

World Conference on Disaster Reduction, Japan, 2005

Following an ICORP initiative emerging from the inaugural ICOMOS Asia Pacific Regional Meeting, held in China, July 2004, an "ICOMOS-Japan International Expert Meeting on Risk Preparedness for Cultural Heritage in Asia and Circum-Pacific Region" was held in Kyoto (January 2005) as a precursor to the World Conference on Disaster Reduction Thematic Meeting on Cultural Heritage and Risk Reduction, held in Kobe. The organizers included ICOMOS Japan, UNESCO, ICCROM, Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, Kyoto City and the Research Center for Disaster Mitigation of Urban Cultural Heritage, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto. Experts from Australia, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Morocco, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United States of America, and representatives from ICCROM and UNESCO attended and presented a series of papers at both meetings.

Several of the papers included discussion and images of the tsunami, including eyewitness images of the inundation of the Fort at Galle and immediately-after images of Aceh, and also canvassed lessons to be learnt. In short, the tsunami disaster was a huge wake-up call which crystallized the need for co-ordinated, timely and appropriate actions in the field.

Perhaps the most important points which emerged were that cultural heritage is a primary resource for the community and an essential part of rehabilitation; comprehensive national disaster prevention policies need to be formulated for cultural properties, historic areas and their settings; cultural heritage disaster prevention and response needs to be part of overall comprehensive national and local strategies; capacity building programmes need to be developed which are aimed at cultural heritage professionals and emergency personnel to achieve seamless integration of priorities and practices; traditional past wisdom and techniques should be preserved and/or recovered and linked with modern science and technology, and collaboration through international networks should establish project development task forces.

The main achievement was to get cultural heritage on the disaster prevention agenda and a brief mention was made in the summary outcome document drafted before the conference. A lot of effort went into a small step in a wide agenda and we now need to capitalize on what has been achieved thus far, and bring cultural heritage up near the top of the disaster prevention agenda, wherein response and recovery actions will address human lives alongside cultural heritage.

The Kyoto Declaration on Protection of Cultural Properties, Historic Areas and Their Settings from Loss in Disasters, 2005 and the Recommendations from the UNESCO/ICCROM/Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan Thematic Session on Cultural Heritage Risk Management Kobe, 2005 were adopted by the meetings. These and a more fulsome report will be put on the Australia ICOMOS Website.

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