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UNESCO Designates Agave Region in Western Mexico as World Heritage Site

by LADB Staff

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The UN Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) has designated an area comprising 116,000 hectares in western Mexico as a World Heritage site. The area, known formally as the Valle del Tequila and informally as the Paisaje Agavero (agave landscape), is primarily in Jalisco state but includes some portions of Guanajuato and Nayarit states. The area is home to the largest concentration of agave plants in the world and to Mexico's tequila industry. The site was chosen because of its contribution to the Mexican culture, especially the tradition of tequila manufacturing. "The cultivation of agave is seen as an intrinsic element of Mexican culture and national identity," UNESCO said in a statement.

The UNESCO designation provides universal protection and funds for conservation and restoration to the region, which is about 48 km northwest of Guadalajara. The designation covers an area comprising two separate regions. One region is divided into two "nuclear zones," the first being the Tequila and Amatitlan Valleys, including the agave fields, factories, and villages. The other zone recognizes the archeological site at Teuchitlan, which shaped the culture of the area from 200 A.D. to 900 A.D. Teuchitlan featured terraces for agriculture, housing, temples, ceremonial mounds, and ball courts.

A second region places special emphasis on protecting flora and fauna in the area around the Tequila Volcano and the Rio Santiago basin. The UNESCO decision to recognize the area was the result of a four-year campaign by a coalition of local, state, and federal entities, including the mayors of several cities in the region, the Jalisco state government, and the federal Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia (INAH).

"This is an international recognition of the exceptional traditions and cultures inherent in our country's tequila-producing region," said the project's chief adviser Francisco Lopez Morales, who once led the patrimony division at the INAH. INAH officials said the UNESCO recognition in a way celebrates a symbol of Mexico's meztizo culture, which is a mixture of the new and old worlds. "Tequila developed through a mixture of two cultural traditions, the prehispanic practice of fermenting mezcal juice and the distillation techniques brought to the country from Europe," said Jose Vicente de la Rosa, a coordinator for INAH.

The Valle del Tequila is one of eight sites worldwide to gain the designation this year at the 30th annual meeting of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee in Vilnius, Lithuania, in July. Also chosen were sites in Colombia, Ethiopia, Gambia-Senegal, Malawi, Mauritius, Tanzania, and Sweden-Finland. UNESCO has recognized 25 other locations in Mexico as World Heritage sites in the last 19 years. The first came in 1987, when the UN agency announced a joint designation of the historic center of Mexico City and the floating gardens of Xochimilco.

Other sites in Mexico that UNESCO has designated have either strong environmental or cultural importance. Among those recognized for their environmental value are the whale sanctuary in El Vizcaino in Baja California Sur and a group of islands in the Gulf of California. Both areas have been threatened by industrial development (see SourceMex, 1999-11-10, 2000-03-08, and 2005-05-18). In addition to Mexico City, UNESCO has also recognized the historic centers or designated areas of several cities in Mexico on the World Heritage list. They include Zacatecas, Morelia, Puebla, Queretaro, Oaxaca, and Guanajuato.

The remains of several prehispanic cities have also received this recognition, including Teotihuacan in central Mexico; Palenque, Uxmal, Calakmul, Tlacotalpan, and Chichen-Itza in the south; and Paquime-Casas Grandes in the north.

Designation to boost tourism industry, protect tequila

Local officials said UNESCO's recognition of the tequila-producing region would help expand the tourism industry in the Valle del Tequila. "[Our region] will become more attractive for foreign tourists," said Francisco Delgado Anguiano, a municipal official in the town of Tequila. "In particular, we anticipate a growth in the number of European visitors." Jalisco state will have to boost expenditures on infrastructure to accommodate an influx of new visitors to the region, some local officials said. "We know that we have to invest in tourism-related infrastructure, restaurants, and hotels," said Floriberto Miguel Cruz, an official with the Consejo Regulador del Tequila (CRT).

The designation will also go a long way toward helping Mexico strengthen and expand its commercial protection of tequila. "[This designation] will help the industry's effort to protect our product against those who attempt to produce an altered or counterfeit liquor," said Lopez Morales. The Mexican government has managed to gain recognition from several trade partners, including the European Union (EU), the US, and Japan, that tequila is a unique Mexican product and cannot be duplicated elsewhere (see SourceMex, 1992-10-21, 1997-02-17, 2004-03-17). The intellectual property rights for tequila was also a key condition in Mexican negotiations on limited accords with China, Russia, and Brazil (see SourceMex, 2001-09-19, 2002-06-19, and 2005-06).

The government and the tequila industry remain concerned about South Africa, whose climate is especially suited to growing the blue-agave variety used in premium Mexican tequila (see SourceMex, 1997-10-29). South Africa produces about 1,200 liters per day of a liquor similar to tequila, in competition with the Mexican product. South African liquor producers were initially calling their product tequila, but changed the name to American agave because of pressure from the Mexican government.

"Up to this point, our only accomplishment is to enlist the South African Ministry of Commerce and Industry to support an international commitment to force producers to stop using the word 'tequila' to describe their product," said Agencia de noticias Proceso. (Sources: whc.unesco.org; Notimex, Associated Press, Agencia de noticias Proceso, 07/12/06; Mural-Guadalajara, 07/09/06, 07/13/06; El Informador-Guadalajara, La Jornada, La Cronica de Hoy, Milenio Diario, The Herald-Mexico City, Spanish news service EFE, Agence France-Presse, 07/13/06)

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