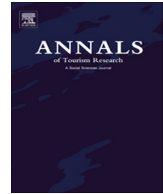




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# Local and public heritage at a World Heritage site

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### ABSTRACT

The World Heritage Rock Art of the Sierra de San Francisco site in Mexico maintains some of the oldest and largest prehistoric murals in North America. The local ranching community is the custodian of a double heritage, the UNESCO-sanctioned rock art and their own ranching heritage. The rock art heritage is both tangible and public, known to and authenticated by professional archaeologists, while the ranching heritage is largely intangible and private, a lived and remembered experience known within families. As economic conditions deteriorate, the ranchers seek to expand their tourism activities to include their ranching heritage. Understanding their double heritage along tangible/intangible and public/private axes clarifies the challenges they face.

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### Introduction

#### *The Double Heritage of the Sierra de San Francisco*

The Sierra de San Francisco, in the southern half of Mexico's Baja California Peninsula, is rich in heritage. The mountain range is part of the El Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve, designated by UNESCO in 1988 to conserve both the unique biota of the Vizcaíno Desert and the coastal wintering sites for grey whales (Carrabias Lillo, Provencio, de la Marza, Gutiérrez, & Gómez, 2000). In 1993, the Sierra was designated as a World Heritage site for its prehistoric rock art, which many experts regard as the most important in North America, and likely the oldest in the Western Hemisphere. The art, which archaeologists call the Great Mural tradition, consists of dozens of representations of animals and humans, many of them far larger than life size. The region is also known for prehistoric petroglyphs. The World Heritage site is administered by the National Institute of History and Archaeology (*Instituto Nacional de*

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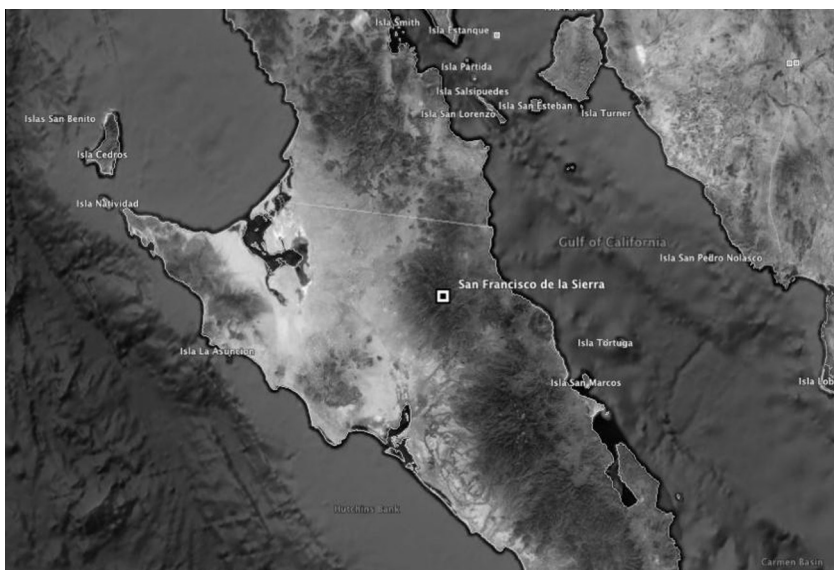
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*Arqueología e Historia*) or INAH, but all of its agents at the site are members of a local ranching community with deep roots in the history of the region.

The community has its origins in the mid-nineteenth century and remained largely isolated and self-sufficient until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Over generations, the community (and other isolated ranching groups in the mountain ranges of Baja California Sur) developed a technology from local materials, mainly for irrigation, that enabled them to occupy and transform their harsh desert environment, creating a landscape of small oases. They also developed a style of life and a way of interacting with others that has been admired by diverse observers (Crosby, 1981) and are a strong source of identity for the ranchers. The ranchers of the Sierra de San Francisco are custodians, then, of two heritages. One is their own ranching culture, a heritage that the ranchers know, live, value in varying degrees, and see passing away with changes in technology, the economy, and their relationship with the wider Mexican society. The other is the World Heritage of the Great Murals that the Sierra de San Francisco is best known for. This second heritage is not one that the ranchers particularly identify with. Yet in a formal and even legal sense they are custodians of the second heritage more precisely than they are of the first (see [Maps 1 and 2](#)).

With a trend toward decreased rainfall, the ranchers' economic strategy of producing goats and goat cheese has become increasingly fragile. Living in considerable poverty, the ranching community faces demographic and cultural decline, as younger people desire or are forced to seek opportunities elsewhere and the population progressively ages. As they look toward alternatives for maintaining their life in the Sierra, an obvious route is to augment income from the small but relatively reliable traffic in tourists who come to see the Great Murals. The ranchers see that they can do this both by becoming more effective guides for the World Heritage rock art and by adding ranch and ecotourism excursions to the offerings available to tourists. This paper explores the characteristics of the ranchers' two heritages and their implications for the development of a coherent tourism that combines elements of both. The local valorization of the Great Murals can be strategically used in order to help ensure the survival of the ranching way of life, which in turn assures the preservation of the millennia-old World Heritage site.

This paper explores the distinction between the cultural heritages of the Sierra de San Francisco along two axes: tangible/intangible and public/private. Tangible and intangible are widely used terms, with the latter defined by [UNESCO \(2013\)](#) as “the practices, representations, expressions, as well as



**Map 1.** San Francisco de la Sierra on Baja California Peninsula (Conway, Espinoza, & Giacinto, 2010).

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