

Where the sea meets the land: **Co**astal **Her**itage, community **Re**silience and inclusion in a changing landscape (CoHeRe)



The challenge

is to enhance resilience to evolving climate and environmental hazards amongst coastal communities in Bénin by increasing engagement with, and management of, heritage. Heritage is integral to identity, belonging and all ways of living, and places and landscapes are an important part of this. Heritage is an essential component of wellbeing and it can strengthen adaptive capacity and resilience by bringing people together creating inclusive pathways to adaptation. Heritage practice is inherently inclusive, equitable and multivocal. It teaches us that losses and damages cannot be entirely prevented, and Decisions about what to keep and what to let go will be fundamental to maintaining values for future generations – even when what is valued is gone.

CoHeRe aims to leverage the principles of heritage conservation practice to boost resilience amongst coastal communities to losses and damages due to, or exacerbated by, climate change.



Communities of coastal Bénin with which CoHeRe is working

Background

The West African coastal zone, the interface between ocean, lagoons and rivers, has a rich cultural and natural heritage, a result of complex interactions over centuries. It is home to fragile ecosystems, protected environments, endangered species, and heritage sites of local and international significance. Because of its "vast and important complex of wetlands", the Bénin coastline was inscribed in its entirety in 2018 by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. Regional food dependency on lagoon, river and sea resources is high, contributing up to 2/3 of human protein supply, yet many local communities are economically and socially vulnerable to the compound risks created by climate change. Shellfish overharvesting, unsustainable mangrove cutting, and illegal capture or harm to endangered species such as manatees or sea turtles are among the many threats to the environment, while the World Bank estimates annual costs from flooding in the area at US\$11bn by the 2050s. Exacerbating existing vulnerabilities is rapid urbanisation which has resulted in the growth of informal settlements in high-risk areas. Sustainable management of the coastal zone has become a priority due to its economic, cultural and environmental importance, and the fact that it is currently exposed to erosion, storm surges, river flooding, and saltwater intrusion.

Collaboration



Training session involving Eco-Benin enumerators and Université d'Abomey-Calavi postdocs



Archaeological excavations along the Route des Pêches with community volunteers



As the lagoon systems change there will be loss of traditional livelihoods



Insight

We have two principal objectives:

- 1) to demonstrate how engagement with heritage enhances understandings and practices of environmental stewardship, and gives communities agency over change,
- 2) to share how these understandings and practices support people in vulnerable areas to improve longer-term resilience to climate change impacts, building coalitions for inclusive decision-making.

We test these two strands of thinking through activities that link local actions and concepts to social and cultural dynamics of coastal change: focus groups to share and collate stories and memories of change, semi-structured interviews across sectors of society, museum exhibitions, and activities in schools. We explore cultural understandings of the environment and its risks, valued places, and perceptions of change, including animal and plant distribution. We conduct archaeological survey of tangible heritage and assess its vulnerability to loss and damage. Through this, we hope to help build resilient communities rooted in their social and environmental history. Our work will be a pilot for addressing problems in other low-lying areas: lessons learnt will be applicable elsewhere.



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