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Posted Date: 15 April 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202604.1001.v1

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Heritage Literacy: A Different Understanding of Heritage Management

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Abstract

Heritage management has traditionally been shaped by what Laurajane Smith termed the "authorized heritage discourse" wherein a narrow group of professionals determines values and meanings on behalf of broader communities. This article argues that a more inclusive, socially responsible model of heritage management is both possible and necessary. Drawing on three convergent intellectual traditions: heritage interpretation as formulated by Freeman Tilden and subsequently deepened through hermeneutic philosophy; eco-museums and the new museology born from the Santiago Round Table of 1972; and the human-rights-based framework for cultural heritage enshrined in the Council of Europe's Faro Convention of 2005 the article proposes "heritage literacy" as the conceptual synthesis that bridges these streams. Heritage literacy denotes a form of socially responsible heritage management that empowers citizens to understand the processes through which heritage is constructed, to participate actively in its interpretation, and to direct their own development through it. The article demonstrates that heritage literacy operates simultaneously as knowledge/wisdom management and as a democratic practice, and argues that it should be recognized as an essential dimension of (cultural) human rights. By tracing the theoretical genealogy of each contributing tradition and synthesizing them into a unified framework, this article offers both a conceptual contribution to critical heritage studies and a practical orientation for heritage professionals and policymakers seeking to move beyond top-down models of heritage governance.

Keywords: heritage literacy; heritage management; heritage interpretation; eco-museums; new museology; Faro Convention; cultural human rights; participative heritage

1. Introduction

The concept of heritage has undergone a profound transformation over the past several decades. What was once understood primarily in terms of material objects, in other words monuments, buildings, archaeological remains have expanded to encompass not only intangible practices, but living traditions or landscapes and (importantly here) the very processes by which communities construct meaning from the past. Yet despite this conceptual broadening, the understanding of heritage has remained remarkably narrow. As Laurajane Smith argued in her landmark work Uses of Heritage, heritage does not simply exist as an objective category waiting to be discovered; rather, it is actively produced through discourse. Smith's concept of the "authorized heritage discourse" revealed how a small group of heritage professionals, operating within institutionalized frameworks, continues to define what counts as heritage, what values it embodies, and whose stories it tells [1]. Or, as she provocatively stated: "There is, really, no such thing as heritage" [1] (p. 11). Heritage, in this view, is not a thing but a cultural practice = a process of meaning-making that is always embedded in power relations.

This tension between an expanding understanding of heritage and the persistence of exclusionary management practices constitutes the central problematic of this article. If heritage is indeed constructed rather than found, and if the process of construction is inherently political, then the question of who participates in that construction becomes a matter of democratic concern. David

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Uzzell captured this duality: "Heritage has been cast in the role of both saviour and sinner" [2] (p. 219), rescuer for revitalizing declining communities through cultural tourism and conservation, sinner for trivializing history and reinforcing nostalgic, exclusionary narratives. The challenge, therefore, is not whether heritage management should exist, but how it can be reconceived to serve broader societal purposes.

This article proposes heritage literacy as the conceptual framework that can meet this challenge. Heritage literacy, as initially articulated by Babic [3], refers to a form of socially responsible heritage management that empowers citizens to understand the processes through which heritage is constructed, to participate in its interpretation, and to direct their own development through it. The concept draws on and synthesizes three convergent intellectual traditions: (1) heritage interpretation, from F. Tilden's founding principles through contemporary hermeneutic critiques; (2) eco-museums and the new museology, rooted in establishment of eco-museums in France and the 1972 Santiago Round Table as well as the subsequent development of sociomuseology; and (3) the human-rights-based approach to cultural heritage, most fully articulated in the Council of Europe's Faro Convention of 2005 [4]. Each of these traditions, developed largely independently, arrives at a remarkably similar conclusion: heritage management must be participatory, dialogical, and oriented toward the empowerment of communities. Heritage literacy names the convergence point where (a least) these three streams meet.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 traces the development of heritage interpretation from F. Tilden to the ICOMOS Ename Charter [5] and the hermeneutic turn. Section 3 examines the eco-museum movement and its evolution into sociomuseology. Section 4 explores the framing of heritage as a human right, with particular attention to the Faro Convention and the Sustainable Development Goals. Section 5 presents heritage literacy as the synthesis of these traditions and elaborates its practical dimensions. Section 6 discusses the implications of heritage literacy for contemporary heritage management, and Section 7 offers concluding reflections.

2. Heritage Interpretation: From Revelation to Dialogue

2.1. Foundations: Tilden and the Communicative Imperative

The modern discipline of heritage interpretation originates in the American conservation movement, its intellectual roots lying in the nature writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir [6]. However, it was Freeman Tilden who, in his 1957 classic, undated "Interpreting Our Heritage", codified the principles that would define the field. Tilden conceived of interpretation not as information transmission but as an "*educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information*" [7] (p. 8). His six principles emphasized provocation over instruction and holistic experience over isolated facts.

Tilden's most enduring contribution was perhaps the teleological chain he articulated: Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection. This chain established a direct connection between the interpretive act and the ethical/desirable outcome of conservation. Heritage interpretation is not merely a pedagogical technique; it is a moral imperative. If people could be brought to understand the significance of a heritage site(s), they would come to appreciate it; and if they appreciated it, they would act to protect it. This logic would prove enormously influential, shaping not only the practice of heritage interpretation in national parks but also the broader field of heritage management, as it developed internationally over the following half (or more) century.

The internationalization of heritage interpretation received its most convincing expression in the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites, ratified in Québec in 2008. The Charter's preamble makes explicit the communicative nature of all heritage practice: "*every act of heritage conservation—within all the world's cultural traditions—is by its nature a communicative act*" [5] (Preamble). Where Tilden had focused on interpretation as something done at

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a site for visitors, the ICOMOS Charter universalizes the communicative dimension. Every decision about what to conserve and how to present it is already an interpretive act. Among the Charter's seven cardinal principles, Principle 6 (Inclusiveness) is particularly relevant. It states that *"Interpretation and Presentation of cultural heritage sites must be the result of meaningful collaboration between heritage professionals, host and associated communities, and other stakeholders"* [5] (Principle 6). This emphasis on collaboration marks a shift from Tilden's original model, which still assumed a fundamentally asymmetric relationship between interpreter and visitor.

2.2. The Hermeneutic and Dialogical Turn

The theoretical deepening of heritage interpretation has been driven by engagement with hermeneutic philosophy. Ablett and Dyer [6] critiqued the cognitive-psychological model dominant since the 1970s. Drawing on Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer they argued that interpretation is not the monological transmission of information but a dialogical process of meaning-making that is culturally situated, critically reflexive, and open to multiple readings. As Uzzell [2] had earlier noted, interpretation had become "*stuck in a rut where the how has become more important than the why*" (as cited in [6] p. 211). The hermeneutic turn offered a way out by returning to foundational questions: what does (heritage) interpretation mean, and what is it for?

Carter and Lehnes [8], within the InHerit project, further developed these themes by connecting interpretation to the Enlightenment, Romantic philosophy, and progressive education. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, they argued that heritage interpretation cultivates reflective thinking, or the ability to consider phenomena from multiple perspectives. This capacity, Arendt held, is essential for plural, democratic societies. Carter and Lehnes thus established an explicit link between heritage interpretation and democratic citizenship. A connection partly central to the concept of heritage literacy, further on developed in Section 5.

The philosophical grounding also intersects with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy [9]. Freire's distinction between "banking" education, or depositing knowledge into passive recipients and "problem-posing" education, where learners actively construct knowledge, or maps onto the tension within heritage interpretation between monological transmission and dialogical engagement. Interpretation at its best is a form of lifelong learning that empowers participants to make their own meanings [10].

3. Eco-Museums and the New Museology: Heritage from Below

3.1. The Birth of the Eco-Museum

If heritage interpretation as a discipline grew primarily from the Anglo-American conservation tradition, the eco-museum movement emerged from a distinctly different context: the social upheavals of late 1960s France and the broader movement for cultural democratization in the Europe and following it in the Latin America. The pivotal moment (in Europe) came in 1971, when museologists Hugues de Varine, Georges Henri Rivière, and Marcel Evrard established the Museum of Man and Industry in the Le Creusot-Montceau-les-Mines region of central France. The area, covering approximately 500 square kilometres, which had suffered severe economic decline following the post-war (WWII) management by departure of the Schneider (accused of collaboration with the Nazi regime) industrial family. The museum was conceived not as a conventional repository of objects, and showcase of it but as an instrument for community revitalization. In other words, a means of helping local populations rediscover their (new) identity and open new development possibilities [3].

The theoretical innovation of Le Creusot was radical. In 1973, writing in UNESCO's Museum International, Varine proposed that "*any movable or unmovable object within predefined community's perimeter is a hypothetical part of the Museum*" [11] (p. 244). This definition shattered the conventional distinction between museum collection and surrounding environment. It introduced the idea of cultural ownership by local community, a form of ownership having nothing to do with legal title

 doi:10.20944/preprints202604.1001.v1

but everything to do with the right of a community to define, interpret, and manage its own heritage. The museum's audience, likewise, was reconceived: every individual living within the defined territory was simultaneously a visitor, a user, and a manager of the museum [3].

René Rivard's, as cited in [12] (p. 73) influential analogy captured this transformation: where the traditional museum consisted of building + collections + specialist + visitors, the eco-museum was defined by territory + heritage + memory + population. The 2004 European Network of Eco-Museums declared the eco-museum is "*a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for sustainable development*" [13] (p. 151) which Babic [3] (p. 31) distilled this further on: claiming eco-museums ideas are "*a dynamic heritage management which enables communities to direct their own development*."

The significance of the eco-museum for the present argument lies in two key features. First, it established the principle that heritage management is inseparable from community development. In other words that the purpose of interpreting and managing heritage is not conservation (only) for its own sake but the empowerment of the communities who live with and through that heritage. Secondly, it demonstrated in practice that a bottom-up, participatory approach to heritage management was not only theoretically defensible but practically achievable. The eco-museum was, in Smith's terms, a direct challenge to the authorized heritage discourse, an attempt to democratize the production of heritage meaning.

3.2. From New Museology to Sociomuseology

The eco-museum was not an isolated phenomenon. It emerged alongside and in dialogue with a broader movement that came to be known as the new museology, whose foundational moment was the 1972 Santiago Round Table organized by UNESCO and ICOM in Chile. The Santiago Declaration called for an "*integral museum*", "*an institution at the service of society, of which it is an inalienable part, and which has within itself the ingredients that allow it to take part in the process of bringing awareness to the communities it serves*" [14] (p. 26). This vision of the museum as an agent of social transformation was deeply influenced by the intellectual currents of the time, particularly Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed [9] and/or, as L. Mellado and B. Brulon Soares are mentioning [14] (p. 27) Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation.

The Santiago Declaration and the eco-museum movement shared the conviction that the traditional museum was insufficient to meet the needs of contemporary societies. The notion of the "integral museum", the one integrated into its society anticipated by several decades ago the language of social inclusion and participatory governance would later become central to international heritage policy.

The subsequent development of this tradition, particularly within the Lusophone world, has been consolidated under the term sociomuseology. As M. M. Neu [15] documents, sociomuseology represents the theoretical articulation of the principles that the eco-museum and the integral museum had pioneered in practice. It affirms the museum as a tool for social transformation, empowering communities to define, interpret, and use their heritage. As Mario Chagas put it: "*For a museum to make sense for life, it must extrapolate the old notions of museum*" (as cited in [15] p.15). This resonates powerfully with the critique of the authorized heritage discourse and the dialogical model of interpretation discussed above.

The community heritage movement represents the practical extension of these principles. From community museums in Latin America to heritage initiatives in e.g., Africa or in Europe, Asia or Pacific, the common thread is that local communities must be the primary agents of their own heritage management. This requires a fundamental redistribution of authority = precisely what the concept of heritage literacy aims to theorize and facilitate.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202604.1001.v1

4. Heritage as a Human Right

4.1. The Faro Convention and the Human Rights-Based Framework

The third intellectual tradition that converges in the concept of heritage literacy is the framing of cultural heritage as a human right. While the connection between culture and human rights has a long history in the international law, far back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which recognized the right to freely participate in cultural life, it was the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society [4], established in Faro (Portugal), in October 2005, that most fully articulated a rights-based approach to heritage specifically.

The Faro Convention's preamble establishes its foundational principle: "*every person has a right to engage with the cultural heritage of their choice, while respecting the rights and freedoms of others*" [4] (Preamble). This (partly) shifts the locus of authority from institution to individual, from professional to citizen. It affirms the right to engage with heritage of one's own choosing, implying a right to participate in determining what heritage is.

The Convention introduces the innovative concept of the "heritage community," defined as "*people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations*" [4] (Art. 2b). A heritage community is defined not by credentials but by values. Article 1c further specifies that "*the conservation of cultural heritage and its sustainable use have human development and quality of life as their goal*" [4] (Art. 1c). Heritage conservation is thus linked not to the preservation of objects or monuments (only) for their own sake but to the well-being of people.

The Convention also emphasizes shared responsibility [4] (Article 4), heritage as promoting dialogue [4] (Article 7), and democratic participation in heritage processes [4] (Article 12). These provisions align precisely with the participatory principles that heritage interpretation and the eco-museum movement had developed independently, but give them the force of international (foremost here European) legal commitment grounded in the language of human rights.

4.2. Heritage, Sustainable Development and Education

Despite the progressive framework established by conventions like the Faro Convention, a significant gap persists between policy aspirations and realities. Labadi [16] demonstrates that heritage-based development projects frequently fail to deliver meaningful benefits to local communities. The rhetoric of participation often masks persistent top-down dynamics in which external experts retain effective control. Labadi's work reminds us that progressive policy frameworks are insufficient. Or what matters is how heritage management is actually practiced.

Harrison et al. [17] offer a complementary perspective by reconceptualizing heritage as "*future-making*." All heritage practices are fundamentally oriented toward the future, i.e., toward decisions about what should be carried forward and what kind of world we wish to create. If heritage is future-making, then who participates in that process is not merely procedural but existential.

Kisler [18] proposes a reconceptualization of heritage education as a distinct form of moral education, arguing that its primary function is not simply to convey historical knowledge but to cultivate the social values that shape how communities relate to their past. Heritage education thus becomes a site of moral formation, a space where citizens develop capacities necessary for democratic life. If heritage is always a vehicle for moral and political values, then the capacity to critically read and participate in heritage processes (heritage literacy) becomes an essential democratic competence.

The economic dimension of heritage, as analysed by Gould [19], from our perspective further underscores the need for a heritage literacy. Heritage economics reveals that heritage is invariably embedded in economic structures, from tourism to urban regeneration all the way to the creative economy. Where decisions about heritage management always have distributional consequences. Who benefits from heritage tourism? Whose livelihoods depend on heritage conservation? Whose cultures are commodified in the process? These are questions that require not just professional

 doi:10.20944/preprints202604.1001.v1

expertise but broad civic understanding, precisely the kind of understanding the heritage literacy aims to foster.

5. Heritage Literacy: The Synthesis

5.1. Defining Heritage Literacy

Having traced the development of three convergent traditions: heritage interpretation, eco-museums and new museology, and the human-rights-based approach to heritage we are now in a position to articulate the concept that synthesizes them. Heritage literacy, as initially proposed by Babic [3], emerges from the recognition that heritage management is inseparable from a knowledge/wisdom management. As Babic argues, "*heritage literacy is a form of heritage management which is simultaneously a sort of knowledge management too*" [3] (p. 33). This formulation captures the essential insight: managing heritage effectively requires understanding how heritage is constructed by means of the processes of selection, representation, as well as the interpretation through which certain elements of the past become "heritage" where others do not.

The analogy with literacy is instructive. Just as conventional literacy empowers individuals to navigate textual culture, heritage literacy empowers communities to navigate the cultural processes through which (their) heritage is produced and used. Heritage illiteracy, the lack of awareness of how heritage is constructed excludes communities from meaningful participation in governance of their cultural resources. Heritage, as Babic [3] (p. 29) notes, "*is very powerful cultural or socio-political resource*." Without literacy to understand how this resource is managed, communities are effectively marginalised.

Heritage literacy involves a dual obligation. It requires communities to understand that, as Smith [1] (p. 3) puts it, "*A heritage is the heritage not because of its intrinsic values...but because of manipulation.*" Simultaneously, it requires institutions to respect and facilitate community participation, in other words to recognize that professional expertise is not the sole basis for authority over heritage. This dual obligation distinguishes heritage literacy from top-down management (only) and purely academic critiques that deconstruct discourse without offering practical alternatives.

The concept also integrates the temporal dimensions that Harrison et al. [17] emphasize. Heritage literacy is not only about understanding the past through heritage, it is about understanding how heritage practices shape nowadays and the future. A heritage-literate citizen is one who can critically evaluate not just what heritage says about the past but what it does in the present and what futures it makes possible. This forward-looking dimension connects heritage literacy to the broader discourse of sustainable development and future-making that has become increasingly central to any heritage policy.

5.2. Heritage Literacy in Practice

Heritage literacy is not merely a theoretical construct. It has identifiable practical dimensions that connect directly to the traditions analysed in the preceding sections. At least three such dimensions merit particular attention: storytelling and narrative, education and capacity-building, and economic participation.

The first, storytelling and narative. Heritage interpretation has long recognized that powerful interpretive experiences connect heritage to personal meaning through narratives. The ICOMOS Charter [5] calls for the incorporation of oral testimonies and active community participation. Eco-museums are inherently exercising in collective storytelling. Heritage literacy, in its narrative dimension, means developing the capacity to tell and hear multiple stories about the same heritage, and to understand the strength of a polyvocality. "The InHerit Manual" [10] or "Heritage interpretation: a look from Europe" [20] provide practical guidance for incorporating diverse narratives into interpretive practice, to name just two examples.

Secondly, education and capacity-building. The Faro Convention's emphasis on heritage education [4] (Article 13) and the ICOMOS Charter's designation of interpretation as an educational

 doi:10.20944/preprints202604.1001.v1

resource [5] (Principle 7) point toward systematic approaches to developing heritage literacy. Kisler's [18] reconceptualization of heritage education as moral education is very relevant here: heritage literacy should cultivate critical capacities that enable responsible participation in heritage governance. This includes formal, non-formal, and informal learning. The InHerit competence framework [10] offers a model adaptable to broader heritage literacy objectives.

The third, economic participation. Heritage is simultaneously a cultural and an economic resource [21], and always exists in plurality [22]. Heritage literacy in its economic dimension means equipping communities to participate meaningfully in decisions about heritage's economic use (e.g., in tourism, urban regeneration, and creative industries). Where Gould [19] shows how economic reasoning intersects with heritage governance. A heritage-literate community can evaluate trade-offs, advocate for its interests, and hold institutional actors accountable. Babic [3] captures the essence of heritage literacy in practice in his formulation of the eco-museum concept. Through interpretive activities, community members become sensitized to the territory in which they live; this sensitization raises awareness of interdependence and pride in identity; and this awareness, in turn, empowers them to reconsider and direct their own development. Heritage literacy is the generalization of an eco-museum logic to the broader field of heritage management. It is, in Babic's [3] understanding, necessary because heritage literacy acts as a sort of socially responsible heritage management which could ensure citizens to become heritage managers, an act which is indeed necessary.

6. Discussion

The convergence of heritage interpretation, eco-museums and new museology, and the human-rights-based approach to heritage is neither accidental nor merely rhetorical. Each tradition, developing in its own historical and disciplinary context, arrived independently at a set of conclusions that are remarkably consistent = that heritage is constructed, not given; that the construction of heritage is a political act with distributional consequences; that communities, not only professionals, have legitimate authority over their heritage; and that the purpose of heritage management is ultimately the well-being and empowerment of people.

Heritage literacy, as the conceptual synthesis of these traditions, carries several important implications for contemporary heritage management. The first concerns the status of heritage literacy as a human right. If the Faro Convention is correct that every person has a right to engage with the cultural heritage of their choice, then the capacity to exercise that right (heritage literacy) is crucial. A right without the capacity to exercise it is a merely formal, where substantive rights require corresponding capacities. Heritage literacy, conceptually akin to citizenship literacy, embraces "*an idea of systematic, global, lifelong and holistic methods in which each individual (or a group) must have an inalienable and guaranteed right to participate, benefit and use heritage toward self-definition, self-esteem and creation of its/their own experiences coming from endless collective heritage of humanity*" [3] (p. 33). States and heritage institutions that recognize the right to cultural heritage therefore have a corresponding obligation to foster the heritage literacy that makes the exercise of this right possible.

The second implication concerns the unsustainability of top-down heritage management. The authorized heritage discourse, as Smith [1] has shown, is not merely exclusive but ultimately self-defeating. Heritage management that fails to engage the communities for whom heritage is ostensibly being managed risks producing heritage that is irrelevant to those communities, thereby undermining the justification for conservation. The eco-museum practices demonstrate that community-led heritage management can produce significant outcomes: in terms of identity reinforcement, social cohesion, and local development, that top-down approaches systematically fail to achieve. Labadi's [16] critical assessment of heritage-for-development projects confirms this: where community participation is tokenistic, development outcomes are typically poor.

The third implication involves adapting Tilden's teleological chain for the age of heritage literacy. Tilden promoted an idea: through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection. Heritage literacy suggests an extended version: through heritage literacy, critical understanding; through critical understanding, meaningful

 doi:10.20944/preprints202604.1001.v1

participation; through meaningful participation, empowered protection and sustainable development. The critical difference is that the heritage-literate citizen is not merely a passive beneficiary of interpretive communication but an active agent in the construction and governance of heritage. Protection is no longer something done by experts for the public; it is something done by an informed public for itself.

Finally, heritage literacy redefines professional practice. In a heritage-literate society, the professional's functions are not sole authority but act as facilitators and desirable assistant(s). The ICOMOS Charter [5] call's for "meaningful collaboration", thus presupposes the heritage literacy coming from the communities. Where at the same time, professionals must be willing to share authority and recognize community knowledge may be constitutive of heritage itself. This mutual transformation is the practical promise of heritage literacy.

7. Conclusions

This article has argued that heritage literacy represents the conceptual convergence of three major intellectual traditions in heritage studies: heritage interpretation, eco-museums and new museology, as well as the human-rights-based approach to cultural heritage. Each of these traditions, developed over the past half-century in response to different challenges and in different disciplinary contexts, has arrived at a common insight: the heritage management, to be effective, must be participatory, dialogical, and oriented toward the empowerment of communities.

Heritage interpretation, from Tilden through the ICOMOS Charter and the hermeneutic turn, has progressively recognized interpretation as a collaborative process of meaning-making. Eco-museums and new museology, from Le Creusot through the Santiago Declaration to sociomuseology, have demonstrated that communities can and should be the primary agents of their own heritage management. The Faro Convention has provided the normative foundation: heritage conservation must serve human development and quality of life.

Heritage literacy is the idea/capacity that makes these commitments operational. It is, simultaneously, a form of knowledge or wisdom = understanding how heritage is constructed, and used. It is a set of skills, e.g., the ability to participate in heritage interpretation, management and (local) development. As well as a disposition, or the commitment to socially responsible heritage management that respects and empowers all members of the heritage community to act as guardians. Without heritage literacy, the progressive frameworks established by international charters and conventions remain aspirational. Within it, they become achievable.

In an era when heritage is simultaneously more valued and more contested than ever, the need for the heritage literacy has never been greater. Empowering local people through open and democratic processes to participate in heritage management is the only way to ensure that heritage serves the common good. Otherwise, heritage will remain "*nothing more than a mirror of a moment of existing power relations*" [3] (p. 33). The development of heritage literacy = as concept, as practice, and as human right is the task that lies ahead.

Further research and conceptualisation will be needed here: further on empirical indicators for heritage literacy; curricula for diverse educational contexts; comparative studies of community heritage management; or using digital tools for fostering and measuring heritage literacy. Where the heritage literacy is here, around us and cannot be ignored. This article offers starting points about the idea of heritage literacy translating it into systematic practice which belongs to the broader heritage community and heritage management topics.

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