Haitian Cultural Heritage (ICC-Haiti), which took place in July 2010. UNESCO brought together leading experts from around the world in: built heritage and urban centers, cultural and natural sites, museums and cultural institutions, intangible cultural heritage, archives, libraries and manuscripts, as well as performing arts and creative industries to work hand-in-hand with the Haitian Ministry of Culture and Communication as they carry-out their National Plan for Reconstruction. The ICC experts developed specific recommendations to guide the national authorities in prioritizing recovery efforts. UNESCO is working closely with the ICC experts and the Haitian government to transform these recommendations into detailed project documents. We are also liaising with UNESCO Member States to mobilize funds to carry-out these projects, and have planned a donor's meeting for early 2011.

### Reinforcing the professional museum network in Africa

One of my main initiatives this year was to launch a partnership with the International Council of African Museums (AFRICOM), which is an NGO in Kenya dedicated to uniting museum

professionals across Africa in order to share knowledge and experiences. Among their many communication tools, they have a very active “list serve” with discussions ranging from repatriation issues to technical information on conservation of collections. We are working together to reinforce their communication tools and strengthen the professional museum network in Africa. We are also building on UNESCO’s partnership with GOOGLE to create a mapping of museums in Africa based on AFRICOM’s membership directory.

#### Using museum education programs to promote HIV/AIDS awareness

Another recent activity, which I hold dear to my heart, evolved from a training project to create digital inventories for two community museums in northern Cameroon (Foumban and Babungo). I wanted to see how museum education and community outreach programs in Africa could be used to help raise awareness about the risk of HIV/AIDS. So together with the Cultural Officer from the Yaoundé Field Office and the Director of the Foumban Palace Museum, we developed a project for a poster contest for students from local schools to raise awareness about the risk of HIV/AIDS from traditional practices such as excision, circumcision, tattooing and scarification. We sent educational information about HIV/AIDS to the teachers from the participating schools (which had diverse religious backgrounds) who then discussed this in their classrooms. The students were brought to the museum for a visit. Afterwards, they had one hour to make a drawing about the risks of contracting HIV/AIDS from traditional practices. Their drawings were then displayed in the museum as part of a temporary exhibition. This brought in a new audience to the museum as friends and families of the students visited the museum – many for the first time. Then, UNESCO awarded a bicycle and school supplies to the top three winners. The drawings are now being displayed at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris along with posters from an Education Sector contest entitled “Art in Action : Empowering Young People Against HIV and AIDS” in an exhibition beginning on 1 December 2010 for World AIDS Day. Although this activity is just a small part of one of my projects, it demonstrates how powerful museum education programs can be in addressing important social issues, especially for local communities.

- **USUNESCO: What current projects may be of particular interest to our website readers, for example, programs funded by the U.S. Government or otherwise likely to interest readers interested in American policy and programs?**

First off, it is important to recognize the importance of additional funding and contributions from the USA and other member countries to UNESCO's Regular Programme Budget, which is only around 600 million US dollars for two years (compared to UNICEF's annual budget of around 3 billion USD or GOOGLE's annual revenues of 21 billion USD!). UNESCO currently receives "extra-budgetary" contributions from its Member States that just about match the regular Programme budget. This allows countries to contribute funds to their own priority programs, and hand-pick projects, which complement or complete UNESCO's Programme and international mandate. For example, in 2007, the Spanish Government granted UNESCO 95 million USD for 18 projects in the field of "Culture and Development" to accelerate efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in selected countries.

When I was coordinating the "Programme for the Preservation of Endangered Cultural Objects", which was financed by the USA Contribution to UNESCO, it was so empowering to have such a big budget for so many important safeguarding projects. We had around 5 million USD at our disposal, which broke down to around 200-250,000 USD for over a dozen large scale pilot projects and 30,000 USD for smaller museum-to-museum partnership projects.

One of the USA-contribution funded projects that marked me the most was for the "**Emergency preservation of the collections of the National Museum of Afghanistan.**" After decades of civil war and Taliban rule, the museum was without a roof and 70 percent of its collections were destroyed or looted when the project began in 2004. Following an earlier UNESCO project for physical building repairs, the project provided training for museum staff to create inventories of their collections (which is also a very important tool in the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural objects), repaired damaged objects and improved storage conditions. In addition, we created an electronic database of the museum collections and published the first catalogue of

the museum collections. Without a doubt, this project significantly contributed towards the remarkable revival of the National Museum of Afghanistan.

Some other current projects of the UNESCO Museum Section, which may be of interest include:

- The USA is funding the creation and management of a **UNESCO Database for National Cultural Heritage Laws** ([www.unesco.org/culture/natlaws](http://www.unesco.org/culture/natlaws)). Launched in 2005, this online database offers free access to national cultural heritage legislation from UNESCO Member States, which helps in the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural property. For example, thanks to this database, an art/ antiques dealer or a customs agent can now check the import/export rules of a country before purchasing an object or letting it cross the border. The Database currently contains more than 2000 laws from over 170 countries in 42 languages.
- The USA Contribution to UNESCO is also supporting a project for the **restoration and conservation of ancient manuscripts** (dating from the 7th century onward) at the Al Aqsa Centre in the Old City of Jerusalem.
- One of UNESCO's flagship museum projects is the creation of **the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC)** in Cairo, which is scheduled to open in 2011. This multi-donor funded project includes the provision of expert advice, institutional capacity building and staff training, and procurement of equipment.
- In September 2010, UNESCO signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding with the **Smithsonian Institution**, creating an unprecedented agreement for cooperation on cultural and natural heritage programmes, including: museum training and partnerships, a travelling exhibition and an international conference on the 40th anniversary of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 2012 as well as aiding in the recovery of Haiti's cultural heritage following the January 12, 2010 earthquake.

- **USUNESCO: How are your projects implemented in the field?**

UNESCO has 50 UNESCO Field Offices around the world plus liaison offices in New York, Geneva, New York, and Brussels so most of UNESCO's projects are managed directly by the staff of the national or regional field offices. They are in regular contact with the local and national authorities, and they know the local conditions and circumstances in order to successfully coordinate our programs and projects. Any project that is launched from Headquarters is systematically backstopped by the relevant Field Office. We also work closely with NGOs, IOGS, specialized agencies and technical experts, etc. to carry-out specific activities.

Out of the approximately 2000 UNESCO employees, around 700 are currently working in field offices; however, the current Director-General of UNESCO, Ms. Irina Bokova, has made it one of her priorities to increase UNESCO's presence in the field. So she has been developing a new "rotation policy" to help encourage staff at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris to accept assignments in the field, and to enhance UNESCO's operational capacities and outreach.

- **USUNESCO: Please explain your view of the importance of UNESCO in the pursuit of the key objectives of the organization's mandate and how your work helps meet these objectives.**

Considering that peace building, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue are UNESCO's key objectives, I think anyone would agree that meeting these objectives requires international cooperation, which UNESCO is uniquely positioned to foster. As a multicultural organization with an international mandate, UNESCO nurtures multilateralism. Projects that might never get done bilaterally find fertile ground at UNESCO. In the field of culture, the numerous international safeguarding campaigns for the protection of cultural heritage are good examples of this. Starting in 1960, when UNESCO united Member States to collaborate on the Nubian Safeguarding Campaign, in which an international team dismantled, moved to higher ground and reconstructed the most important Nubian temples to

protect them from the flooding of the Nile Valley caused by the construction of the Aswan High Dam, UNESCO has continually proven how the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

My work in the museum section primarily focuses on training museum staff, conserving objects or archives, showing how to create inventories and documentation of their collections, improving storage conditions, and sometimes reconstructing or constructing museum buildings. We also help strengthen links with local communities, improve museum education and community outreach programs, as well as develop links within the tourism industry to promote sustainable tourism and economic development. Considering that some of the world's richest collections are located in some of the least developed countries, this kind of practical, technical assistance is imperative to ensure that these valuable collections are preserved for future generations. Through their collections and programming, museums bring together local communities, students and tourists alike to learn about different cultures and their traditions through the objects they make and use. Museum exhibitions and education programs encourage intercultural dialogue and understanding, which can lead to peace building. The income generated by the museum visit, purchases in the museum shop or at the local crafts market, as well as through films, concerts, theatre or dance performances at the museum can contribute to the eradication of poverty and sustainable development. Museums also expand knowledge on the diversity and wealth of cultures across the globe, which helps build a greater understanding of different cultures. Our activities in developing countries, post-conflict or post-disaster countries help contribute to meeting the objectives of UNESCO's mandate.

- **USUNESCO: How is your work connected to the work of other UN organizations?**

Much of UNESCO's work relies on inter-agency collaboration. For example in the Culture Sector, we collaborate with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), and the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) for our **sustainable**

**tourism Programme at UNESCO World Heritage sites** such as Machu Picchu in Peru, the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador or the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. UNESCO's Science Sector leads the **World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP)**, which involves 28 UN agencies in a system-wide effort known as UN Water that reports on resources and management of world-wide freshwater.

Each UN agency has its strengths and specializations, which complement and complete one another. Our collaboration with other UN agencies is facilitated through our liaison offices in New York, Geneva and Brussels. For the past three years, UNESCO has been part of the "One UN" initiative to work together on pilot projects for greater impact at lower cost. Specifically, we collaborate closely with the other UN organizations for the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The head of the Culture Sector at UNESCO recently succeeded in having the essential role of Culture in Development recognized in the MDGs. The activities of UNESCO's Culture Sector demonstrate the important role of culture in developing economies, especially through tourism and employment.

- **USUNESCO: Why should America support UNESCO?**

America should continue to support UNESCO for many reasons. First of all, because America is part of the world community and is therefore concerned about world issues such as peace-building, education, poverty alleviation, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue, which are the core of UNESCO's programs. Moreover, America, more than any other Member State has always been proud of its multicultural population—"The Great American Melting Pot".

Secondly, because the programs that UNESCO carries out reinforce many of the activities public and private institutions in America are carrying out in the United States and around the world. Just look at the Carnegie Corporation's Islam Initiative to improve understanding of Muslim communities and societies (which complements UNESCO's intercultural and interreligious dialogue Programme); the Smithsonian Institute's efforts to save and restore artwork from Haiti's museums and art galleries following the devastating earthquake of January 2010 (which

complements the work of the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding of Haitian Cultural Heritage); the Sesame Street Workshop's efforts to improve early childhood education and intercultural understanding (which complements the work of the Education and Culture Sectors); the partnership among NASA, the National Wildlife Federation and the Foundation for Environmental Education to raise awareness about the risks of Climate Change at USA "Eco-Schools" (which complements the work of UNESCO's Science Sector and the Education Sector's Section for Sustainable Education); or Google, Wikipedia, You Tube, School Tube, Facebook and Twitter's efforts to offer free online resources around the world (which complements the work of the Communications and Information Sector for Open Educational Resources)-- not to mention the UNESCO and US Library of Congress partnership for the creation of a "World Digital Library." UNESCO is working towards the same objectives as Americans and can complement or multiply their impact and sustainability by engaging other UNESCO Member States in the efforts. Lastly, because America wants peace in the world, they need to be involved in the international efforts led by UNESCO to promote a culture of peace.

- **USUNESCO: Tell us something about your background: where you are from, your educational background, what you were doing prior to joining UNESCO, etc.**

I was born in Toledo, Ohio in 1969. I received my Bachelor's Degree in Communications from the University of Dayton (USA) and a Master's Degree in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester (UK). After working as the media relations specialist for the Chicago Office of Tourism, I moved to Paris, France in 1997 where I collaborated with Editions Gallimard, the Paris Voice magazine, ELLE Magazine and the OECD before joining UNESCO in 2001. I am married and I have two children.

- **USUNESCO: Any other career highlights you'd like to mention?**

I am an active member of the "Greening UNESCO" group, which aims to raise awareness among UNESCO staff about the importance of reducing our negative impact on the environment through our actions and behavior at work. We recently created a brochure for staff members, which gives tips and facts for lowering our carbon footprint at work. Last year, we launched a

video-clip competition (30 seconds to 1 minute) to promote ways for UNESCO to “be greener”. This was a big hit among UNESCO staff and has now become an annual event.

- **USUNESCO: Tell us about any personal interests, family, etc., you wish to share.**

Before joining UNESCO, I wrote a film script entitled “Bienvenue à Paris” about what it’s really like for an American writer to move to Paris nowadays. It demystifies the stereotype of an American in Paris and shows how important it is to learn the language and culture –and above all, to have a work visa. I have had some interest in it, but am still looking for a producer.