Borders, European Integration and UNESCO World Heritage: A Case Study of the Curonian Spit

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1 Landscape Management and Human Ecology

The Curonian Spit is a unique cultural landscape – an elongated “finger of sand” of about 98 kilometers, separating the Baltic Sea from the Curonian Lagoon (Figure 1) – which received World Heritage status in 2000. Its unique character is the result of human intervention into natural processes of geomorphological change. The southern part of the Curonian Spit, 46 kilometers long, belongs to the Ze- lenogradsk District of the Kaliningradskaya Oblast, which is part of the Russian Federation. Here, the Spit is connected with the mainland.

The northern part, approximately 52 kilometers long, belongs to the Republic of Lithuania. This northern part is administered by the Municipality of Neringa, formed from the four villages of Nida, Juodkrantė, Preila, and Pervalka with some 3,400 inhabitants, and the City and Municipality of Klaipėda, of which the village of Smyltinė near the tip of the Spit, with about 100 inhabitants, is a suburb. Both areas together make up the Kuršių Nerija National Park, established in 1991. On the Russian side, the Kurshskaya Kosa National Park was established in 1986; it encloses the villages of Rybachy, Lesnoye and Morskoye, with a combined population of about 1,530, but the villages are not formally part of the national park. Nearly a third of registered inhabitants on the Lithuanian side are using their homes on the Curonian Spit primarily as second homes, and thus the number of full-time residents is actually much lower than statistics suggest. The Kuršių Nerija National Park comprises 26,461 hectares, of which 9,761 hectares are land; the
remainder covers the adjacent waters of the Baltic Sea and the Curonian Lagoon, including the coast of Šilute District. The Kurshskaya Kosa National Park covers some 16,421 hectares, of which 6,621 hectares are land.

Along the entire length of the Baltic Sea side of the Spit runs a sandy beach, accompanied by an engineered protective dune. On the eastern side, towards the Curonian Lagoon, a range of higher dunes stretches for some 72 kilometers, rising to nearly 70 meters, and in some locations a littoral plain extends along the shore. The width of the Spit varies from less than 400 meters near Lesnoye, to almost four kilometers at the Cape of Bulvikis, and covers a territory of some 180 square kilometers. Nowadays more than 70 percent of the Spit is covered by forests, with varieties of pine dominating the landscape. The protection of this environment in its present form raises broader issues of landscape management and human ecology, not least the questions of whether, to what extent and at what cost the envi-
In 2000, the year the Curonian Spit received UNESCO World Heritage status, the European Landscape Convention (ELC) was launched by the Council of Europe as the first supra-national instrument devoted to the protection, management and planning of all the landscapes of Europe. This convention does not merely add yet another type of heritage to the catalogue, but offers a fresh outlook by emphasizing the cultural significance and societal value of landscape across different contexts while leaving actual policies, methods, and procedures of implementation to individual countries that have ratified it. In the convention’s preamble, its signatories sum up this new approach, stating that landscape has “an important public interest role in the cultural, ecological, environmental and social fields, and constitutes a resource favorable to economic activity and whose protection, management and planning can contribute to job creation.” It “contributes to the formation of local cultures and is a basic component of the European natural and cultural heritage, contributing to human well-being and consolidation of the European identity.” Landscape is “an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere: in urban areas and in the countryside, in degraded areas as well as in areas of high quality, in areas recognized as being of outstanding beauty as well as everyday areas.” This makes landscape “a key element of individual and social well-being and [...] its protection, management and planning entails rights and responsibilities for everyone” (Council of Europe 2000).

For anthropologists, cultural heritage is primarily a cultural construction that happens in the present and refers to the past (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, Peleikis 2006b). Such constructions of heritage can be described against the background of changing national attachments (Peleikis 2008). Landscape, as defined by the ELC, is such a construction, but it is also material reality with substantive impacts on, and thus relevance for, people’s everyday lives and well-being. Historically the most northerly part of successive Germanic polities since the Middle Ages, the Curonian Spit has in the course of the 20th century changed hands several times, and is currently divided between the Republic of Lithuania and Kaliningradskaya Oblast, which forms part of the Russian Federation. A military restriction zone during the Cold War, the Oblast now seeks to develop tourism, with the unique landscape of the Spit viewed as a major asset. On the Lithuanian side, too, tourism development is an important strategy, building also on the artists’ colony at Nida and the legacy of the German-Baltic ethnic frontier as heritage resources. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, already existing differences in the approach to the landscape on either side of the Russian-Lithuanian border were exacerbated, and Lithuania’s EU membership has created further complexities. While the physical frailty of the cultural landscape has been well recognized on both sides of the current border, political and practical responses have differed markedly. The present essay is a first attempt to survey the present situation in terms of a human ecological perspective on cultural heritage and belonging (see Kockel 2012), drawing on
an initial period of fieldwork in the Lithuanian part of the region, informed by a recent comprehensive study of governance in the two national parks involved (Albrecht 2008), as well as a range of UNESCO documents and secondary sources.

2 The State and the Curonian Spit

Historically, the Curonian Spit in its entirety was for a long time governed by a single authority, the Prussian state. In Prussian times, the protection of the environment started in 1908 with legislation against non-traditional buildings and other impacts on the landscape; thus a set of protective measures has already been in place for over a century. The northern area of the Curonian Spit became a part of Lithuania in 1923. In 1939, the Spit, as part of the Memelland, came under German rule again, but was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1945. From that point on, although the Spit belonged to the same state until Lithuania gained independence in 1990, the two parts were managed separately. Kavaliauskas (2010: 69) contends that already

in the Soviet years, the status of environment protection and formation of cultural landscape in the Lithuanian part of the spit traditionally was considerably better. Even the development plans for the National Park “Kurshskaja Kosa” were worked out following the Lithuanian standards and in close cooperation with the Lithuanian experts.

Moreover, according to Kavaliauskas there is a distinctly different attitude to planning and environmental management in the two jurisdictions, to the extent that “projects regarded as absolutely unacceptable, impermissible and harmful in the Lithuanian part of the spit are rather easily realized in the southern part without any fear to lose the status of the site of World Heritage,” for example, “new recreational constructions on the sea shore (Šarkuva/Lesnoje), radical reconstruction of older buildings (Rasytė/Rybatchij), intensive construction of new recreational buildings (Pilkopa/Morskoje), etc” (Kavaliauskas 2010: 69).

The wider Klaipėda region and Kaliningradskaya Oblast are participating in activities associated with the Euroregion Baltija, established in 1998 by representatives of Lithuania, Denmark, Poland, Latvia, Russia, and Sweden. The Euroregion agreement provided a platform for joint projects in a range of fields including environmental protection and tourism, although progress has been slow and it has been noted since that “the nascent Russian-Baltic Euroregions lack substance” (Kononenko 2005: 25). Initiatives for incorporation of the Curonian Spit into the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) were already under way, and on May 7–8, 1998, the final declaration of an international conference recommended that the Republic of Lithuania and the Russian Federation submit a joint application to that effect. The application recommended that the Spit be “considered an area of natu-
eral and cultural value” (Lopata and Sirutavičius 1999: 7). Accordingly, in 1999, both national parks, supported by both national governments and a number of NGOs, prepared a joint nomination for the Curonian Spit to be included in the WHL as a site of outstanding features according to several UNESCO criteria (Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO 1999), and in 2000, the Spit was finally inscribed on that list as cultural heritage under criterion C v, characterized as

an outstanding example of a landscape of sand dunes that is under constant threat from natural forces (wind and tide). After disastrous human interventions that menaced its survival the Spit was reclaimed by massive protection and stabilization works begun in the 19th century and still continuing to the present day. (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2000)

This process nominally united the two parts of the Spit once again as a single entity, although there are no policy tools for enforcing unified management structures or even only approaches, and despite repeated attempts to facilitate such integration, not least following UNESCO pressure since 2005 to devise a detailed management plan, progress has been slow. Following inscription of the Curonian Spit on the WHL, Lithuania signed up to the European Landscape Convention (ELC) in October 2000, ratifying it in April 2002. The ELC, which “promotes the protection, management and planning of European landscapes and organizes European co-operation on landscape issues” (Council of Europe 2000), entered into force on March 1, 2004, after ten signatories had ratified it; the Russian Federation has yet to sign up to this treaty. Moreover, the situation of the Curonian Spit has become more complex since Lithuania joined the European Union (EU) in 2004 and has had to adapt to EU environmental policy regulations and projects such as Natura 2000 (Keilbach 2006: 7), designed to protect the most valuable wildlife areas in Europe. The Baltic States had woven the planning and implementation of these measures into their preparations for EU accession. This effectively gave them an edge over many of the older member states, which are struggling with the EU’s ambitious environmental policy. In the Baltic States, “whole teams were created to work on the legislative approximation process and, because new laws need to be enacted, the Baltic States chose verbatim transposition and implementation of EU laws” (Keilbach 2006: 8).

The political category of “the state” can refer to any one of a number of levels, from the local to the supra-national, and in practice “the state” refers to a combination of levels and factors as they affect a particular constellation. Theories of multilevel governance, frequently applied in analyzing such constellations, distinguish co-operation networks in terms of a “vertical dimension” and a “horizontal dimension” (Paraskevopoulos 2006: 6). The former refers to co-operation between stakeholders from different levels of authority, for example, between local actors and a state government, whereas the latter refers to co-operation on a comparable level, for example, between local government and other local public agencies. EU
integration, to some extent, opens up formerly fixed national structures to facilitate a range of multilevel governance relations; the degree of progress with these structural changes depends on the learning ability of national governments, thus determining the success or failure of EU policy (Paraskevopoulos 2006). For Lithuania, these adaptations are also affecting relations with the non-EU part, the Russian side, of the Curonian Spit, where the interplay and interaction between local, national and international levels appears to be characterized by a considerable level of confusion, and accompanied by a somewhat condescending attitude of protagonists on both sides towards one another. This may be a reflection of the very different perspectives that Russia and the EU seem to have with regard to how cross-border co-operation should be organized (cf. Kononenko 2005).

Co-operation and communication between stakeholders in the Kuršių Nerija, as in other protected areas of Lithuania, is increasingly seen as important:

The new age presents us with new opportunities that can help with the conservation of our most valuable territories. Their management is becoming less centralized, information and education is becoming publicly available, and society is being given the chance to participate in the planning and decision making process. (Baskyte et al. 2006: 322)

However, beyond the rhetoric, evidence of notably improved communication between stakeholders or other forms of local community involvement in protected areas remains sparse. The frequently overlapping responsibilities due to poorly defined structures of responsibility between local authorities and other administrative bodies, and a perception of policy of protected area administrations as consisting primarily of restrictions, which leads to conflicts between these administrations and local communities are particularly problematic. The Kuršių Nerija participated in research evaluating the relationships between local inhabitants, especially entrepreneurs, and governmental and non-governmental authorities towards its administrative practice to identify problems in relation to communication. The study formed part of an international EU-funded program on “Coastal Sustainability as a Challenge” (Grönholm and Berghäll 2007). According to the data presented in that report, over 80 percent of local entrepreneurs in Kuršių Nerija claim co-operation with the National Park administration as non-existent. Moreover, only 37 percent of other stakeholders report organized co-operation, mostly in the form of information rather than joint activities. However, 83 percent of the Kuršių Nerija personnel mention examples of co-operation other than the mere exchange of information (Grönholm and Berghäll 2007: 29). Some 58 percent of local inhabitants, and indeed 88 percent of local entrepreneurs, see the restrictions imposed by the Kuršių Nerija administration in a negative light (Grönholm and Berghäll 2007: 70). Judging by these statistics, co-operation between stakeholders is low. This contradicts the observation of increased support for protected areas by local stakeholders, noted by Baskyte et al. (2006: 325).
3 Aspects of Implementation

The Kuršių Nerija and Kurshskaya Kosa both fall under the responsibility of their respective government ministry for environmental affairs. In Lithuania, the Ministry of the Environment (MoE) has a Protected Area Strategy Division, charged with developing laws and regulations for the protection of natural heritage in Lithuania. The agency responsible for implementation of any conservation-related policies is the State Service for Protected Areas (SSPA; Baskyte et al. 2006: 28). This Service controls environmental protection measures and activities in Lithuania’s four national parks. Furthermore, the SSPA is responsible for managing protected areas, assigns administrations to individual areas and implements planning decisions (Baskyte et al. 2006: 28f.). In theory, therefore, the Kuršių Nerija follows the directions of the SSPA.

In the case of the Kurshskaya Kosa, the Russian Federation Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) has overall responsibility (Oldfield 2005: 83). The MNR develops and implements legislation with regard to protected areas and conservation, which are managed by a state service subordinated to the ministry. The Natural Resources Management Service (NRMS) implements legislation introduced by the MNR. Unlike the Lithuanian SSPA, which has a more local–regional policy remit, its duties are limited to areas considered of federal significance (Baskyte et al. 2006: 28).

3.1 Stakeholders

A wide range of stakeholders are at play on the Curonian Spit (Figure 2): Different government bodies; other public as well as private and voluntary organizations; and, indeed, interested individuals. Among the main stakeholders at a national level are the state institutions, such as the MoE and MNR, with their respective state services, the SSPA and NRMS, as primary institutions with the power of legislation and implementation. A number of further stakeholders with legal powers exist on both sides of the border.
On the Lithuanian side, these are the municipalities of Neringa and Klaipėda, and the regional offices of national agencies, the Cultural Heritage Department and the Environmental Protection Department, both based at Klaipėda, as well as the state forest service. All of these state services are subordinated to the MoE. In the Kuršių Nerija, unlike elsewhere in Lithuania, responsibility for the state forests lies with the national park administration. On the Russian side, bodies comparable to the regional offices in Lithuania are absent and local government functions differently. Zelenogradsk District’s role is not the same as that of Neringa Municipality because its settlements are not included in the Kurshskaya Kosa’s territorial definition and remit. Due to these differences in territorial governance, the local population in the Kurshskaya Kosa area is less involved with and affected by the management of the national park than the population in the Kuršių Nerija, which is directly affected in its everyday life by decisions made in the interest of the national park management.

Other authorities that play an insignificant part in Lithuania have a major role to play in the management of Kurshskaya Kosa. The border guards are one example. Whereas in Lithuania they are almost invisible, in Kaliningradskaya Oblast the service effectively controls the area along the Russian–Lithuanian border to a depth of two kilometers. Another stakeholder whose role and influence is likely to be significant in future years is the Ministry for Economic Development and Trade of the Russian Federation, which has been planning a large-scale tourist development on the Curonian Spit, although this particular project had to be abandoned under
pressure from the Lithuanian government and UNESCO (Ostpreußenblatt 2011), at least for the time being.

Among the international stakeholders, UNESCO clearly has a dominant role as the institution that controls the World Heritage List. A second key stakeholder is the EU, with various policies and environmental directives that Lithuania is expected to follow. While EU influence extends to both Kuršių Nerija and Kurshskaya Kosa, it is obviously much stronger on the former as long as Kaliningradskaya Oblast remains outside the EU. The EU offers project funding under a number of schemes, such as TACIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States) and INTERREG, which shape initiatives in border regions such as the Curonian Spit (Kennard 2010). Various NGOs, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or Greenpeace, are involved in such projects, and Greenpeace Russia was involved in the World Heritage List nomination of the Curonian Spit. However, these NGOs are not considered important partners when it comes to managing the World Heritage Site.

The “stake” foreign tourists and companies hold in the Curonian Spit relates primarily to having particular standards and expectations which the World Heritage Site is supposed to meet, and this has an obvious influence on the managers in charge of the national parks. The number of foreign and local tourists differs significantly between the Kuršių Nerija and the Kurshskaya Kosa, which has considerably smaller numbers of especially foreign visitors.

3.2 Co-operations and Constellations

Co-operation between the Kuršių Nerija and the Kurshskaya Kosa commenced in 1997–98. The chief reason was the nomination of the Curonian Spit as a UNESCO World Heritage Site straddling the border between the two jurisdictions (Kvietkus 2005: 59f.). Albertas Kvietkus, former Deputy Director for Natural and Cultural Heritage at the Kuršių Nerija, outlines the key stages of co-operation between the two administrations over the period 1998–2004. The co-operation agreement between the Kuršių Nerija and the Kurshskaya Kosa of May 1, 1998 is identified as the first stage. The agreement set out measures for a joint action required to meet the standards of a World Heritage Site, especially collaborative research and the safeguarding of human-made heritage landscape features. Through staff training and the provision of information for visitors, the image of a unified territory and full communication with stakeholders at all levels was being projected. The second stage, between 1998 and 2000, was the preparation of the nomination document (Kvietkus 2005: 60), with applications for joint projects under INTERREG and TACIS forming the third stage (1999–2004), and the fourth stage was envisaged as full-blown co-operation between administrators and specialists of Kuršių Nerija and Kurshskaya Kosa, in accordance with the co-operation agreement (Kvietkus 2005: 61).
There have been few agreements at state level concerning governance or development of the Curonian Spit, although the Lithuanian Ministry of Environment had declared this as its primary aim for international co-operation during the period 2005–2007 (Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania 2005). The only major agreement related to a joint environmental impact assessment of a Russian oil rig located 22 kilometers off the Curonian Spit (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2005b).

Some stakeholders have been involved in active conflict in both national parks. The conflicts in the Kuršių Nerija have been between the national park administration, Neringa Municipality and local inhabitants or their representatives. The Kurshskaya Kosa has seen different conflicts between the authorities of the three settlements and wealthy entrepreneurs, supported by their political connections, who are building illegal residences (Russland aktuell 2007). In both cases, a key issue is the desire of the local authorities to expand the areas available to them for further construction and to improve tourist infrastructure. The conflicts in Lithuania are mainly clashes of opinion over interpretations of the specific points in the law, whereas in the Kurshskaya Kosa, strictly illegal building work, both within and outside the settlements and even in the protected dunes, is a major problem.

A related issue arises over the further development of existing settlements. Private building plans must be approved by the municipality in accordance with their socioeconomic policies and goals, and Neringa municipality has occasionally approved proposals that have later been turned down by the Kuršių Nerija administration. Both bodies are charged with agreeing joint general development plans, but the process is fraught as the question of legal superiority has not been sufficiently clarified.

In the Kurshskaya Kosa, the lack of a general planning document means disputes often end up in court, especially where illegal construction is concerned. The national park administration frequently comes into conflict with Zelenogradsk District over the issue of tourist infrastructure. The situation of the settlements, which remain outside the remit of Kurshskaya Kosa, continues to be problematic. Interestingly, the Kuršių Nerija’s Deputy Director for Economic and Forestry Development, Viktoras Kolokšanskis, sees most of the conflicts in the Kuršių Nerija as due to the fact that the settlements are within the national park area and managerial remit.

Co-operation between the Kuršių Nerija and Neringa has been hampered by conflicting sets of aims and objectives. Whereas Neringa, as a municipality, has to look after the local inhabitants, Kuršių Nerija deals with natural and cultural heritage. One issue raised by Kuršių Nerija staff is the absence of local people involved in the original culture of the region. The Curonian Spit was resettled with new inhabitants after the Second World War, so that
most of the adult inhabitants living on the spit are in the first generation and the community’s common collective memory of the region only reaches back 50 years. Local identity has no roots in the history and culture of the spit. This lack of identification with the surrounding cultural landscape reinforces the [...] negative tendencies of regional development, especially at the social level. (Pluhařova-Grigiene 2006: 4)

Arguably, these new locals lack a real understanding of the cultural and natural heritage and values around them – a point I will pick up again toward the end of this discussion.

While Neringa officials may accuse Kuršių Nerija staff of acting contrary to local needs, staff of the Kuršių Nerija sometimes see local inhabitants as being interested only in quick income, careless about tradition and heritage, and unsupportive of the Kuršių Nerija administration’s attempts to develop sustainable tourism.

With regard to co-operation, the Kuršių Nerija staff mentioned the agreement of 1998, but this seems to have had little practical effect in terms of engendering co-operation between the two administrations. The World Heritage Committee, in its Decision 34COM7B.91 regarding the state of conservation of the Curonian Spit, had requested the Russian Federation and Lithuania to invite a World Heritage Centre–ICOMOS–IUCN monitoring mission, and to review their draft Statement of Outstanding Universal Value for the property. A joint report on the state of conservation on the Spit and implementation of the various actions requested was due to be submitted to the World Heritage Centre by February 1, 2011, for examination by the World Heritage Committee at its 35th session (UNESCO World Heritage Committee 2010). The visit of the monitoring mission to both parts of the Curonian Spit took place in December 2010 (Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO 2011). At the time of writing, Kuršių Nerija staff were still drafting the joint “Statement of Outstanding Universal Value of the Curonian Spit,” but there had been limited input from the Russian side.

The main co-operative activity both administrations appear to engage in regularly is the exchange of information. The two administrations also support a scientific co-operation project, and co-operative meetings have been increasing. However, the two administrations entertain different priorities with regard to co-operative efforts; whereas the Kurshskaya Kosa favors development of a unified tourist information system, the Kuršių Nerija seeks broader co-operation and mutual learning. Kuršių Nerija staff, for example, holds the ecological education activities of Kurshskaya Kosa in high regard and would like to improve their own provision through co-operative ventures, offering, in turn, to support their colleagues at Kurshskaya Kosa in matters that may be of interest to them.

Since Lithuania is expected to comply with EU environmental policies and receives funding for this, the Lithuanian state has expected the Kurshskaya Kosa to apply the same standards in the context of the cross-border UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, there have been political and administrative obstacles to this.
Co-operation projects, such as a tourist boat line between Klaipėda and Rybachy, for example, could not be developed despite the availability of EU funding, owing to the Russian Federation’s regulations concerning border controls for sea traffic. While the UNESCO World Heritage Centre has highlighted the demand for joint planning schemes in its Annual Reports, there does not seem to be much pressure by UNESCO to implement more co-operative ventures. An exception to this has been the environmental impact assessment which UNESCO required, in response to an initiative by the Lithuanian government, in order to keep the Curonian Spit off the List of World Heritage in Danger (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2005b).

Vertical as well as horizontal co-operation between the stakeholders at various levels is required to achieve multilevel governance (Paraskevopoulus 2006: 6). EU-funded projects are often required to involve different levels of authority. One such project was the aforementioned boat line between Klaipėda and Rybachy. This included the two national park administrations along with Kaliningradskaya Oblast, Zelenogradsk District and the municipalities of Klaipėda and Neringa, with Klaipėda being the lead partner. Moreover, Neringa Municipality co-operates with Zelenogradsk District under a long-term agreement involving local entrepreneurs in tourist development, and the Kuršių Nerija administration, for example, co-operates with the Kaliningrad-based NGO Ecodefense, and has organized school exchanges between Rybachy and Juodkrantė to engage children in the cleaning up and strengthening of dunes.

3.3 Economic Development

There has been a shift towards a greater focus on economic and social issues in the Kuršių Nerija. Since the municipality earns most of its revenue through tourism, developing the tourist business through unique recreational resources is of key importance. Settlements in the Kuršių Nerija are part of the national park, which is effectively divided into two distinct but overlapping spheres of managerial responsibility, unofficially described by Lina Dikšaitė, Deputy Director of Natural and Cultural Heritage as the “city zone,” managed by the Neringa and Klaipėda Municipalities, and the “forest zone,” managed by the Kuršių Nerija administration (interview, May 2, 2011). The overlap results from the existence of cultural protection areas in the settlements, and the municipalities support the Kuršių Nerija administration financially. Beyond this, the local population or community groups play no significant role in the management and governance of the Kuršių Nerija. The municipalities regard themselves as representing the people of the area, but the Kuršių Nerija does not see the local population as stakeholders responsible for management decisions of their own.

Since the Curonian Spit has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the World Heritage Committee (WHC) has published several reports on its regular meetings, containing recommendations and discussions concerning current
issues. At one such meeting, both states concerned with the Curonian Spit were asked to co-operate in a risk assessment of a Russian off-shore oil rig (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2002). Subsequently, Lithuania complained that the Russian Federation had failed to share information and was obstructing co-operation, while the Russian Federation insisted that all relevant information was readily available (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2003: 56). The World Heritage Committee then urged both states to make progress on the environmental impact assessment, cautioning the Russian Federation against commencing oil extraction before the required assessment had been carried out; the Committee also requested

a joint UNESCO/ICOMOS/IUCN mission to be undertaken to the site in full collaboration with the Russian and Lithuanian authorities, and a detailed report by the State Party of the Russian Federation to be prepared on the state of the project, by 1 February 2004, for examination by the 28th session of the World Heritage Committee. (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2003: 56)

The subsequent report noted efforts to improve the management of the site. Lithuania had by then requested that the Curonian Spit be added to the List of World Heritage in Danger, as Russia was proceeding with oil exploration and the environmental impact assessment remained outstanding. The World Heritage Committee responded with an ultimatum to both states to come to an agreement by the committee’s next meeting (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2004). Under pressure, the two governments finally managed to communicate on the environmental impact assessment and a number of other common projects, and the Curonian Spit was saved from inclusion on the List of World Heritage in Danger (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2005a: 91), but the committee requested a detailed report on progress with co-operation between the two national parks, as well as jointly-prepared documentation on the current state of the property, for its next session (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2005a: 91). The 2006 report of the committee noted that the required joint documentation had not been submitted, and the two states were given an extension until February 2007 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2006: 220). This episode reflects the slow progress towards co-operation at state level and the persistent need for UNESCO, through the World Heritage Committee, to seek compliance with agreements by exerting international pressure. Lithuania quasi forced the committee to act by nominating one of their designated heritage sites for the List of World Heritage in Danger. This indicates greater willingness to co-operate on the part of Lithuanian state authorities, compared to their Russian counterparts, at least in this instance.
3.4 Culture vs. Nature

The differences in the development directions and priorities between the two national parks need to be kept in mind with regard to natural and cultural heritage. Problems of natural heritage exist, with dune erosion being an issue on both sides of the border. The Kurshskaya Kosa sees the problem as a minor one that can be managed, whereas Kuršių Nerija staff express concern about different problems related to the dunes that need to be tackled urgently, in particular the natural succession of grey dunes, and the coastal erosion on the shores of both the Baltic Sea and the Curonian Lagoon. The Kuršių Nerija staff sees no solution to this problem and believe it is only a matter of time until the grey dunes disappear. With good management, they hope to delay this process for as long as possible. Further to the landscape impact of natural forces, the negative impact of tourist developments can be noted. Obviously, the much higher number of visitors in the Kuršių Nerija, compared to the Kurshskaya Kosa, causes considerable pressure there. A related concern is the danger of forest fires potentially ignited by a discarded cigarette or an illegal camp fire. Coniferous forests dry out in summertime and the risk of fires is high; the big fire of 2006, for example, devastated some 230 hectares of forest and shrubs.

Natural problems have little regard for human boundaries; problems of cultural heritage seem, however, to be non-existent on the Russian part of the Spit. Traditional buildings tend to be in poor condition, or have been restored in a non-traditional manner. Cultural heritage in the Kurshskaya Kosa exists today primarily in the form of the cultural landscape, and the strategic impetus for its consistent management appears to be lacking, whether for want of resources or due to other, more systemic, cultural reasons, as some Lithuanian observers suspect: “The reality of the Kaliningrad oblast is that strategies will never be clear, always chaotic” (Lopata and Sirutavičius 1999: 9).

The Kuršių Nerija, in contrast, has strict regulations concerning traditional buildings, and maintains a more or less “authentic” atmosphere, although critics note that most of the “traditional” houses are in fact copies and can only barely be considered traditional. Nevertheless, protecting and preserving this cultural heritage is a major concern for the Kuršių Nerija. Given a relative paucity of traditional buildings on the Russian side, it is surprising that UNESCO seems to have taken little notice of the discrepancy, and there is no reference to the problem in any of the World Heritage Committee reports.

As a historical cultural landscape straddling a multifaceted international border – one that separates an EU from a non-EU member state, a former Soviet republic from its one-time superpower, and the northern tip from the rest of a once German province – the Spit is exposed to multiple stakeholder interests that try to navigate the parameters established by bodies such as UNESCO, and frameworks such as the European Landscape Convention, that seek to regulate heritage. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee, at its 2010 meeting in Brasilia (UNESCO
World Heritage Committee 2010), chastised the Kaliningradskaya Oblast for its ambitious plans to develop tourism on the Russian part of the Curonian Spit. The threat of the Spit’s inclusion on the Danger List, averted in 2005 after assurances were given by both governments with regard to off-shore oil production in the region, was back on the horizon, although this now seems to have been averted once more (Ostpreußenblatt 2011).

The genesis of different visions of heritage and their utilization for the purposes of national identity formation is an issue that cannot be explored in depth here, given the focus of the essay on more technical questions, but some observations should be noted. Anja Peleikis has studied the local context extensively, especially on the Lithuanian side, for a number of years (Peleikis 2006a, 2006b, 2008). Her work highlights different heritage discourses at the grass-roots level that have significance for the present topic even if the groups involved are not among the most potent stakeholders and their influence is felt rather indirectly. In both parts of the Curonian Spit, the majority of the normally resident population are immigrants from other parts of the jurisdiction (or former jurisdiction), who have often come to their new home from a considerable distance. Hence the sense of rootedness and ownership of whatever cultural heritage outside agencies, including one’s own state government, may perceive in the locality is generally limited. Having not yet carried out fieldwork in Kaliningradskaya Oblast, I can only comment here on the Lithuanian part of the Spit. In this region, there appears to be an intriguing process – or rather, a set of processes – of re-rooting at work, involving a handful of very different groups. One of these are returning refugees and expellees who left the Memelland at the end of the Second World War and who, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, have been returning to their former homeland, mainly to reconnect with their memories and a particular construction of what constitutes “their” heritage. Most of these are ethnically German, although there are also ethnic Lithuanians among this group, exiled during the Nazi or Soviet periods. Another group are internal migrants from different parts of Lithuania who have settled on the Curonian Spit since 1945. Many of these take a keen interest in a cultural heritage that was not theirs until they came here, but which they are now trying to appropriate in a respectful manner. There is little or no precedence for such cultural practice and many analysts would be quick to point out the constructedness of it all. While acknowledging that they do have a point, I have discussed elsewhere (e.g. Kockel 2012) why I am not inclined to follow their analysis. Peleikis (2008) has argued that what we are witnessing here are discourses of cultural property rights that relate to different epochs, and which, therefore, can co-exist in relative peace. In formal, legal terms, local and national actors have the power of definition over the locality and any heritage representations connected with it. However, as Peleikis points out, tourists – including cultural heritage tourists – are a major source of income and the Spit depends on this income. Therefore, German lieux de mémoire are acceptable if they bring tourists to the region. This means, however, that the same places may be interpreted entirely differently by different groups, and different
heritage representations may exist side by side. Peleikis wonders whether, in time, these might be replaced by a common European heritage discourse. Such a common discourse is, arguably, already emerging, although the range of “commonality” depends largely on where and how one draws the boundaries of “Europe” (Kockel 2010). There is a certain postmodern cosmopolitanism that regards the existence side-by-side of sometimes highly divergent heritage claims as evidence of a new “European” heritage discourse transcending the old animosities between different peoples sharing the European space. Ideas of mutual tolerance, underlying a vision of “unity in diversity,” are evident in this interpretation. On the Curonian Spit and in many other border regions, stakeholders frequently include groups who may have historical roots but no contemporary basis in the region. The challenge of creating a shared European heritage discourse is all too often perceived rather restrictively in terms of metanarratives – primarily that of reconciling the European credentials of the three monothestic religions. At the local, everyday level, a “European” heritage discourse is conceivable but likely to remain, at least for some time, a matter of practical negotiation and largely pragmatic circumnavigation of the obstructions created by different local, regional and national actors. However, as opportunities for interregional networking and experience exchange increase, the interpretations by different groups of their historical and environmental circumstances as singular may well be expected to shift towards shared narratives, out of which a common heritage discourse may, in time, emerge.

4 Summary and Conclusion

This essay is a first attempt to compare and contrast approaches to landscape conservation in the two jurisdictions sharing – at least nominally – a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A particular emphasis has been on aspects of cultural import, and raising some questions for ethnographic research.

The SSPA sets the framework for management and decision-making for the Kuršių Nerija. Thus the national park’s general management plan is shaped primarily by a national authority. Moreover, the local municipalities, as stakeholders in the planning process, but often overruled by the Kuršių Nerija administration, are not always able to affect the situation of their inhabitants and other public stakeholders to the extent and in the ways they would like. There is a division of responsibilities between the Kuršių Nerija administration and Neringa and Klaipėda municipalities as the main players at a local level, with a large set of bodies representing other stakeholders. However, there is also on-going tension between Neringa municipality and the National Environmental Protection Agency, which constitutes a serious obstacle in finding best land management solutions. In the current situation, it would be best to return to the integrated planning of the Curonian Spit. […] It is necessary to reach closer cooperation with the admin-
The Russian part has been divided into three administrative zones, with the settlements and the restricted border area taken out of the remit of the national park management and each of the three zones following its own planning directions. This makes the sustainable management of the World Heritage Site difficult. In the absence of appropriate legislation, and with the three settlements excluded from the protected area, local residents and newcomers show little or no interest in protective measures.

The border remains a major problem for the development of the region, not only because of the Russian customs regime, but also because of the EU’s reinforcement of border controls in the context of the Schengen Agreement, which creates conflicts with other EU policies. While external borders of EU member states were initially seen as channels for co-operation, following the 2004 EU enlargement “the prevailing discourse in the Baltic states tends to view the EU’s external border more cautiously as a line protecting the EU’s internal stability against external risks” (Kononenko 2005: 24). Moreover, as Kononenko (2005: 25) notes, “border regions have their own place in the border discourse. This is something that often tends to be overlooked if one focuses on such aspects of border regime as Schengen, visas, migration and so forth.” This wider significance of the Curonian Spit, not least as a multi-layered lieu de mémoire for different stakeholders, is only beginning to be explored in the work of Peleikis (2006a, b, 2008) and others.

It seems from the reports of the World Heritage Committee, corroborated by interviews with Lithuanian officials, that communications relating to the Curonian Spit are primarily conducted by the SSPA and the NRMS with UNESCO rather than directly with each other, and the lack of motivation on the Russian side, as noted in those reports (2003, 2004, 2005a), appears to have been a major impediment to the establishment of common management structures and procedures. At the time of writing, there are on-going discussions on the Russian side with regard to the new recreational zoning, with conflicting signals being sent across the border concerning the progress with or rejection of specific proposals, such as the large-scale tourism development mentioned above (4.1). A meeting between the main stakeholders on both sides of the border to discuss cross-border co-operation concerning issues raised by UNESCO was due to take place at Nida in late 2011.
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5 References


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UNESCO World Heritage Nomination Curonian Spit (1999)