

Session proposal for ICOMOS 2026 Scientific Symposium:

Heritage interpretation in the mid-21st Century

(proposed by ICOMOS-ICIP)

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SPEAKERS

Open Call for Paper in January/February 2026, selected speakers in April 2026

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

Heritage interpretation may seem self-explanatory when we consider the efforts of ICOMOS over the last sixty years or so. But this is not really the case. Although contemporary heritage interpretation can be traced back to the early 20th century and is primarily associated with the establishment of the National Parks in the USA (John Muir; Enos Abijah Mills) and the development of the six basic principles of heritage interpretation (Freeman Tilden), it has existed for as long as the human civilisation. We can trace activities that can be considered heritage interpretation, albeit not necessarily in the modern sense, back to ancient Roman times or even earlier records of storytelling.

While the importance of heritage interpretation is recognised, sites which are candidates for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List very rarely undergo a check to see if the (heritage) interpretation of candidature site(s) is adequate or misleading. In general, conservation standards always take precedence, sometimes alongside other considerations (but always with a scientific focus). However, if we/ICOMOS want to be a truly accessible and fully inclusive, we must pay much more attention to how World Heritage sites are presented and interpreted, provided that conservation standards are respected and carried out in accordance with set criteria. The core issue here is the meaning and understanding of the local people who possess the heritage, and how they manage it. Crisis and peace building are yet another topic, and are never more important.

Within the conceptual framework ICOMOS-ICIP proposes several subtopics that ICOMOS members (and others) could address:

- o Heritage interpretation in times of crisis
- o Heritage interpretation and living heritage
- o Heritage interpretation and peace building
- o Heritage interpretation and memory wars
- o Heritage interpretation and shared histories

All of these topics will respect the main ICOMOS-ICIP theme “Heritage interpretation in the mid-21st Century”, as well as the overarching theme for the ICOMOS 2026 General Assembly (GA).