

CHAPTER 2

ASSESSMENT AND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the methodology used to establish the significance of Robben Island World Heritage Site (RIWHS) and includes a discussion on the different heritage values associated with the site, and the significance and grading of various landscapes on the site. The chapter concludes with the Statement of Significance which was informed by the assessment of significance.

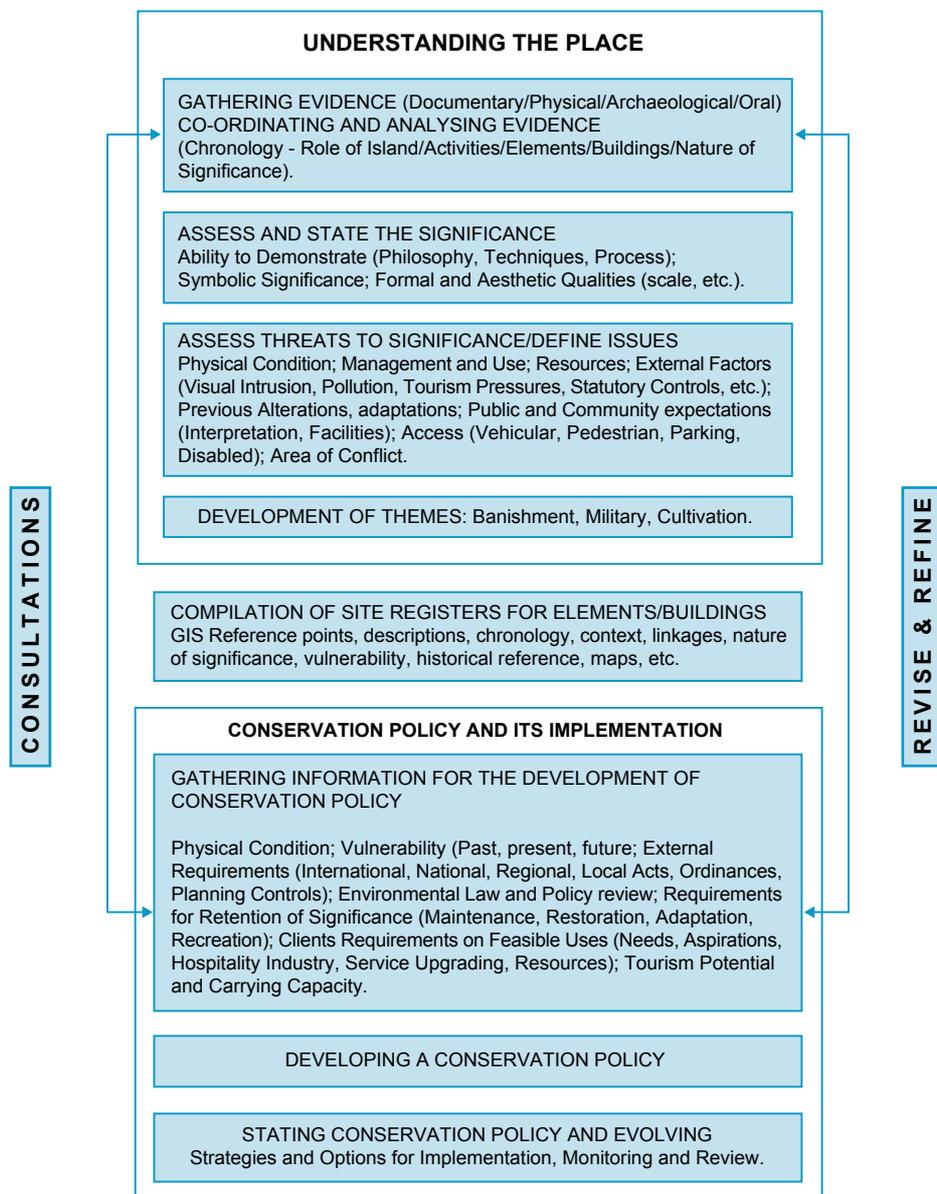
THE METHODOLOGY USED TO ESTABLISH SIGNIFICANCE

Heritage significance may be embodied in the following:

- In the physical or tangible fabric of a site, for example, in its buildings, burial places and landscape; or
- In the intangible significance of the site, which is related to the values of the site, the records of the site, its former or current use, associations, and the meanings that the site may have to the people for whom it is important.

The diagram below gives an outline of the process used to assess the significance of the heritage resources of the Island.

The process used to assess the significance of Robben Island



Significance of Intangible Heritage

As a site of memory, intangible heritage plays a major role in the assessment of significance of the sites on Robben Island. The Conservation and Land Use Plan¹ compiled in 2000/2001 summarises the significance of the intangible heritage as follows:

Robben Island is of cultural significance because of the social, historical, symbolic, experiential, sensory and recreational values that are associated with it. Its significance is derived from historical use that has included the exercising of political power, social control and resistance. The island has acquired a universal symbolism because of the people and events associated with it. It has also assumed symbolic significance in terms of human suffering and transformation.

Furthermore, it has derived significance from its physical setting and the physical elements that make up its fabric. The various precincts, landscapes as well as individual buildings of different historical periods also contribute towards its significance. It is the interaction between these elements and associations that create a less tangible but equally important impression of the island as being:

- A sacred place
- A place of melancholy and austerity
- A place of continuity and discontinuity
- An imposed rather than a spontaneous landscape
- A dramatic island location enfolded in Table Bay, and
- A place of commemoration and learning and hope.

The above summary highlights the importance of its intangible heritage, that has become the essence of the approach to conservation on Robben Island and that lies at the core of the ICMP.

Statutory Framework for Assessing Significance

The assessment of Robben Island's significance has further been informed by the criteria contained within the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999. (S 3.3) These may be summarised as:

- Its importance in the community, or pattern of South Africa's history;
- Its possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of South Africa's cultural or natural heritage;
- Its potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of South Africa's cultural or natural heritage;
- Its importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class of South Africa's cultural or natural places or objects;
- Its importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group;
- Its importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period;
- Its strong or special association with a particular

community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons;

- Its strong or special association with the life or work of a person, group or organisation of importance in the history of South Africa;
- Sites of significance relating to the history of slavery in South Africa.

Heritage Values Associated with Robben Island

An understanding of the different values attributed to RIWHS is the key to assessing the significance of the site. These values include the following:

Historical value

The historical and associative value of Robben Island is reflected in both the tangible and intangible heritage, which arise out of events and historical or cultural phases that have had a significant role in human occupation and evolution of the WHS. Through historical research and critical interpretation these two forms of heritage can be drawn together.

The intangible significance is held in memories, as well as in places of significance within the landscape that presently do not show any physical evidence. Except for brief periods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all previous political regimes in South Africa used Robben Island as a place of banishment and imprisonment, from 1657 to 1996. Hence the strongest associative value of Robben Island is that which is linked to banishment and imprisonment, and includes:

- Dutch VOC officials of the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* in the Cape banished Khoikhoi leader, Autshumato, to Robben Island in 1657 and used the Island as a site of hard labour. Their counterparts in the East Indies also banished religious and political leaders to Robben Island. In both cases these banishments were used to remove indigenous political influences and threats to Dutch expansionism in the regions concerned.
- During this period, the Island is also associated with slavery, with slaves in the Cape being sentenced to work in chains on Robben Island either because they resisted the authority of their masters or for various criminal acts.
- Prisoners in this era were subjected to severe beatings and other forms of torture, near-starvation and extreme hard labour. The Dutch Fort, The Castle in Cape Town, constructed from Robben Island quarry stone, is a tangible outcome of this prison labour.
- The British government continued using Robben Island as a prison when they took over the Cape from the Dutch in 1806. Convict labour was used to build the Garrison Church and the Faure Jetty on Robben Island, among various other buildings.
- In 1960 the apartheid government established a Maximum Security Prison (MSP) on Robben Island for common law prisoners and political prisoners. Hard labour became a feature of Robben Island

imprisonment during the 1960s and 1970s. Political and common law prison labour resulted in the building of the MSP itself and various other constructions on the Island.

- The significance of the tangible can be found in the many historical buildings, including among others, the Church of the Good Shepherd, the Garrison Church, the Female Asylum and the Medical Superintendent's House, which through historical interpretation can be linked to the period of the General Infirmary on the Island from 1846 to 1931. The MSP embodies the tangible significance directly linked with the period of political imprisonment from 1962 to 1991, and again links to the oral testimonies of resistance and activism by political prisoners.
- The significance of this combined heritage is guided by the themes of banishment, isolation and, most importantly, resistance that recur throughout the multi-layered history of the Island. Through ongoing historical research at the Museum, continuous affirmation of critical analysis based on reading of the past is required.

Social value (symbolic, spiritual, sacred value)

Social values are essential reference points or symbols for communities' identities. Given Robben Island's historic use and the events and people associated with it, it has acquired a universal symbolism in terms of human oppression, resistance and transformation. It is also associated with values of the restoration of human dignity and pilgrimage. Robben Island's social values are manifest in all aspects of its cultural and natural environment – the tangible and the memories and associations embedded in this environment. These include the following:

- Robben Island's symbolic value, internationally and nationally, lies in the ultimate triumph of the liberation and anti-apartheid struggle over colonialism and apartheid.
- Robben Island has attained the status of a place of inspiration and a spiritual site of reflection due to the struggle and eventual victory over oppression.
- Robben Island's spiritual significance is constituted by the tangible and intangible heritage of the site.
- The presence of sacred sites further enhance its symbolic value as a site of spirituality and pilgrimage.
- Hundreds of marked and unmarked graves dating across centuries bear testimony to those people who died on Robben Island. A number of political prisoners died during their incarceration and, in some cases, their remains were never returned to their relatives. This heightens Robben Island's symbolic value as a site of loss and trauma.
- Through the efforts of political prisoners to engage in political and formal education in prison between 1962 and 1991, Robben Island is acknowledged as a centre of lifelong learning. Its role as a heritage site, museum and educational institution reinforces this symbolic association.
- Political prisoners were sustained by sharing their diverse cultural practices and languages, and in the process new cultural practices and language emerged.

Sports and recreational activities also played an important role in overcoming barriers of culture and ideology. The uniqueness of this approach in conditions of adversity has enhanced the symbolic value of reconciliation.

- Under harsh prison conditions, the Island became a site of struggle, and a political and educational training ground for freedom fighters. A range of experiences and different forms of resistance were generated against oppressive conditions, including engaging in political debates, discussions and practices. In these ways a new vision for a future society based on tolerance, respect and non-racialism was achieved, thereby providing a powerful symbol of triumph over adversity.
- As a place of incarceration for leaders and activists fighting the apartheid regime, Robben Island attracted international attention and galvanised the whole world in supporting the fight for liberation. This iconic role is of symbolic value today for those fighting against oppression and abuse of human rights elsewhere.

Place value

Robben Island's setting has enabled colonial authorities to dictate its use as a place of banishment and exile. The place value of Robben Island derives from the built and the natural, which physically embody and collectively bear testimony to the Island's layered symbolism. The following elements are material proof of the intangible value:

- Robben Island's architecture is a physical embodiment of its layered history, and its layered re-use of buildings.
- Robben Island demonstrates a landscape of extraction and insertion. During its long history of human habitation and use, much of the natural vegetation of the Island was destroyed. The alien fauna and flora introduced over time, form part of the complex construction of the Island as a cultural landscape.
- Robben Island's setting, views and vistas, sounds and smell have a strong impact on thoughts, feelings and attitudes.
- The evolution of the human footprint on the Island reflects various periods of occupation and use.
- The use of punishment and hard labour is reflected by the Island's numerous and varied quarries. This form of forced labour spans from the 1670s up to the 1970s.
- The historical use and its physical location have resulted in a myriad of interwoven linkages with, and routes between, other sites – including Cape Town, South Africa and across the world.

Educational value²

Robben Island is described as the 'university of life' in that it became a crucible, in which strategies for a future society based on tolerance, respect and non-racialism were nurtured and implemented. Its educational value is also seen in the following:

- The emphasis on education, on debate, and on lifelong learning is a testimony to the fight for justice and education, and is key to Robben Island's role as a heritage site and its human rights discourse.
- Robben Island's layered history, both tangible and intangible, provides a rich heritage resource for research. It provides an opportunity to explore the ways, means and methodologies used in the MSP to create, nurture and use knowledge.

Environmental value

Despite human impact, including construction of buildings and the introduction of alien plants and animals, the isolation of Robben Island from the mainland, has ensured its place as a haven of bird species and created an opportunity for numerous species of fauna to evolve separately. The Island has therefore remained an important place of environmental significance for the following reasons:

- Introduced plants and animals contribute visually to the rich fabric of the cultural and natural landscape. The Island is of international importance to the conservation of birdlife and qualifies as a wetland of international significance in terms of the Ramsar Convention of 1971.
- The Island is one of South Africa's most important breeding localities for sea birds and is currently home to 8 500 breeding pairs of African Penguins – the world's second largest colony of this vulnerable species.
- In addition to penguins, Robben Island supports some of South Africa's (and the world's) most important breeding colonies of Bank Cormorants, Crowned Cormorants and Hartlaub's Gulls – all species that are endemic to southern Africa. It further supports a growing population of African Black Oystercatchers, representing approximately 5 per cent of the global population of the species.
- Robben Island is the southern destination for several species of shorebirds that migrate annually from their breeding grounds in northern Europe.
- A number of mammal species including Bontebok, Springbok and rabbits were introduced to the Island and are an important part of the cultural landscape. Representative populations should be maintained where practical and humane.
- Robben Island is also a home to some species that have evolved separately from similar species on the mainland, for example, Legless Skinks.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND GRADING OF THE LANDSCAPES OF ROB BEN ISLAND

While the overall assessment of significance is a useful management tool, it is also relevant to consider the significance of the site at a more detailed level. Given the complexity of the site and the number of elements identified, it has been decided to address the assessment of significance and associated grading in terms of the layers of landscapes contained on Robben Island.

The present grading has been done according to priority areas. This grading system is provided as a guide to understanding the complexity of the site in its totality and to ultimately assist in decision-making. The grading of the landscapes is not intended to substitute for a more detailed site or object-specific evaluation of significance, which should be undertaken as part of the process of making major decisions.

The priority areas are as follows:

Priority 1: The Political Imprisonment Landscape; maintenance of the cultural and natural resources in great need of intervention on Robben Island and Mayibuye Archive; and the implementation of a maintenance schedule.

Priority 2: All other heritage resources within the WHS.

The criteria and guideline from which the grading (Priority 1 and 2) of key landscapes on Robben Island has been informed by the following statement:

The use of Robben Island as a place of banishment and imprisonment spans more than three centuries. Its cultural and natural landscapes, and the memories it holds, bear testimony to the physical and psychological hardships endured on the Island during centuries of colonialism and apartheid. Robben Island offers a socially unjust world an example of struggle and resilience, and ultimately the triumph of liberation and democracy.

The table on the next few pages outlines the landscape, the elements within these landscapes, and their gradings. The maintenance schedule takes into consideration all urgent intervention needs.

The grading of landscapes and elements within these landscapes [see table on next page]

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NAME OF LANDSCAPE	ELEMENTS COMPRISING LANDSCAPES	PRIORITY 1	PRIORITY 2
<p>Pre-colonial Landscape – prior to Dutch occupation</p>	<p>Archaeological sites (two sites identified on Robben Island with stone implements and one with fossilised mammal bones).</p> <p>Maritime archaeology (shipwrecks).</p> <p>Flora and fauna – food.</p> <p>Human occupation (mutinous sailors, Khoikhoi).</p>		
<p>Colonial Landscape</p>	<p>VOC occupation (imprisonment and slavery – hard labour, banishment) gardens – food source of natural fauna (archaeological evidence), building material and quarries, resistance and escape, graves.</p> <p>British occupation – banishment of indigenous chiefs, imprisonment, hard labour and escapes, built environment, graves, whaling station.</p>		
<p>Infirmary Landscape</p>	<p>Dumping ground for the poor, sick and mental patients, atrocities, resistance by the patients.</p> <p>Built environment and erasure of elements of the built environment.</p> <p>Graveyards and sacred sites (churches, deliberate introduction of alien flora and fauna).</p> <p>Segregatory practices – gender, class and race, hospital staff and patients.</p> <p>Forced labour</p> <p>Leprosaria</p>		
<p>WW2 Landscape</p>	<p>Military structures, function and fortification, introduction of alien vegetation, geographic position, gender and race, hard labour, construction of Murray's Bay harbour.</p>		
<p>Landscape of Imprisonment</p>	<p>Political imprisonment Maximum Security Prison – prison gardens.</p> <p>Sites of incarceration of political prisoners under apartheid on Robben Island between 1962 and 1991: <i>Ou Tronk</i>, <i>Zinc Tronk</i>, MSP, Sobukwe House.</p> <p>Jetty 1 Visitors' Centre</p>		

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NAME OF LANDSCAPE	ELEMENTS COMPRISING LANDSCAPES	PRIORITY 1	PRIORITY 2
<p>Landscape of Imprisonment [cont]</p>	<p>Work sites and spans <i>Landbou</i> Roads Hydroponics / cattle kraal Quarries - Limestone, Bluestone, Jan van Riebeeck's Bamboo Factory <i>Ou Tronk / Bougroep</i> MSP built by <i>Bouspan</i></p> <p>Views and vistas Table Mountain, sky</p> <p>Fauna and flora</p> <p>Warder Village, administration, dog kennels</p> <p>Harbour and boats</p> <p>Memories, rituals and objects associated with the MSP.</p> <p>Common law imprisonment Political and common law prisoners were kept together at the following sites: <i>Ou Tronk, Zink Tronk, MSP.</i></p> <p>Medium Security Prison – only common law prisoners were held here. Co-option of common law prisoners to control political prisoners.</p> <p>From convict to comrade – some common law prisoners were politically conscientised by their interaction with political prisoners.</p>		
<p>Environment Landscape</p>	<p>Alien and indigenous fauna and flora (endangered species), geology, marine environment, human interventions – quarries, ground water, wetlands, climate, geographic location, self-sufficiency.</p>		
<p>General Maintenance</p>	<p>Endangered species and their dependency on exotic vegetation and alien and indigenous vegetation.</p>		
<p>Mayibuye Archives</p>	<p>Mayibuye Archives</p>		

It is important to note that the significance of Robben Island cannot be fixed and permanent, but that like other such sites, its significance will evolve as more and more people and stakeholders share their experiences and as the interpretation perspectives change.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Statement of Significance is based on the assessment of the significance of Robben Island. The significance of the Island can be described as follows:

While we will not forget the brutality of Apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument to our hardship and suffering. We would want it to be a triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil. A triumph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness; a triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness, a triumph of the new South Africa over the old.

A. Kathrada

As a site of living heritage and a national and international symbol of political imprisonment, Robben Island holds strong symbolic associations for humanity. The site is a universal symbol of hope, solidarity and transformation, a site of spiritual reflection, healing and pilgrimage. As such, it offers a world struggling under social injustices and intolerance, an example of the indomitable nature of the human spirit.

Banishment, forced labour, imprisonment, isolation, and resistance to these civil rights infringements, are inscribed on the history of Robben Island over more than three centuries. Its cultural and natural landscapes, its views and vistas and the memories it holds, bear eloquent testimony to the physical and psychological hardships endured by those held on the Island during centuries of colonialism and apartheid.

Yet it is the resilience, struggles and fighting spirit of the people of South Africa – interwoven with those of Africa and the world – and the triumph of liberation and democracy, that constitute Robben Island's universal significance. Robben Island has come to symbolise, not only for South Africa, or even the African continent, but also the entire world, the resilience and the eventual triumph of humanity over enormous hardship and adversity. The Island represents a place of trauma and suffering by many, and as such it is a catalyst for healing.

The existing quarries, prisons, WW2 gun emplacements, infirmaries and the remnants of the demolished leprosaria and seventeenth century gardens are evidence of Robben Island's long history of human habitation through difficult periods and great challenges.

The spatial relationships between the precincts – historically dividing the sick from the healthy, men from women, black from white, prisoners from free – provide a tangible reference point to ideologies of separation and division, bringing out what can be described as the worst in humans.

Alien fauna and flora introduced over time form part of the complex construction of the Island as a cultural landscape of extraction and destruction; as well as construction.

Human graves, both marked and unmarked, create a vast, largely uncharted historic layer below the surface. These elements, collectively, bear testimony to Robben Island's layered history and multiple voices. The layered history further mirrors, in microcosm, the history of colonialism and apartheid in southern Africa, and the struggle against the same.

Robben Island is described as a 'university of life' through which strategies for a future society based on tolerance; respect and non-racialism were nurtured and implemented. The emphasis on education, on debate and on lifelong learning is testimony to the fight for justice and education and is key to Robben Island's role as a heritage site and its human rights discourse. It demonstrates the role of education in the championing of human rights and the creation of a just society. It creates a space of contestation and dialogue that is the ingredient of a democratic society.

Robben Island's tangible and intangible resources, its oral histories, documentary evidence, collections, structures, artefacts and landscapes hold the potential to provide a complex, rich interpretation of this world heritage site, its interconnections with other sites and its associated values.

In the words of ex-political prisoner Walter Sisulu:

Robben Island's notorious history as a place to which so-called undesirables of our society were banished should be turned around into a source of enlightenment and education on the dangers of myopic philosophies, social and economic practices whose primary and sole objective is the oppression of one group over another ...

While the universal significance of Robben Island can be summarised as above, it is also recognised that the natural environment provides the context in which the cultural dimensions evolved. Robben Island is itself environmentally a component of the Cape Floristic Region, and has been separately listed as part of the Cape Floral Region Protected Areas World Heritage Site.

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JUSTIFICATION FOR NOMINATION

Robben Island was declared as a World Heritage Site (WHS) in 1999 under criteria (iii) and (vi) of the 'World Heritage Convention's Operational Guidelines'.

- Criterion (iii) requires that a site bears unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or has disappeared.
- Criterion (vi) requires that sites should be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.

The justification for inscription, as set out in the 'Nomination Dossier', captured the significance of the Island based on its long and layered history that has resulted in both the tangible (built fabric) as well as the rich intangible heritage (memories). It reads:

The buildings of Robben Island bear eloquent testimony to its sombre history... Robben Island and its prison buildings symbolise the triumph of the human spirit of freedom and of democracy over oppression.

'Nomination Dossier' 1999

CONCLUSION

This chapter has assessed the significance of Robben Island, which forms the basis of its status as a WHS. It has described how the significance was established, including the methodology used, the statutory framework, and the heritage values associated with the site. The key issue is the preservation of the significance of RIWHS through the prioritisation of heritage places for maintenance, management and remedial action within the first cycle of the ICMP – the next five years. However, the chapter also recognises that the Island is made up of many layers that are all significant and RIM will ensure that no layer is left unprotected.

ENDNOTES

1 - Le Grange Architects et al, 'Conservation and Use Plan for Robben Island', 2000.

2 - The Educational Value is a relatively new value associated with Robben Island as a site. Although not included in earlier documentation this value is considered to be significant and worthy of inclusion in the ICMP.