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Ribeira Sacra Waterscape (Spain) No 1639

1 Basic information

Official name as proposed by the States Parties

Ribeira Sacra Waterscape

Location

Provinces of Lugo and Ourense
Autonomous Community of Galicia
Spain

Brief description

Located in Galicia in northern Spain, Ribeira Sacra is a large waterscape. It is bounded by the deep river canyons at the confluence of the Miño and Sil rivers and is characterised by steep slopes and rugged terrain. The property, nominated as a cultural landscape, has been shaped by the forces of water, and by the management of water for more than 1,500 years of continuous occupation and adaptation. Distinctive adaptations include the pattern of micro-plots called *cavaduras* that date back to the Middle Ages when distinct units marked by watercourses known as *socalcos* that support a mix of crops, chestnuts and vineyards. The early importance of monastic traditions is demonstrated by many cave sanctuaries, churches, abbeys and monasteries. Evidence of water management technologies span the periods of human occupation and include archaeological sites, drainage systems associated with the terraces, fountains, canals, weirs, crossings, bridges, water mills and industrial power stations. Local traditions of “water culture” include myths and legends, toponymy, and the legacies of eremitic and monastic practices.

Category of property

In terms of categories of cultural property as set out in Article I of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

In terms of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (2025), paragraph 47, it has also been nominated as a *cultural landscape*.

Included in the Tentative List

16 July 1996 as “The Ribeira Sacra, Lugo and Ourense”

Background

This site was nominated in 2020 but was withdrawn by the State Party prior to its consideration by the 44th session of the World Heritage Committee.

The differences between the previous nomination and the current one were summarised by the State Party in the additional information received in October 2025. It was emphasised that the current nomination should not be understood as a revision, but as a comprehensive rethink. The previous proposal was for a serial proposal of four component parts although the overall area was similar, and the buffer zone was larger. The justification for the Outstanding Universal Value on the basis of criteria (iii), (iv) and (v) focused on Ribeira Sacra as a sacred landscape. While the land use patterns and terraced slopes were part of the earlier proposal, the principal attributes were monasteries, churches and other sacred places. In 2021, ICOMOS concluded that the continuity and exceptionality of the sacred landscape was not demonstrated and recommended that the nomination should not be inscribed on the World Heritage List.

The current nomination has a different narrative, criteria, attributes and nomination strategy as discussed throughout this report.

Consultations and technical evaluation mission

Desk reviews have been provided by ICOMOS International Scientific Committees, members and independent experts.

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the nominated property from 6 to 11 October 2025.

Additional information received by ICOMOS

A letter was sent to the State Party on 16 September 2025 requesting further information about the nomination strategy, the comparative analysis, planned and approved development projects, the proposed attributes, hydroelectric development, and community engagement.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 23 October 2025.

An interim report was provided to the State Party on 19 December 2025, summarising the issues identified by the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel.

Further clarification was received from the State Party on 25 February 2026.

All additional information received has been incorporated into the relevant sections of this evaluation report.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

11 March 2026

2 Description of the nominated property

Note: The nomination dossier and additional information contain detailed descriptions of this property, its history and its state of conservation. Due to limitations on the length of evaluation reports, this report provides only a short summary of the most relevant aspects.

Description and history

Located in Galicia in northern Spain, Ribeira Sacra is a large organically evolved cultural landscape, described by the State Party as a “waterscape”. In the additional information of February 2026, the State Party clarified that use of this term establishes the theme of the cultural landscape and its predominant character. Water is the dominant feature of the cultural landscape, as a theme and a shaping force.

The nominated property is bounded by the deep river canyons at the confluence of the Miño and Sil rivers and is characterised by steep slopes, fertile soils and rugged terrain. The Sil canyon has been designated as part of the Natura 2000 Network as a Special Area of Conservation.

In the additional information received in October 2025, the State Party traced the historical background of the toponym Ribeira Sacra from the 12th century and cited references to it in historical texts. Today, the name Ribeira Sacra is used in tourism promotion and identifies the designations of origin for local products (such as the Ribeira Sacra Designation of Origin for wines).

Ribeira Sacra features distinctive patterns of traditional settlement and land tenure. There are 96,125 micro-plots that cover an area of 394 square metres. They are divided into tiny plots called *cavaduras* according to the vernacular land management system. These date back to the Middle Ages which also created distinct units known as parishes, bounded by more than 400 watercourses. The area is known for its biodiversity, natural ecosystems, forests, riparian vegetation, waterfalls and scenic beauty.

Slopes of up to eighty-five percent have been recorded, and there are 2,494 hectares of centuries-old crop terraces known as *socalcos*. These support chestnut trees, grape vines (heroic viticulture), olives and other crops. Although the overall population is relatively small, the nominated property encompasses seventy-two parishes and a dense constellation of villages.

The nominated cultural landscape has been shaped by the use and management of water for more than 1,500 years of continuous occupation and adaptation. From the 5th century, this area was shaped by eremitic traditions and the asceticism of monastic communities. These communities established the first water mills and crops on steep terraces, connecting spiritual practices and technical knowledge. Within this medieval context, Ribeira Sacra was a regional manifestation of a broader phenomenon. There are many churches, cave sanctuaries, abbeys and more than eighty monasteries overlooking the water courses. Part of the route of the Winter Way (*Camino de Invierno*) runs through Ribeira Sacra.

Evidence of water management technologies span the periods of human occupation to the present and include archaeological sites, drainage systems associated with the terraces, fountains, canals, weirs, crossings, bridges, more than 600 water mills that date from the 11th to the 20th centuries, and modern industrial power stations. The 20th

century hydroelectric dams and power stations are considered by the State Party to be outstanding examples of hydraulic engineering and are the final phase of a continuous process of harnessing energy from water.

Ribeira Sacra is characterised by an interdependence of natural and cultural elements. The large number and diversity of proposed attributes are multi-layered and associated with a long time span. Together they comprise what the State Party refers to as a “water culture”. Local traditions include the local governance, myths, legends, toponymy, trades, gastronomy, festivals and the legacies of eremitic and monastic practices.

The nominated property directly overlaps with three nationally and regionally designated protected areas, which are designated as Natura 2000 sites. The nominated property is also included in the Ribeira Sacra and Serras do Oribio and Courel Biosphere Reserve (which refers to a larger area than the nominated property).

According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, there is potential for the nominated property to include the distributions of threatened species, such as the endangered Iberian Desman (*Galemys pyrenaicus*) and the Freshwater Pearl Mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*); and the vulnerable Western Spadefoot toad (*Pelobates cultripes*) and Iberian Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis*).

The nominated property has an area of 16,471 ha, and a buffer zone of 31,979 ha.

State of conservation

The State Party considers that the nominated cultural landscape has a good state of conservation on the basis of: the condition of the river valleys and the terracing of the slopes; the retention of woodland vegetation; good water quality; the persistence of the parish structure, small plots and historic villages; visibility of the waterscape; the continuing intangible heritage of water management and uses; and the good condition of the monastic and religious buildings and complexes.

IUCN has advised that the state of conservation of biodiversity and natural values and the monitoring of the water systems is in accordance with the EU Water Framework Directive and the EU Birds and Habitats Directives.

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation of the nominated property is generally good, although the large number and types of proposed attributes means that these are vulnerable to different pressures.

Factors affecting the nominated property

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the main factors affecting the nominated property are the loss of biological diversity and fragmentation of natural habitats, climate

change, forest fires, past inundation from hydroelectric developments, and demographic changes. Deterioration of redundant historic elements and abandoned agricultural terraces are also a potential factor. IUCN has also pointed out that future expansion of viticulture could add to the pressures on the natural values of Ribeira Sacra. The vulnerability of the nominated property to these factors differs according to the various types of proposed attributes.

The establishment of hydroelectricity reservoirs during the 20th century had some impacts on the landscape. These were outlined in the additional information received in October 2025 and February 2026 in relation to impacts on land use, biodiversity, water quality, and modifications to buildings, settlements and agriculture. There are ten hydropower plants (including four large ones). The State Party estimates that the area occupied by the dams and reservoirs is no more than 5.9 percent of the total area of the nominated property, and that the structures account for an even smaller area. Two churches were relocated prior to their inundation, and two settlements were affected by rising water levels. The State Party argues that the dams do not detract from the setting and image of the rivers, canyons and deep valleys, and that minor losses of biodiversity are offset by their contribution to clean energy, climate regulation, disaster protection and their contribution to recreation and scenic appeal.

The nominated property currently faces minimal risks or pressures from residential, agricultural, industrial, tourism, or infrastructure development. Tourism is relatively limited, although future growth could pose risks. Facilities such as viewpoints and trail signs are integrated into the environment under strict regulations.

Agriculture and viticulture are considered to be part of the values of the nominated property and are subject to policies and regulations. Environmental pressures include potential losses of biodiversity, fragmentation of habitats and invasive alien species.

Climate change is shrinking critical habitats for certain species and is causing shifts in agriculture (e.g. harvesting periods). In addition, in recent years several water retention dams in Spain have experienced serious depletion, resulting in under performance, which could be an affecting factor for the nominated property. Forest fires pose a significant risk, but the area is less prone to other natural disasters, although severe storms, floods, and earthquakes remain potential threats.

Concerns about wind farm installations in the wider area were raised by ICOMOS in its previous evaluation. However, in the additional information of October 2025 the State Party confirmed that there are no wind farms in the nominated property or its buffer zone. Those located further away are considered to have no significant visual impact. The State Party has also confirmed that there are no active quarries in the nominated property or its buffer zone.

In the additional information of October 2025, the State Party provided an update on planned and approved developments in and near the nominated property. No large-scale planned or approved development projects (including energy projects, road or transport infrastructure, major tourism development projects, large-scale agricultural projects, industrial projects, or major new urban or resident developments) are ongoing or envisaged within the nominated property or its buffer zone. The only exception is underground works to upgrade the power plants, with no impacts on the landscape. Smaller scale projects that are planned are listed in the management plan.

ICOMOS notes that the management system has identified potential factors and put in place actions in response. The State Party is encouraged to consider in more detail the potential impacts of climate change (including the scarcity of water resources and the increased risk of fires and hydrological extremes). Although the State Party advised that recent population trends are promising for Ribeira Sacra, ICOMOS considers that because the population is small and is responsible for the upkeep of key elements of the cultural landscape, the nominated property remains vulnerable to depopulation.

ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is generally good and that the main factors affecting the nominated property are loss of biological diversity and fragmentation of natural habitats, climate change, forest fires, past inundation from hydroelectric developments and demographic changes. The key pressures are well-identified by the State Party and appropriate measures are in place through the implementation of the management plan.

3 Proposed justification for inscription

Proposed justification

The nominated property is considered by the State Party to be of Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural property for the following reasons:

- Ribeira Sacra is an outstanding cultural waterscape that demonstrates the relationship between humans and water.
- The spectacular river canyons and valleys have been sculpted by water, and the harvesting of water over centuries of continuous occupation has ensured the survival and wellbeing of communities.
- The eremitic tradition that emerged in the 5th century, and the establishment of monastic communities and traditional settlements have shaped the landscape of small plots and fragmented land holdings, interspersed with churches, monasteries and abbeys that overlook river courses.
- The exceptional water heritage includes archaeological sites, systems for draining the *socalcos* (terraces on steep slopes with crops and

vineyards), waterworks of all historical periods (including the 20th century industrialisation of hydropower), fountains, water mills, canals, weirs, crossings, bridges, river routes and waterfalls.

- A high density of vineyard and agricultural terraces have adapted to the natural constraints of the slopes. These structure the topography, control runoff and erosion, and reflect the management of hydrological processes.
- The intangible heritage of the waterscape includes the governance and customs for managing water, the beauty of the watercourses and waterfalls, myths and legends, and the toponymy.

According to the State Party, the nominated property is proposed as an interconnected set of attributes centred on water, rather than a list of individual attributes. These are described as follows in additional information provided in February 2026: the river canyons and valleys sculpted by water and the numerous watercourses; the water and energy heritage sustained by watercourses [including water mills, power stations and dams dating from the Middle Ages to the mid-20th century]; the enduring legacy of traditional terraced farming systems on the steep slopes of river canyons, as a feat of hydraulic engineering; the unique land-use and land-tenure (smallholdings) structure, marked and defined by the river system and watercourses; the eremitic and monastic heritage that shaped the distinctive cultural features landscape and water culture since its origins; and the survival of a rich intangible heritage associated with water culture.

During the evaluation of this nomination, ICOMOS questioned the inclusion of the 20th century industrial hydroelectric plants as attributes of the nominated cultural landscape. In the additional information of October 2025 and February 2026, the State Party argued that these are considered to be a modern continuation of the earlier tradition of water mills. The State Party explains the logic of their inclusion according to four phases of the evolution of water power beginning with the introduction of water mills by monastic orders, changes in water mill technologies over time, and the introduction of water turbines in the 19th century. On this basis, the 20th century power plants, dams and reservoirs sites are considered to be the final phase of a process of continuous evolution in harnessing water for energy. However, the State Party also acknowledges that operational considerations mean that the machinery and technology of these power stations are not attributes (e.g. turbines, control systems, electrical systems) as they need to continue to be modernised/upgraded.

ICOMOS appreciates the clarifications provided by the State Party on this matter. However, the argument that the 20th century industrial hydroelectricity elements of the nominated property represent a continuity with the earlier methods of harnessing water power are not supported in the context of an evaluation of what might be outstanding about this cultural landscape. Some or all of these could be of local or national heritage value due to their representation of 20th century industrialisation, but ICOMOS does not consider that they are aligned with the

potential Outstanding Universal Value of Ribeira Sacra due to their dramatically different scale and purpose. In this context, ICOMOS concurs with the State Party's observation in the additional information of February 2026 that excluding the power stations as attributes would not fundamentally alter the evaluation of the nominated property and has excluded further consideration of them as attributes in this evaluation report.

Comparative analysis

The State Party considers that the nominated waterscape addresses the aims of the 1994 Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List, and the ICOMOS "Filling the gaps – an action plan for the future" (2004). The State Party has taken note of relevant ICOMOS and IUCN thematic studies, and a thematic study undertaken by TICCIH on water industry. Europe is identified as the relevant geocultural context (particularly the Atlantic sub-region), although examples from other regions are included in the comparative analysis.

During the evaluation of this nomination, there were several exchanges with the State Party to clarify the use of the term "waterscape", which has a range of meanings outside the World Heritage context. In the additional information received in February 2026, the State Party clarified that the use of the term "waterscape" establishes the theme of the cultural landscape and its predominant character. Water is the dominant feature of the cultural landscape and is its shaping force. The use of the term "waterscape" is not intended to propose a new typology.

Nevertheless, the comparative analysis is presented according to a typological framework (cultural waterscapes), followed by a thematic framework (water-related cultural heritage), and to a lesser extent, a chronological framework (from the 6th century to the present). Given that all human societies depend on water resources and involve water management, the State Party notes the wide diversity of water-related heritage and notes that many such sites and systems are already inscribed on the World Heritage List. The State Party does not consider that it would be necessary to extend the comparative analysis to all rural water management systems in the European regional context, and notes that this would be an enormous task.

The first part of the comparative analysis considers cultural landscapes in inland river environments. This was based on European landscape characterisation typologies for rivers, which classify this area in the category of gorges and ravines with canyons and valleys incised into Palaeozoic massifs. This type of river valley creates physical constraints on human settlements and land uses and are found in the Iberian Peninsula and in the massifs of western and central Europe. This part of the comparative analysis considers geomorphological characteristics, agro-ecological systems, settlement patterns, hydraulic heritage and historical continuity.

The State Party selected a representative sample of fourteen inland river environments that feature agricultural

terraces, some of which are included on the World Heritage List and Tentative Lists including: the Alto Douro Wine Region (Portugal, 2001, criteria (iii), (iv) and (v)); the Wachau Cultural Landscape (Austria, 2000, criteria (ii) and (iv)); or the Loire Valley between Sully-sur-Loire and Chalonnes (France, 2000, criteria (i), (ii) and (iv)). Several Tentative List entries from Europe are also briefly discussed (in Serbia and Latvia), as well as a small number of examples from other regions.

The next part of the comparative analysis is constructed on the basis of thematic comparisons between various types of water-related cultural heritage, including hydraulic energy supply (water mills and hydroelectric power) and the ability to demonstrate the historical evolution of hydraulic technologies. A representative sample of nineteen comparators was selected and subdivided into old water mills (eight), isolated water mills (four), hydropower sites (four) and other hydraulic systems (three). All of the examples selected are on the World Heritage List or Tentative Lists.

The State Party asserts that the proposal is a cultural waterscape which is distinct from a water management system, although there are elements of such systems within it. Tracing the movement of water underpins the creation of the terrain, biodiversity and scenery. The taming, harnessing and management of water is seen in the terraced slopes and small holdings, and in the generation of local energy through the hundreds of water mills for local energy production and modern hydroelectric dams, reservoirs and plants.

In the additional information of February 2026, the State Party summarises the overall distinctiveness of the nominated property on the basis of its complexity in terms of the density of land uses and historical continuity, and its ability to demonstrate a more coherent relationship between landforms, agriculture, settlements and hydraulic systems than other compared areas. The State Party also refers to the enduring medieval landscape structure and the unusual micro-parcels, and emphasises the diversity of crops (compared to other areas that have monocultures).

ICOMOS acknowledges the research that has underpinned the State Party's comparative analysis but has concluded that it remains insufficient to demonstrate that Ribeira Sacra is an "outstanding example". ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis has been narrowed by the framing of the thematic analysis as a "cultural waterscape", the geomorphological categorisation of the river valleys, the emphasis on the Atlantic coastline of Europe (rather than the full region); and the use of representative examples or samples for comparison. The approach to the comparative analysis to select representative samples for comparison and the focus on the waterscapes has not enabled a sufficiently solid basis for understanding the comparative significance of the nominated cultural landscape. While the additional information provided in October 2025 and February 2026 has augmented the understanding of what has been done and clarified the State Party's perspective, the conclusion reached by ICOMOS is that the comparative

analysis is not sufficient to demonstrate the potential for the nominated cultural landscape to be inscribed in the World Heritage List as an outstanding example of a particular traditional human settlement or land use.

ICOMOS does not consider that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

Criteria under which inscription is proposed

The transnational serial property is nominated on the basis of criterion (v).

Criterion (v): be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that Ribeira Sacra is an exceptional testimony to a living cultural waterscape that evolved over 1,500 years, with a large number of water works and evidence of cultural knowledge about water management. The State Party considers that the complex settlement patterns of the nominated property demonstrate adaptation to difficult environmental conditions, including agricultural practices on rugged terrain using *socalcos* (terraces). The State Party also considers that the different hydraulic technologies for generating energy are significant, including traditional water mills and the 19th and 20th-century hydroelectricity dams and power stations found within the nominated property. The State Party also considers the interdependence between culture and nature to be central to the proposed Outstanding Universal Value and points to the intangible cultural heritage traditions of the waterscape.

ICOMOS notes the long history of interaction between people and nature in this area, its scenic qualities, and the ways in which the remote and steep terrain and watercourses have been adapted to support human settlements and lifeways. A very wide variety of landscape elements representing multiple historical timeframes have been used to argue for the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. However, ICOMOS does not consider that Ribeira Sacra has been established as an "outstanding example" of a traditional settlement and/or land use. While interesting imprints of relict historical periods are readable in the landscape and continue to be used (such as the pattern of micro-plots and terracing), the integration and inter-relationships of these with the many other proposed attributes have not been demonstrated. Despite the efforts of the State Party to clarify the basis of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, ICOMOS considers that this has not portrayed a coherent pattern of settlement/land use that could be considered to be outstanding.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is not demonstrated.

ICOMOS considers that criterion (v) has not been demonstrated.

Integrity and authenticity

Integrity

The integrity of the nominated cultural landscape is based on the state of conservation and the way major pressures are managed, as well as the intactness of the material evidence.

The State Party has drawn the boundaries in order to include an area of sufficient scale to represent the features of the waterscape, and points to the very large number of watercourses, terraced slopes, and micro-plots. According to the State Party, there are no major threats impacting on the nominated property.

No issues have been identified with the boundaries of the nominated cultural landscape. However, since the criterion for justifying the proposed Outstanding Universal Value has not been demonstrated, attributes of Outstanding Universal Value cannot be identified and integrity, as defined by the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, is not demonstrated.

ICOMOS considers that the integrity of the nominated property has not been demonstrated.

Authenticity

Authenticity depends on the degree of credibility and truthfulness of information sources about the proposed values of the nominated property and the ways in which the attributes can be understood as conveying the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. Sources of information must be considered and judged primarily within the cultural contexts to which they belong. The authenticity of the nominated property is based on the form, design, functionality, typology, materials, period and location of the proposed attributes.

The State Party has outlined how the authenticity of the nominated property is supported by documentary sources and historical maps, as well as the large number of studies, inventories and research that has been undertaken.

ICOMOS considers that since the criterion for justifying the proposed Outstanding Universal Value has not been demonstrated, attributes of Outstanding Universal Value cannot be identified and authenticity, as defined by the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, is not demonstrated.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity and authenticity of the nominated property have not been met.

Boundaries

There are 1,177 inhabitants within the nominated cultural landscape and 4,909 inhabitants within the buffer zone (2022 figures). Most of the land is publicly or communally owned, although there is some privately owned land and land owned by the Catholic Church.

The boundaries of the nominated property have been established on the basis of the topography of the upper contours of the valleys at the confluence of the Sil and Miño rivers. These have been drawn on the basis of *bocarribeiras* or the point where the slope abruptly changes from gradients steeper than thirty percent to below ten percent. The boundaries enclose a large area with a perimeter of 273 kilometres.

The proposed buffer zone encloses the entire nominated property. It is based on the location of the parishes that were established in the Middle Ages and survive today as identifiable territorial units. The State Party has explained that the buffer zone contributes to the protection of the cultural landscape and also preserves viewsheds. ICOMOS considers that the alignment of the buffer zone with the parish boundaries is appropriate. The buffer zone plays a role in safeguarding the nominated property and maintaining the continuity of the Ribeira Sacra landscape as well as facilitating stewardship and sustainable management.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the proposed boundaries and buffer zone are adequate and are aligned with the legal protection and management system.

Evaluation of the proposed justification for inscription

In summary, ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis does not justify consideration of the nominated property for the World Heritage List, and that criterion (v) has not been demonstrated. Since the criterion for justifying the proposed Outstanding Universal Value has not been demonstrated, attributes of Outstanding Universal Value cannot be identified and the integrity and authenticity (as defined by the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*) are not demonstrated.

4 Conservation measures and monitoring

Documentation

The State Party has described the inventory of the elements that comprise the nominated cultural landscape, which was done as part of its designation as a Heritage of Cultural Interest (BIC). The General Directorate for Cultural Heritage is responsible for managing and updating this information.

In the additional information of October 2025, the State Party provided further details about the documentation of the proposed attributes. Digital cartographic data were used to characterise and describe the nominated

property. Base maps and images such as aerial orthophotographs, topographic maps, hypsometric maps, LiDAR terrain models, slope maps and digital elevation models were used. The digital thematic maps included lithological maps, hydrogeological maps, vegetation maps, maps of rivers and reservoirs, land use and land cover, plot subdivisions, road networks and traditional footpaths, the Natura 2000 network, the Galician network of protected areas, and administrative boundaries (municipalities and parishes). Georeferenced aerial photography from 1956 was used to trace the changes in the nominated property, and an extensive catalogue of historical maps was used.

The State Party advised that most of the tangible attributes are well documented and mapped, although there is continuing work on the detailed mapping of water mills, small bridges, *portellas*, fountains, washing places, *sequeiros*, and other ethnographic elements. A map of scenic viewpoints was provided in additional information received in February 2026. The management plan identifies ongoing actions to complete these inventories.

Regarding the intangible cultural heritage, additional information received in February 2026 explained that this is well-documented in published sources and indicated that there is a commitment to research and identification of intangible cultural heritage in the management plan.

Conservation measures

There is a very wide range of proposed attributes and conservation measures vary. These are not described in detail in the nomination dossier, although the management plan identifies planned conservation actions.

The parish structure and historic settlement system remain functional reflecting a continuity in territorial organisation and agricultural land use. The system of smallholdings with traditional terraces continues to be maintained by local communities, ensuring the conservation of ancestral techniques and economic viability, especially through viticulture and other crops.

In additional information of October 2025, the State Party noted that the key conservation plans and policies are outlined in the management plan and the Ribeira Sacra Landscape Action Plan (2021). Some areas have some specific conservation plans, such as the hydrological plans for the Miño-Sil Demarcation, and the forest resource management plan and the management plans for the Special Area of Conservation (Natura 2000 Network). There are also plans for water heritage conservation, restoration of the traditional chestnut forests, and a conservation plan for all immovable heritage including the *socalcos*.

Monitoring

The monitoring arrangements are described in the nomination dossier. Reflecting the diversity and large number of proposed attributes, monitoring indicators have been developed in groups: climate, territory, resources and

environment; cultural heritage; population and socio-economic factors; tourism, visits and mobility; and knowledge transfer, dissemination and management. The indicators, periodicity and responsibility are outlined. In relation to the ability of these indicators to identify and monitor trends in the state of conservation and factors, ICOMOS notes that there is a mix of direct and secondary measures proposed. The effectiveness of the monitoring system will depend on the systems of inventorying and recording of interventions.

ICOMOS considers that that the documentation, conservation measures, and monitoring of the nominated cultural landscape are adequate.

5 Protection and management

Legal protection

The legal protection of the nominated property is established through national, regional and European laws. This is primarily assured through the designation of the entire nominated area as Heritage of Cultural Interest (BIC) in the category of cultural landscape. This is considered by the State Party to be the highest legal status available in current regional and national laws, including Law 5/2016 on the cultural heritage of Galicia.

The protection of the nominated property is further supported by laws for the protection of rivers and the environment, including Natura 2000 Network (which applies to two areas within the nominated property including the Cañón Del Sil), Law 5/2006 on the Protection of Rivers and laws relating to the Public Water Domain. At the regional and local levels, the Landscape Protection Law of Galicia and relevant planning instruments also apply.

ICOMOS notes that it is not straightforward to determine the exact number of individually protected elements within the extensive area of Ribeira Sacra. ICOMOS considers that the State Party could implement more specific local controls on land use and development in the buffer zone, including building heights, materials, density and infrastructure improvements.

Management system

A management structure has been established under the Directorate General of Cultural Heritage of the Xunta de Galicia and is coordinated by the Interdepartmental Commission of Ribeira Sacra. The Commission is made up of representatives of local bodies (public and private) that cover the spectrum of stakeholders involved in the nominated property, including the Xunta de Galicia, Parish Councils and communities, local and provincial councils, the Ribeira Sacra Rural Association, the Ribeira Sacra Tourism Consortium, the Regulatory Council of the Designation Origin, the bishoprics of Lugo and Orense, the Miño-Sil Hydrographic Confederation, and non-government organisations in the fields of cultural heritage, environment and local development. There is a Standing

Committee with responsibilities for implementing agreements; and a Scientific Committee with an advisory role.

The management system includes a management plan and a collaborative governance structure to support cooperation among public entities and owners. Resources for conservation and management of the nominated property come from a range of sources, with the Regional Administration serving as the primary driver for many initiatives. There is a reliance on owners to maintain the crop terraces and water-related structures. The nominated property also benefits from various public funding streams at the European, national, and regional levels. ICOMOS also notes that the management plan works in tandem with others in place for obligations in relation to nature conservation and land management such as the Special Drought Plan and the Ribeira Sacra Landscape Action Plan. Aligning the management plan for the nominated property with those in place for the governance and management of the Biosphere Reserve is recommended by ICOMOS and IUCN.

The management plan is the key tool for the stewardship of the nominated property. It outlines seven programmes and actions (with identified responsibilities, resources, timeline and monitoring indicators). The plan and its programmes are reviewed biennially, while the specific actions are planned over a four-year period. The strategic goals focus on conserving and enhancing the proposed Outstanding Universal Value and related heritage, ensuring effective protection of the nominated cultural landscape, and providing an integrated management system for unified policies and efficient resource use. The plan aims to coordinate the actions of all stakeholders, establish common conservation guidelines, strengthen community participation and awareness, and support the socio-economic revitalisation of the area through sustainable practices. It also promotes sustainable tourism, the preservation of traditional knowledge and customs, and the advancement of research and dissemination related to the nominated property.

While the nomination dossier alludes to the assessment of environmental and/or heritage impacts arising from the different regulations, it is not clear whether a formal system for Heritage Impact Assessments in relation to the proposed Outstanding Universal Value are currently in place. Such mechanisms should be established for all projects or land use proposals within or near the nominated property that could potentially affect its heritage values; and Strategic Environmental Assessments should be applied for broader plans and policies for the buffer zone and wider setting.

While there is no risk preparedness plan in place, the State Party has identified key risks and relevant management responses, including monitoring and maintenance arrangements. Because of the risk of forest fires, partnerships with civil protection authorities are in place; and risks associated with the abandonment of agricultural land are being addressed through initiatives to

encourage generational renewal, support rural entrepreneurship projects, and strengthen producer networks.

Visitor management

Ribeira Sacra and the scenic Cañón del Sil are among the leading tourist destinations in Galicia. The area has a large number of vineyards, producing one of the most famous Galician Designations of Origin. Other highlights include, the ethnographic group of the Xábrega mills, the Ethnographic Museum of Arxeriz, and the monasteries of Santo Estevo and Santa Cristina, which offer guided tours and additional services for visitors. There are ninety-two strategic viewpoints; and twenty trails stretching over 365 kilometres, including certified routes and the Winter Way (*Camino de Invierno*). Annual festivals and cultural performances are also elements of tourism.

Tourism demand has steadily grown from the 1990s, although it is still relatively low (approximately 150,000-175,000 overall). This is within the carrying capacity established by the State Party. Many parts of the nominated property are in private ownership or are inaccessible due to the steep topography.

Visitor facilities and interpretation have been provided through the implementation of the Ribeira Sacra Landscape Action Plan and Landscape Covenant. Interpretation is provided in a number of historic buildings and viewpoints, and trails and signs have been installed.

A Tourism Revitalisation Plan was established in 2005, accompanied by the creation of the Ribeira Sacra Tourism Consortium comprised of twenty town councils. A 2021-2023 Tourism Sustainability Plan was developed in coordination with the management plan and Sustainable Mobility Plan, and there is a manual of good practices for visitors. A new Tourism Sustainability Plan 2024-2026 is being developed. Planned actions will focus on development of interpretation, new activities and tourism products that are consistent with the proposed Outstanding Universal Value; support for local tourism businesses and services, including training for guides; and encouraging zero or low-emission land and river transportation modes. The management plan also provides for the development of a Public Use Plan. The area has been included in the national Integral System of Tourism Quality in Destinations (SICTED).

ICOMOS notes the well-developed tourism infrastructure and diverse range of visitor experiences that are aligned with the heritage values of nominated property. ICOMOS considers that the nominated property is potentially vulnerable to future tourism impacts and notes the work undertaken by the State Party to develop sustainable tourism for Ribeira Sacra, including actions associated with carrying capacities, traffic congestion, real-time monitoring of visitor flows, and ensuring that benefits flow to communities.

Community involvement

The nomination dossier and additional information provided by the State Party in October 2025 outline the community engagement processes in detail. Engagement with key stakeholders and actors in the nomination process has been ongoing since 1996, including the processes of the declaration of the nominated cultural landscape as a BIC in 2018. The key issues raised by communities include: housing, transportation and other infrastructure; difficulties faced by farmers; sustainable tourism; and the creation of a study centre and local advisory group. The management plan provides responses to these issues.

While most of the land is publicly or communally owned (common land, public paths/roads and water surfaces), most of the farmed terraces are privately owned in highly fragmented plots. A substantial part is in a form of communal ownership known as *montes vecinales de mano común* (wooded common lands) that provides for customary uses of the land. The Council of Parishes represent local residents, and the Ribeira Sacra Tourism Consortium, the Regulatory Council of the Ribeira Sacra Designation of Origin, as well as the Bishopsrics of Lugo and Ourense are also important local organisations. The Catholic Church owns most of the religious monuments; and the hydrographic network is managed by the Miño-Sil Hydrographic Confederation which oversees power generation. Wine Cooperatives bring together small producers around shared processes of wine production and marketing.

The governance of the nominated property is based on a participatory approach and shared responsibilities that involve local stakeholder organisations, with representation of local people. Two meetings per year of the Council of Parishes allow local issues to be identified. The Ribeira Sacra Waterscape Scientific Committee has been established to advise on various expert issues; and the Interdepartmental Commission of Ribeira Sacra was established in 2020 to ensure community representation. Communities can participate through non-governmental organisations for culture and local development, or through the Parishes. Educational outreach and participatory decision-making foster a shared sense of responsibility, ensuring that community values remain central to conservation efforts. ICOMOS also notes the attention paid to the intangible cultural heritage of the local communities (including knowledge, skills and collective memory).

In the additional information of October 2025 and February 2026, the State Party described the aging population and demographic decline, although these trends have begun to reverse in recent times. The revitalisation is attributed to the opportunities from wine production, heritage management and heritage tourism. While the State Party does not consider that demographic issues pose threats to the nominated property, the maintenance of the heritage values of the nominated property and the long-term functionality of the parishes are reliant on local inhabitants. For these reasons, ICOMOS considers that the nominated property is vulnerable to future population decline (including

any future increase in the proportion of absentee land owners).

ICOMOS received information on behalf of a number of local community organisations from the Federación de Asociacións da Ribeira Sacra expressing strong concerns about the nomination. A range of issues were raised including the participation of local communities, the promotion of Ribeira Sacra for commercial and tourism purposes, and water quality and environmental protection problems. The circumstances for the residents of the nominated area are considered to be precarious due to demographic and economic factors, a lack of community infrastructure and conflicts with wine growers. In October 2025, the State Party provided a response to these points. ICOMOS notes the disparate community views about the benefits of World Heritage inscription, and encourages the State Party to continue its engagement actions and to listen to dissonant views.

Effectiveness of the protection and management of the nominated property

In summary, ICOMOS considers that the legal protection and management system are adequate, although formal processes for Heritage Impact Assessment should be established. The management plan and sustainable tourism plan provide relevant strategies and actions for the conservation, safeguarding and presentation of the nominated property.

6 Conclusion

The Ribeira Sacra Waterscape is a large organically evolved cultural landscape with both continuing and relict elements. It has a long history of land uses in the valleys and tributaries of the Miño and Sil rivers, and features steep slopes, micro-plots, agricultural terraces, hydraulic features, water mills and water energy features, as well as elements associated with centuries of monastic practices and intangible cultural heritage traditions. This nomination is the result of a lengthy period of research and development and was substantially revised following the withdrawal in 2021 of a nomination for Ribeira Sacra which was based on a different justification for Outstanding Universal Value, different criteria, and different boundaries.

ICOMOS appreciates the efforts of the State Party to provide heritage designation to this large area and the significant commitments made to the conservation and safeguarding of the cultural landscape. The legal protection and management system developed for the cultural landscape are clear strengths of the nomination, and the State Party and local communities have developed important initiatives for sustainable tourism.

However, ICOMOS does not consider that a compelling justification for Outstanding Universal Value has been presented.

The State Party has conceptualised the nominated property as a waterscape in its title and in its promotion to visitors. Whilst agreeing that this is an interesting approach for those purposes, ICOMOS does not consider that the focus on the idea of “waterscape” as part of the comparative analysis and proposed justification for Outstanding Universal Value has assisted in specifically explaining what is distinctive and potentially outstanding about the nominated property.

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis does not support the consideration of the nominated property for the World Heritage List. This type of cultural landscape features a range of vernacular characteristics that are not altogether uncommon within the European region. More thorough research is needed to establish that this particular landscape can meet the requirement of criterion (v), to demonstrate that it is an “outstanding example”.

In common with the previous nomination for Ribeira Sacra, the nomination presents features of a wide temporal and typological diversity which are all considered to contribute to the potential Outstanding Universal Value. ICOMOS notes that there are many hundreds of potential attributes in various different typological categories (terraces, water mills, settlements, hydraulic works, etc). It is important to stress that a wide diversity of attributes is not necessarily a determinant of Outstanding Universal Value. Despite the additional information provided by the State Party, it is not evident how they fit together to form a coherent cultural landscape (including the relationships between them and over time), to express the potential Outstanding Universal Value. In addition, ICOMOS does not concur with the arguments made by the State Party about the inclusion of the 20th-century industrialised hydroelectric power stations, dams and reservoirs as proposed attributes. While these elements may be of local or national significance for their 20th-century design and/or industrial characteristics, the argument that they represent an organic evolution and continuity of local water-based energy production from the centuries of water mills and other hydraulic works is not accepted.

While the State Party is optimistic about recent demographic trends, past population decline has led to the loss of some attributes such as the farmed terraces. According to the State Party, the water mills became obsolete in the 20th century, and those that survive serve educational and heritage interpretation purposes.

ICOMOS appreciates that the work to fully revise the nomination of Ribeira Sacra has been energetically undertaken according to a different narrative, justification for Outstanding Universal Value and criteria. Nevertheless, gaps remain in relation to the revised approach.

Understanding the attributes (their location, historical context, inter-relationships and current state and condition) is crucial. For example, given the emphasis on the waterscape and water culture, it is of some concern

that a clear analysis of the state of conservation of these elements has not been completed. Also, there is an emphasis on the importance of the intangible “water culture” of Ribeira Sacra, but despite advice about the existence of studies and publications, only brief information is available about these traditions and the communities or individuals that hold this knowledge.

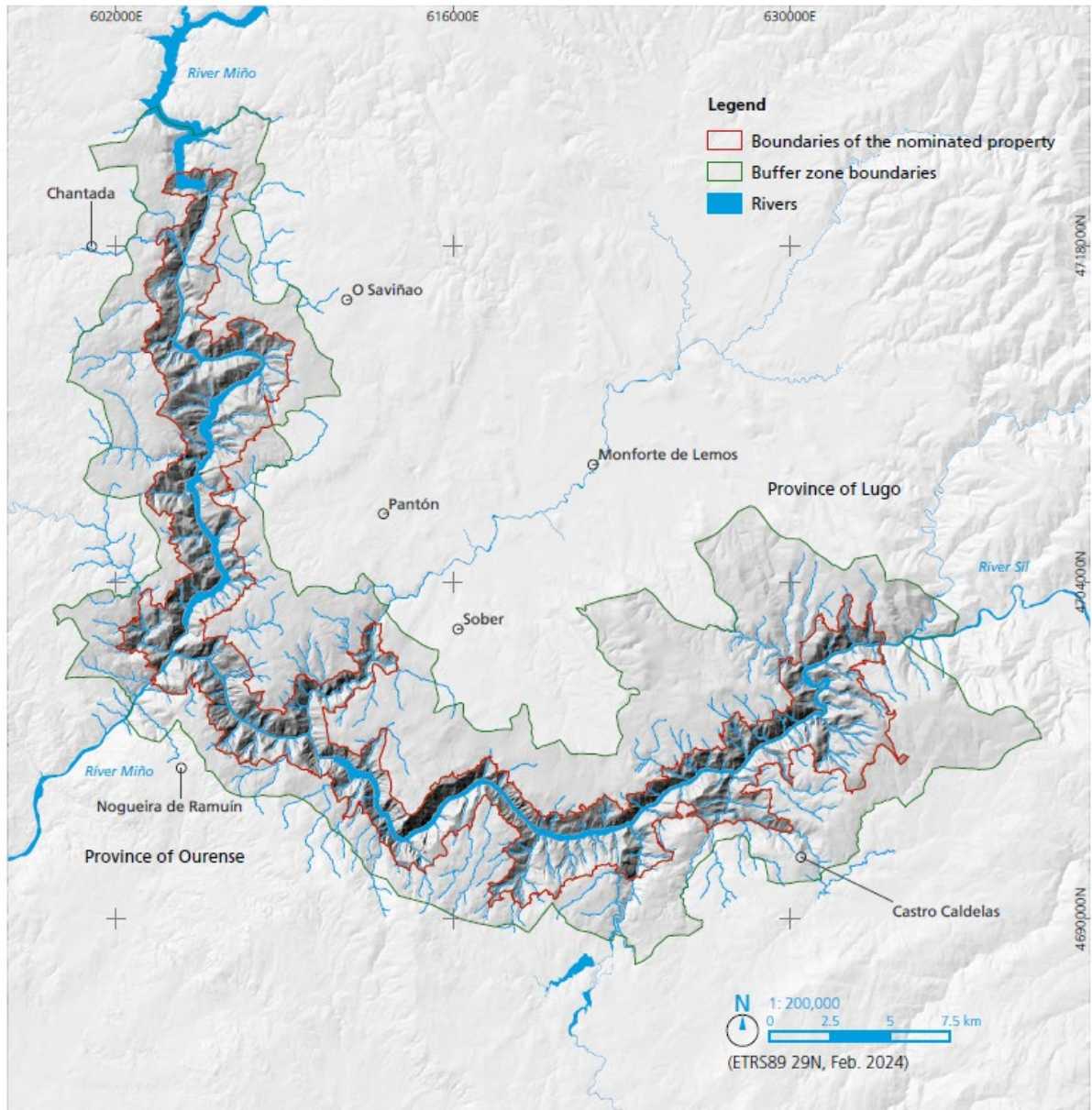
While it is clear that there is a strong willingness by the State Party and its local partners to continue to work on the issues raised in this report, ICOMOS does not consider that the nominated property meets the requirements for inscription set out in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. ICOMOS has concluded that criterion (v) is not demonstrated, and the conditions of integrity and authenticity are not met. There is a lack of breadth and depth to the comparative analysis and further work is needed on the documentation of the proposed attributes.

ICOMOS considers that the nomination does not justify Outstanding Universal Value and cannot be recommended for inscription.

7 Recommendations

Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the Ribeira Sacra Waterscape, Spain, should **not be inscribed** on the World Heritage List.



Map showing the boundaries of the nominated property

