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Managing Mining Landscapes – Some issues and cases in Portugal and the UK

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Mining landscapes are heritage sites that present added difficulties in their management, since they involve a vast number of areas of intervention, proportional to their spatial dimensions.

A vast number of factors, from the more physical to the more intangible, influence the ability to aggregate the various assets of these landscapes in order to fulfil their entire potential, not only on an individual level but also globally, and to achieve the best social, recreational and educational results in the presentation of the site.

This type of heritage presents itself over a wide area, forming a composite landscape which contains several different elements, ranging from the most physical - such as buildings and infrastructure, the minerals extracted, processed and discarded, or the objects used (from heavy machinery to objects of personal use) - to the most intangible - like the events, personal stories, social organization, or the spirit of the place, that involve the entire landscape. Also, one cannot forget the very ground on which the site is planted, or the animal and plant life that it contains. These are all part of the landscape, which is itself changing inexorably, and need to be taken into consideration when preparing the management plan for the site.

Despite the obvious richness and diversity of this heritage, it is nevertheless often undervalued, as happens in Portugal, in favour of an older heritage which is easier to fit into common aesthetic standards, and easier to define and organise.

It is possible to highlight three factors that hinder the development and valorisation of mining sites:

1. The fact that it is a heritage that still gets little recognition, largely due to the sites' temporal proximity, either by society or by governments, and also by most of the scientific community working with heritage. The very notion of a cultural landscape, even as a heritage element, is still in the process of gaining widespread recognition.

2. The associations which it normally carries include some of the worst images of the Industrial Revolution, like child labour, poor working and living conditions, and social conflict. There are also connotations with today's negative images of pollution, hazard and 'eyesores' on the landscape.

3. Its very nature as a landscape, which stretches across a very wide area (often even going out of sight), containing many and varied elements and constantly changing, requiring constant maintenance and updating.

In Portugal, the industrial heritage is in rapid decline, and although measures have been taken for the recovery of these sites, they are still less than sufficient.

One area particularly relevant in the field of mining landscapes in Portugal is situated in the Iberian Pyrite Belt (IPB), a very rich geological formation which extends from Grândola, in Alentejo, to Seville, in Spain, and is about 300km long and 60km wide. It has been widely exploited, from Roman times to the present day, and has a huge diversity of structures, technologies, and stories. Also, it has gathered influences from many different countries, with British companies having had a particularly strong presence there.

For the work in which this study will be included, three Portuguese sites were analyzed: the mines of Lousal, of Aljustrel, and of S. Domingos. In Lousal we find a dynamic project of valorisation of the site, with the owners and the city

council working together successfully; in Aljustrel we find the difficulties of trying to preserve a very relevant historic landscape against the requirements of continuing exploration of some of its mines; and in S. Domingos we find a very widespread and impactful landscape quickly collapsing, in need of projects and investment.

Although part of a geological and spatial area that unites and identifies them, each one developed very different and unique landscapes. Each site has its own very particular stories and struggles, and each faced, and is still facing today, its particular difficulties and challenges.

In short and in general, some of these challenges are:

- The lack of widespread recognition and dedication by political powers, intellectuals and the community at large. Also, there is often an absence of the will, investment, and activity necessary to maximize the potential of the sites and instigate their successful reuse and dynamization— in the case of Lousal, however, there is an attempt to break with this trend.

- The difficulty in balancing the need for local development with the preservation of the sites. In Aljustrel, the preservation of the remains comes behind the need to continue operating the mine; in Lousal, however, it is sought to integrate the conservation and enhancement of the heritage site with local development, promoting tourism.

- The relationship with the owners of the property, usually the exploiting company, needs to be strengthened. In some cases, joint solutions for the sites were found, as in Lousal, but, as in the case of Aljustrel, it is often hard to find a balance between the city council's desires for the valorisation of the heritage site and the development plans of the company.

- There are also cases of vandalism, which accelerate even further the deterioration of the remains. Alarmingly, this may show a lack of connection between the local population (particularly the younger generations) and this part of their history – this has been especially so in Aljustrel and S. Domingos.

- There are still strong environmental problems in these sites, especially related to acidic waters. A national program for the environmental recuperation of these sites has been taking place for a few years but, although it is necessary to decontaminate the landscape, the sites sometimes end up largely adulterated due to reforestation, losing their identifying character - as is likely to happen in Aljustrel.

They are still, however, sites that have an extensive and ongoing history, linked to local populations that are still able to recreate it and tell stories about it. These sites are rich in historical events and cultural influences, and are part of a network of many other mines in the IPB, which can work together and exchange ideas and experiences, integrated into a unique landscape with great potential for tourism – this landscape is in the Alentejo region, which is well located and has several ongoing development projects. There is, however, a basic need for investment in the site's conservation, recovery, research, enhancement, communication, and integration.

This effort would clearly not be in vain, as one can see in the case of mining landscapes in the UK, where it is apparent that these places are vibrant, attractive, and successfully integrated into the communities in which they are situated, constantly promoting activities and renewing themselves.

Two sites spring immediately to mind, since they have acquired the status of World Heritage Sites: the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape in Wales, and the Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape.

These sites' merits are easily visible when one visits them, and they show the potential of mining landscapes for tourism activities, all the while making a valuable contribution to their communities, bringing dynamism, development and income, and creating valuable interactive projects, both locally and internationally.

At these sites, the key components of the landscapes are protected through listing and planning policies; the areas and their boundaries were analysed and delimited in their historic dimension and conservation is carried out according to best practice. They both operate through management partnerships, bringing together advice and expertise from various stakeholders, and although the various sites in the landscape are independent, they are united under a common goal and image, having invested in creating a strong and solid brand, intimately connected to the character of the site. They provide well developed walking tours of the landscape, which are well marked and supported by interpretative panels, with supporting documentation available online and through tourism and heritage facilities. Their websites are vital means of communication, both for information and marketing; they have developed web-based projects in order to collect historical information from the visitors, and also to collect the oral history that is used in interpretation, focusing it on the human side of mining history. This is augmented by visits guided by ex-miners, which keep the community connected to the sites. These sites also embrace and publicise their international connections, support cultural programmes related to mining heritage, and maintain and take part in local and international heritage-related associations and partnerships, making them part of wider groups and networks.

In Portugal there is also vast potential in the field of mining heritage. Fulfilling this potential will require the investment and the will to give new life to the sites, always reinforcing links with their local communities, working through partnerships, and learning from the experience of others.

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