

# Conservation and fruition of the Côa Valley Rock art. Stakeholders' engagement processes.

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## Introduction

The open-air Upper Palaeolithic engravings in the Côa Valley, **discovered in 1991**, represent the world's largest preserved collection of this kind. This cultural heritage has significantly impacted the local community, influencing political decisions on dam construction and fostering tourism. **The Parque Arqueológico do Vale do Côa (PAVC) was established after an intense public and academic debate, leading to the 1996 decision by António Guterres' government to halt the dam project. In 1998, UNESCO classified the engravings as a World Heritage Site, and the Côa Museum was inaugurated in 2010.**

Over the past 15 years, **around 1,500 engraved rocks have been recorded, spanning from the Upper Palaeolithic to the 20th century.** However, several management and preservation challenges remain, including conflicts between cultural heritage and economic activities, the lack of a legal framework for an archaeological park, and the seasonal flooding caused by the Cofferd Dam.

Our ongoing research aims to develop a conservation plan through the analysis of previous studies, interviews, and stakeholder training. This approach seeks to ensure the sustainable and multidisciplinary preservation of this invaluable heritage.

## Objectives

**Understanding and characterizing the community and stakeholders in the Côa Valley is a crucial step to the implementing of any conservation plan.** Only by assessing the relationship between communities and rock art can a sustainable and effective plan be developed. This approach focuses on three key objectives:

- **Characterizing and analyzing the anthropological dynamics** between communities and rock art, both past and present.
- **Ensuring the inclusion of both passive and active stakeholders in the conservation plan.**
- **Raising awareness about rock art and cultural heritage conservation.**

## Challenges & Methodology

**Challenge 1:** One of the biggest challenges we have faced is **the alienation of communities from the issues concerning rock art.** Younger people sometimes don't know what the rock art of the Côa Valley is or even unknown the concept of "heritage".

**Method:**

- Organization of educational activities in the museum and schools. One of the activities we have implemented is called **"How can I protect my region's heritage?"** [1].

**Challenge 2:** In recent years, **flooding episodes** have become increasingly frequent [4]. Beyond the physical impact on rock art, these events have intensified the debate within the local community between supporters and opponents of the dam.

**Method:**

- Organize awareness campaigns within communities about the negative impact of flooding on rock art, as well as on agricultural and tourism activities."
- Continue the awareness campaign on the benefits of dismantling the cofferdam [3].

**Challenge 3:** Represents **the delicate balance between economic groups and rock art.** One of the key sectors involved is stone extraction, particularly at the Poio's Quarries [5].

**Method:**

- Conduct awareness campaigns about the buffer zones around the archaeological sites, some of which are listed by UNESCO.
- Assess the impact of quarrying activities, particularly regarding the spoil heaps produced during the construction of the dam [4].

**Challenge 4:** **The distance between the communities and the rock art has increased acts of vandalism.** Two of the vandalized sites were the Fariseu [7] and the Ribeira de Piscos [8].

**Method:**

- Implementing awareness campaigns within local communities, emphasizing the significance of rock art for the region and clearly identifying the buffer zones.
- Establishing a structured system of fines or penalties for individuals who vandalize rock art.

**Challenge 5:** **The impact of agricultural activities and the tourism are other challenges.** Issues such as vineyard advance and clandestine visits (made by stakeholders' outside the foundation). One of the most important aspects to work on is the balance between the rock art and the vineyards (both of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites).

**Method:**

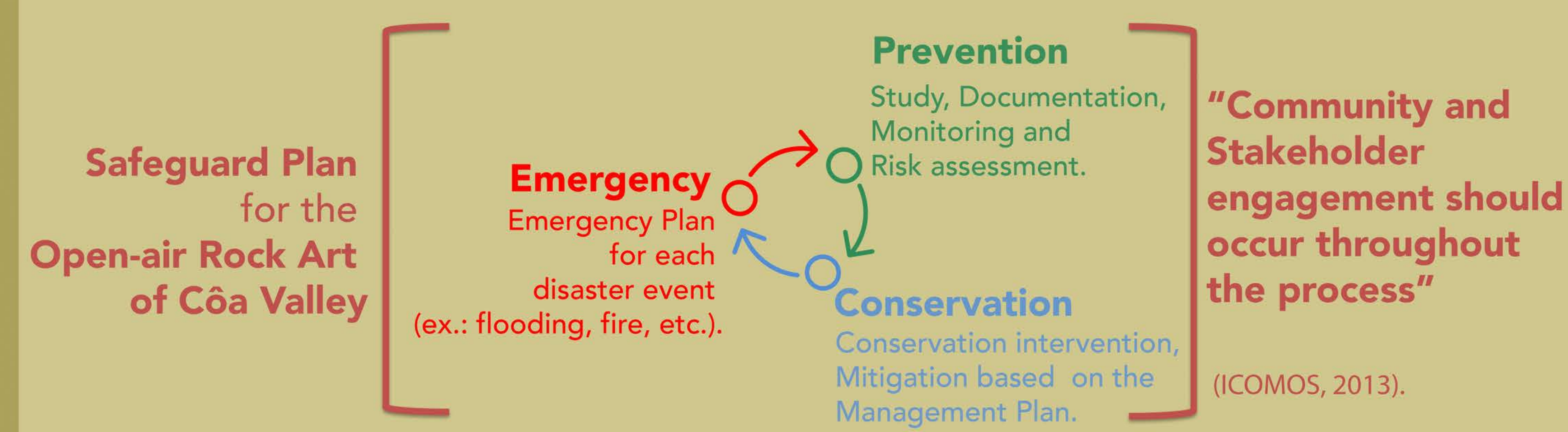
- Raise awareness of the importance of buffer areas (as mentioned above).
- Increase access control to archaeological sites.

**Image Captions:**

- [1] Durana Pinto © 2025
- [2] Durana Pinto © 2024
- [3] CNART © 1990s
- [4] Durana Pinto © 2025
- [5] Durana Pinto © 2025
- [6] Durana Pinto © 2024
- [7] Durana Pinto © 2024
- [8] Fundação Côa Parque © 2017
- [9] Durana Pinto © 2024
- [10] Durana Pinto © 2024
- [11] Durana Pinto © 2024
- [12] Durana Pinto © 2024

## Expected results

Characterizing stakeholders and community engagement processes will enable the development and implementation of a **more effective and sustainable Safeguard Plan for open-air rock art of Côa Valley**, ensuring its long-term preservation across time and space.



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