



***** IAU0808: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE *****

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UNESCO and the IAU sign key agreement on Astronomy and World Heritage Initiative

30 October 2008, Paris: A Memorandum of Understanding is to be signed today, 30 October 2008, between UNESCO and the International Astronomical Union (IAU). The IAU will be integrally involved in the process of developing UNESCO's Astronomy and World Heritage Initiative, helping to promote astronomical sites of "Outstanding Universal Value".

The world-famous UNESCO World Heritage Convention is renowned for its work protecting and promoting sites that celebrate the heritage of humanity. Examples include the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt, the Mayan city of Chichen Itza in Mexico, and the Stonehenge in the United Kingdom.

However, astronomical heritage is currently under-represented. All too often, neglect and mistreatment cause irreversible harm. The new Memorandum will place the Astronomy and World Heritage Initiative in a better position to reverse this trend by raising awareness of the cultural importance of astronomical sites, both ancient and modern.

Adopting the successful strategy previously applied to architectural and natural sites, the new UNESCO Astronomy and World Heritage initiative will officially recognise, promote and preserve astronomical sites that are of outstanding significance to humankind. The places in question include landmarks whose design or location relate to celestial events, whether with symbolic or direct connection with astronomy. Historic sites, instruments and representations help to broaden and enhance our perception of the sky. This theme is integral to the upcoming International Year of Astronomy 2009. The initiative is therefore designated as one of the Year's key Cornerstone projects, which are being organised to increase public understanding and appreciation of astronomy throughout the coming year and around the world.

In order to fulfil its commitment to the UNESCO Initiative, the IAU has set up a new Working Group on Astronomy and World Heritage under the chairmanship of Professor Clive Ruggles, Emeritus Professor of Archaeoastronomy at the University of Leicester, UK. Ruggles, who is also Vice-President of the IAU's Commission 41 on the History of Astronomy, has already worked with UNESCO in the early stages of developing the initiative. He said: *"The globalisation of human culture is proceeding at a relentless pace, and it is becoming increasingly urgent to preserve some of the more fragile aspects of our common cultural heritage. 'Fine', you might say, 'but why worry about astronomy in this regard?' The main reason, I think, is that every human culture has a sky, and strives to interpret what people perceive there. The understanding they develop inevitably comes to form a vital part of their fundamental knowledge concerning the cosmos and their place within it. Astronomy is not just a modern science but a fundamental reflection of how all people, past and present, understand themselves in relation to the Universe."*

At present, States Parties to the World Heritage Convention may nominate sites for inscription on the World Heritage List for a variety of reasons; but until now, there have been

few precedents and no guidelines for nominations relating principally to astronomy. Identifying and defining criteria that demonstrate "Outstanding Universal Value" in relation to astronomy is not a straightforward task. They must encompass a wide range of sites, from prehistoric monuments to modern observatories. Helping to establish such criteria is the IAU Working Group's top priority. As Ruggles says, *"without such guidelines member states of UNESCO will have little motivation to put forward astronomical sites for the World Heritage List, since they will have very little idea of their chances of success."*

The agreement between UNESCO and the IAU is designed to set the wheels in motion. As a result, astronomical heritage will become much better represented in the World Heritage List.

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Notes for editors

Founded in 1919, the IAU is the world's largest professional body for astronomers, bringing together almost 10 000 distinguished astronomers from all nations of the world. Its mission is to promote and safeguard the science of astronomy in all its aspects through international cooperation. The IAU also serves as the internationally recognised authority for assigning designations to celestial bodies and surface features on them.

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Links

- IAU website: <http://www.iau.org>
- UNESCO website: www.unesco.org/
- UNESCO World Heritage Convention website: <http://whc.unesco.org/>
- IYA2009 website: <http://www.astronomy2009.org>
- Astronomy and World Heritage Initiative website:
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/19/>
http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=281&id_group=21&s=home
- Astronomy and World Heritage Initiative on the IYA2009 website:
<http://www.astronomy2009.org/globalprojects/cornerstones/astroworldheritage>