

**National Archaeological Park**

# TAK'ALIK AB'AJ



**TAK'ALIK  
AB'AJ**



PARQUE ARQUEOLÓGICO NACIONAL

**World Heritage Nomination / Additional Information  
Republic of Guatemala / Ministry of Culture and Sports**





*Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes*

Guatemala, November 5th 2021  
DM-1803-2021

Ms.  
Gwenaëlle Bourdin  
Director  
ICOMOS Evaluation Unit  
Paris, France

Dear Ms Bourdin,

By this means, I present you the *Additional Information* requested on the letter dated 27 September 2021 and sent by the Evaluation Unit, as part of the currently assessing of the nomination of the *National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj* as a World Heritage site carried-out by ICOMOS.

Based on the foregoing, clear and brief responses are submitted regarding 3 different topics, as it was requested on the mentioned letter.

1. Area of the nominated property and proposed buffer zone
2. Site Museum Tak'alik Ab'aj "El Caracol del Tiempo"
3. Participation and free, prior and informed consent.

I am thanking you in advance for your attention to this letter, and send my sincere expressions of high esteem and consideration



Lic. Felipe Amado Aguilar Marroquín  
Ministro de Cultura y Deportes

# ICOMOS

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES  
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES  
CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS  
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ ПО ВОПРОСАМ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕСТ

Our Ref. GB/EG/1663\_Add.Inf

Charenton-le-Pont, 27 September 2021

H. E. Mr Francisco Roberto Gross Hernandez-Kramer  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of  
Guatemala to France, Permanent Delegate  
Permanent Delegation of Guatemala to UNESCO  
Ambassade du Guatemala  
7, avenue Niel  
75017 Paris

## **World Heritage List 2022 – Additional Information National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj (Guatemala)**

Dear Ambassador,

ICOMOS is currently assessing the nomination of the “National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj” as a World Heritage site and an ICOMOS evaluation mission has visited the property to consider matters related to protection, management and conservation, as well as issues related to integrity and authenticity.

In order to help with our overall evaluation process, we would be grateful to receive further information to augment what has already been submitted in the nomination dossier.

Therefore, we would be pleased if the State Party could consider the following points and kindly provide additional information:

### **Area of nominated property and proposed buffer zone**

ICOMOS notes that there is no proposed buffer zone in the vicinity of the nominated property. A “Preliminary Protection Strip” has been delineated on the outer limits of the nominated property. It contains a perimeter metallic mesh fence, a zone without vegetation and / or a live vegetation barrier and a 3-meter-wide land strip. It is mentioned that this is not meant to be a permanent solution. In order to better understand this situation, ICOMOS would appreciate if the State Party could provide further information on the following questions:

- What is the relationship between the nominated property and the surrounding area, referred to as “archaeological site”?
- What is known about the site outside the nominated area and how was this knowledge acquired?
- What is the opinion of the owners of the surrounding land with respect to the archaeological site and the nomination of the property to the World Heritage List?
- How would representatives of the State Party describe the relationship with the landowners?
- Would and how the “Preliminary Protection Strip” provide additional layers of protection to the nominated property?
- Is there a possibility of creating a buffer zone in the future?

### **Site Museum Tak'alik Ab'aj “El Caracol del Tiempo”**

ICOMOS notes that the planned Site Museum is to be located within the nominated property in the sector of the original historic entrance, in the south of the city, where the ancient travelers coming from the long-distance trade route arrived. The nomination dossier states that the design and construction of the building are already approved by the Ministry of Environmental and Natural Resources. ICOMOS would be pleased if the State

Party could provide additional information on the current proposal as follows:

- Has a Heritage Impact Assessment been carried out before the approval of the project?
- What is the timeframe for the completion of the museum project and what has prevented its initiation / completion until now?
- Have other possible locations for the museum been considered?
- Are there other projects under consideration for the development of the site or its preparation to receive a larger number of tourists?

### **Participation and free, prior and informed consent**

The nomination dossier highlights the continuing use of the archaeological property as a sacred site for different indigenous communities. The ritual use is regulated to ensure the conservation of the archaeological remains. Community workshops with indigenous participation, focused on the World Heritage nomination, have shown that there seem to be further needs for communication and the possibility of more active participation. In this regard, paragraph 123 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* states that: "States Parties are encouraged to prepare nominations with the widest possible participation of stakeholders and shall demonstrate, as appropriate, that the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples has been obtained, through, inter alia, making the nominations publicly available in appropriate languages and public consultations and hearings".

Therefore, ICOMOS would appreciate if the State Party could provide information regarding the process implemented to obtain the free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous communities. ICOMOS also wishes to understand how the participation of indigenous communities is organised and what their opinions are on the whole World Heritage nomination process, the planned museum and their access to the site. Could the State Party specify what impact their opinions have had in the past on the management of the nominated property?

ICOMOS appreciates that the timeframe for providing this additional information is short. Brief responses are required at this stage, and can be discussed further with the State Party if needed during the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel process.

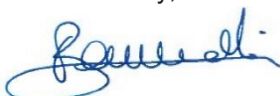
We look forward to your responses to these points, which will be of great help in our evaluation process.

We would be grateful if you could provide **ICOMOS** and the **UNESCO World Heritage Centre** with the above information by **Friday 12 November 2021 at the latest**.

Please note that the State Party shall submit two copies of the additional information to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre so that it can be formally registered as part of the nomination dossier.

We thank you in advance for your kind cooperation.

Yours faithfully,



Gwenaëlle Bourdin  
Director  
ICOMOS Evaluation Unit

Copy to Ministry of Cultural and Natural Heritage  
UNESCO World Heritage Centre



# National Archaeological Park

# TAK'ALIK AB'AJ

**World Heritage Nomination / Additional Information**  
**Republic of Guatemala / Ministry of Culture and Sports**



MINISTERIO  
DE CULTURA  
Y DEPORTES



Delegación de Patrimonio Mundial  
GUATEMALA

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# ACRONYMS

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| COCODE   | Community Development Council                                   |
| CODEDE   | Departmental Development Council                                |
| COLORES  | Corridor of Parrots and Reserves                                |
| COMUDE   | Municipal Development Council                                   |
| CONAP    | National Council of Protected Areas                             |
| DIGARN   | General Board of Environmental Management and Natural Resources |
| DISETUR  | Board of Tourist Security                                       |
| IDAEH    | Institute of Anthropology and History                           |
| INAB     | National Institute of Forest                                    |
| INE      | National Institute of Statistics                                |
| INGUAT   | Guatemalan Institute of Tourism                                 |
| MARN     | Ministry of Environmental and Natural Resources                 |
| MICUDE   | Ministry of Culture and Sports                                  |
| SEGEPLAN | General Secretariat of Planning and Programming                 |
| SIGAP    | Guatemalan System of Protected Areas                            |

# INTRODUCTION

The State Party of Guatemala submits to the Advisory Body (ICOMOS) and to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the supplementary information necessary to clarify the doubts on the points specifically exposed. Specific and concise answers to the three main questions made by ICOMOS are presented, which are the result of the analysis of the nomination dossier and the evaluation carried out in August 2021, during the Technical Evaluation Mission to The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj.

Regarding the issue of the buffer zone and its future implementation, a proposal is presented that contemplates an “initial protection zone” that takes advantage of the geographical location of the property between two rivers and the natural environment. In addition, other monuments located throughout the archaeological site have been taken into consideration under the thematic of protection islands as part of the current Work Plan for provide an adequate solution to the buffer zone. It is important to mention that the entire archaeological site or zone is already protected by Guatemalan legislation as National Cultural Heritage.

Regarding the topic related with the Site Museum Tak'alik Ab'aj “El Caracol del Tiempo”, more detailed information is submitted to support the efforts being made by the State Party. Significant progress has been made, which will make it possible to reactivate its construction as soon as possible.

Lastly, the State Party of Guatemala affirms that it has held popular consultations in the Municipality of El Asintal including surrounding areas. It has, in good faith, involved the local and indigenous communities during the information process on the nomination of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as UNESCO World Heritage site, in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent.

The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj, has been inscribed on the tentative list since 2012. Its nomination and declaration as a World Heritage Site is of great importance for the archaeological heritage of Latin America. The inscription of the nominated property enriches a group of cultural assets that are underrepresented at the regional level and allows the magnificence of the Mesoamerican cultures of the pre-classic period to be made known.

The State Party of Guatemala recognizes the magnificence and the Outstanding Universal Value of the nominated property. Therefore, it has joined efforts with different stakeholders of Guatemalan society to promote the nomination of this emblematic site.

Felipe Amado Aguilar Marroquín  
Minister of Culture and Sports  
Republic of Guatemala

# Area of nominated property and proposed buffer zone



# Area of nominated property and proposed buffer zone

ICOMOS notes that there is no proposed buffer zone in the vicinity of the nominated property. A “Preliminary Protection Strip” has been delineated on the outer limits of the nominated property. It contains a perimeter metallic mesh fence, a zone without vegetation and / or a live vegetation barrier and a 3-meter-wide land strip. It is mentioned that this is not meant to be a permanent solution. In order to better understand this situation, ICOMOS would appreciate if the State Party could provide further information on the following questions:

- What is the relationship between the nominated property and the surrounding area, referred to as “archaeological site”?
  - What is known about the site outside the nominated area and how was this knowledge acquired?
  - What is the opinion of the owners of the surrounding land with respect to the archaeological site and the nomination of the property to the World Heritage List?
  - How would representatives of the State Party describe the relationship with the landowners?
  - Would and how the “Preliminary Protection Strip” provide additional layers of protection to the nominated property?
  - Is there a possibility of creating a buffer zone in the future?
  - What is the relationship between the nominated property and the surrounding area, referred to as an “archaeological site”?
- 
- **What is the relationship between the nominated property and the surrounding area, referred to as “archaeological site”?**

It is necessary to clarify that the nominated area is part of a larger archaeological site or zone. The total extension of the archaeological site is 650 hectares and the extension of the nominated property is 15.40 hectares, that is, 2.36% of the total. For practical purposes of the nomination, the total area is called “archaeological site Tak’alik Ab’aj”, while the nominated property corresponds to the “National Archaeological Park Tak’alik Ab’aj”.

The archaeological site contains the remains of a pre-Hispanic city or settlement that was one of the most important centers of intellectual, artistic and commercial development of the southern coast of Guatemala. It was settled on ten reinforced and conditioned natural terraces, which descend on a slope from north to south, in the piedmont of the Pacific slope, and bordered on the east by the Ixchiyá River and west by the Xab River. There are four architectural groups, which extend throughout the archaeological site. The nominated property corresponds to the central group, from the first terrace in the lower part of the slope, to the fourth terrace in the intermediate part. This is the area that is open to the public, where the monuments and buildings are concentrated and which contains the Outstanding Universal Value to be preserved. The other architectural groups are distributed around the nominated property and the vestiges are covered

by the mantle of agroforestry crops in five private farms which are: Finca Santa Margarita, Finca San Isidro Piedra Parada, Finca Buenos Aires, Finca San Elías (Santa Olaya annex) and Finca Montes Elíseos. The central group and the rest of the archaeological site form a single unit and are closely interrelated in an archaeological, historical and anthropological context.

Archaeological investigations both outside and inside the core group confirm that the nominated property is representative for the entire site. The archaeological site Tak'alik Ab'aj is declared as National Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Guatemala (Ministerial Agreement 528-2002). It is also protected according to the Law for the Protection of Cultural and National Heritage (Decree 26-97) and the Agreement for the Creation of Archeological, Historical and Artistic Zones and Monuments of the Pre-Hispanic and Hispanic Periods (Agreement 1210-1970). On the other hand, the archaeological site is also identified as a Special Protection Area according to Guatemala's Protected Areas Law (Decree 4-89). All of this is confirmed by the certifications issued by the Cultural Property Registry of the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Guatemala and the National Council of Protected Areas of Guatemala -CONAP by its acronym in Spanish- (Annex 1).

In conclusion, the archaeological site consists of one public area and five private properties. Only the State property, i.e. The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj, is being nominated as a World Heritage Site.

- **What is known about the site outside the nominated area and how this knowledge was acquired?**

**About the site outside the nominated area:** All research conducted at the archaeological site, both outside and inside the nominated property, follows established lines of archaeological research, covering the following topics: architecture, sculpture, ceramics, obsidian, lithics, lapidary, hydraulic, archaeology, geoarchaeology, archaeoastronomy, rituality and pre-Hispanic and present-day cosmovision. Studies have been conducted in the ceremonial, residential and peripheral sectors.

The knowledge generated throughout the archaeological site Tak'alik Ab'aj, has been published in some 300 academic, popular publications and talks in several languages. There is a catalog of publications (Annex 2), that includes scientific articles in recognized archaeological journals, books, theses, technical reports of projects, as well as presentations at conferences, symposiums, courses and specialized workshops at the national and international level. In addition, scientific reports have been published in different media.

**About how this knowledge was acquired:** All the archaeological research on the archaeological site Tak'alik Ab'aj dates from 1888 to date, carried out by both national and international researchers. Currently, the private properties (estates) around the park allow archaeological excavations within their properties.

The entire archaeological site, both the nominated area and the surrounding estates, have been archaeologically and topographically surveyed. The architectural groups outside the nominated area are mapped, most have been investigated, some show some management and restoration.

- **What is the opinion of the surrounding landowners regarding the archaeological site and the nomination of the property to the World Heritage List?**

**Opinion regarding the archaeological site:** The landowners of the private estates around the park are aware of the importance of the entire archaeological zone and the need for its adequate conservation. Thus, the Ralda family, who are the owners of Finca Santa Margarita, are the donors of the land that currently constitutes the property named “National Archaeological Park Tak’alik Ab’aj”. This has been stipulated in the different legal documents that guarantee the acceptance of both donations in favor of the State of Guatemala (Annex 3).

On the other hand, they are also aware that their properties are located within the archaeological site and therefore must comply with everything established in the Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation (Decree 26-97). The Law establishes that public or private landowners of cultural property must allow the examination, study or periodic supervision by researchers or inspectors of the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala, of the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Guatemala (Article 26, paragraph d) and must allow the execution of exploration, excavation, research, reconstruction or studies authorized in accordance with this Law. In this sense, the landowners of these estates collaborate effectively with the archaeological park and are pleased with the results of the archeological investigations carried out on their properties.

Since its beginning, 35 years ago in 1987, The National Archaeological Park Tak’alik Ab’aj has sought closer relations with the landowners who occupy part of the ancient city of Tak’alik Ab’aj. For example, they have been invited to learn about the research work in progress (Fig. 1) and archaeological discoveries (Fig. 2). They have also participated in the archaeological symposiums where research advances are presented annually. In addition, they participate in various events throughout the year, such as the visit of personalities or the anniversary of the Park. The owners of these private estates have been important key actors, who have participated in the workshops to socialize the nomination and in the elaboration of the Management Plans.



Figure 1. Visit of the owner of Finca Santa Margarita (Mr. José Luis Ralda) as a special guest, in the archaeological research work of the National Archaeological Park Tak’alik Ab’aj, together with the Scientific Technical Coordinator, archaeologist Chista Schieber de Lavarreda. Photography: © National Archaeological Park Tak’alik Ab’aj.

It is considered that, over time, an important process of awareness and valorization has been carried out with landowners about the importance of owning part of the ancient city of Tak'alik Ab'aj in their properties. The development of archaeological research and excavations in their lands has been successful in both senses. Since it allows to increase the knowledge of the history of the occupation of the archaeological site. The landowner becomes a witness of the process of archaeological discoveries and receives all the explanations of the interpretation based on the data obtained, enriched with the already existing information of the investigations in general.

According to the remains found and the consensus reached with the landowners, restoration, conservation, and condition monitoring works can be done. An example of these actions is the work done at Finca Buenos Aires, where the "Patio Hundido" enclosure is located, and at Finca Santa Margarita, there is the sanctuary called "El Escondite", which was the distribution center for drinking water canals for the residential areas at the west of the Central Group. This has also forged a sense of pride in having part of Tak'alik Ab'aj's cultural legacy on their property.

The owners have also expressed interest in tourism, for example, at Finca Montes Elíseos a hotel is managed in the facilities of the main house of this coffee farm. Meanwhile, at Finca San Isidro, in the northern part of the property, guests are received at the estate's main house.



Figure 2. Discovery of Altar No. 48 in The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj, with the participation of the Park Directors, owners of the private estates around the Park and the national media. Photography: © National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj.

**About the nomination:** The landowners of the five estates around the nominated area are fully informed of the Park's nomination as UNESCO World Heritage Site. They have participated in the nomination socialization workshops and have been very attentive to news about the nomination process since 2014.

Landowners welcome the nomination and are aware that the declaration of the park is a high-level designation that could bring many economic benefits to the sector (Annex 4). It is important to keep in mind that these socioeconomic changes may result in a land use change. This represents an opportunity and a responsibility for the State Party to continue to inform and raise awareness about the importance of sustainable economic development that is environmentally friendly and consistent with the carrying capacity of the nominated property and its surroundings.

On the other hand, landowners expressed some concerns or doubts regarding possible limitations that may arise related to land tenure and possible changes in land use. Therefore, there have been direct high-level communications from the Guatemalan Ministry of Culture and Sports to clarify that the designation of the nominated property, which is state property, will not affect private properties. In fact, the establishment of a buffer zone does not represent any threat of obligation to sell, donate and/or expropriate their land, but only customary agreements that guarantee a land use that does not negatively affect the integrity of the nominated property.

According to conversations with them and their participation in the nomination process and Management Plans, they express their respect and commitment to the legal protection of the archaeological site. This is even taken into account in the practice of their agroforestry economic activities. For example, the logo of a local agricultural company includes the symbol called "Lamat", which is carved on Monument No. 188 of Tak'alik Ab'aj. They believe that the nomination of the park would enhance in some way this commitment to respect the heritage within their property.

There are possible threats to the archaeological site, associated with changes in land use according to fluctuating macroeconomic and climatic conditions, which could generate the need to change agroforestry cultivation. The current system of traditional cultivation has helped conserve the cultural heritage under the soil. However, it could change to other types of economic practices such as livestock farming, which reduce forest vegetation, generate soil's erosion, and at the same time reduce natural water resources (springs and streams). These threats must be taken into account in order to reach a consensus with the landowners so that land use changes that imply the elimination of forest vegetation do not occur. These consensus can be generated in the medium term for a continuity of cooperation that makes sustainable land management feasible on their properties.

- **How would representatives of the State Party describe the relationship with landowners?**

The relationship of the State of Guatemala with the landowners of the private properties around The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj is based on the Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation (Decree 26-97). This law indicates that the existing cultural properties in the national territory can be public or private property, however, regardless of who owns or possesses them, they are part of and will be under the safeguard and protection of the State (Article 5). In addition, the persons who have legitimate possession of cultural property as



established in this law, must be responsible for its conservation and custody (Article 30).

In this sense, the relationship between the State and these private properties (estates) is to provide them with custody of the archaeological assets and to ensure that land use is appropriate to avoid damage or threats to the assets. There is consensus among the owners of the five private estates that make up the archaeological site where the nominated property is located that the heritage on their lands is protected. These estates develop economic activities based on agroforestry, i.e., forest and timber crops, which can be considered environmentally compatible. However, in case they want to develop other types of activities that require a change in land use, they must comply with heritage and environmental impact studies according to current legislation.

Communication between park administrators and landowners is good and constant. This is due to the effective management that has been carried out for more than 35 consecutive years, which means continuity in the management and conservation process of the nominated property. This provides a level of credibility, trust, and security between the landowners and the representatives of the State Party, which has contributed to reaching consensus and lasting agreements. As part of the Risk Management Plan that is currently being developed, dialogue and work tables have been established with the active participation of the representatives of these estates.

In the face of situations derived from macroeconomic fluctuations that may cause abrupt changes in land use that may represent threats to the nominated property, we consider that this joint effort with the owners of the estates that make up the 650 hectares of the archaeological site, can generate in the medium term the consensus for a continuity of cooperation that makes feasible a sustainable land management in their properties, which at the same time protects the nominated property as a buffer zone. This can be part of an intergovernmental and institutional effort to safeguard agricultural and cultural landscapes and traditions as a potential resource for sustainable development.

- **Would and how the “Preliminary Protection Strip” provide additional layers of protection to the nominated property?**

The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj is completely enclosed by a metal perimeter fence, which delimits the site and provides primary protection and security. This mesh serves for external delimitation, protection and safeguarding of the integrity of the cultural and natural elements within the nominated property. The three meters of vegetation of the internal preliminary protection strip is being implemented as a natural filter against visual, noise and air pollution. The vegetation strip and wire mesh combine to be a reinforcement to protect and safeguard the integrity of the nominated property. However, because the nominated property is surrounded by private estates, no illegal acts have been recorded.

This barrier can isolate the Park from outside impacts such as noise. The main noise comes from vehicles on the access road and from a pig farm. However, the archeological park's surroundings are made up of agroforestry estates and private nature reserves, so environmental impacts are minimal.

In addition, this delimitation allows some wildlife, such as white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), to remain at liberty within the nominated property. These animals have been confiscated by the National Council of Protected Areas and are given to the archeological park for

management.

- **Is there a possibility of creating a buffer zone in the future?**

Yes, the creation of a buffer zone is possible, but it requires further analysis, inter-institutional work and the participation of all stakeholders. For nomination purposes, the proposal that is currently being agreed upon as a future buffer zone will be referred to as the “initial protection zone”

Through years of interaction and cooperative work with landowners, it has been possible to make visible the points of archaeological interest and their conservation within their properties. This is the basis for the elaboration of a work plan to reach a consensus on the future delimitation of an adequate buffer zone and the concept of Protection Islands, which is an integral part of the proposal to establish the protection categories for the archaeological site of Tak'alik Ab'aj. (Annex 5).

The nominated property is surrounded by a mostly natural environment, which is characterized by agroforestry systems on private estates. In addition, it is located between the basins of two rivers, the Nimá River and the Ixchiyá River, the latter is also the eastern boundary of the entire archaeological site, and other streams run through it. This natural system provides protection and security to the nominated property while creating a biological corridor for the archaeological site's wildlife.

The initial protection zone proposal involves only the owners of one of the five estates, the Finca Santa Margarita. These owners are the same ones who donated the land of the nominated property and with whom consensus is currently being reached.

This initial protection zone covers 43.8 hectares, almost three times more than the nominated property (Fig. 3). This zone is made up of Finca Santa Margarita's agroforestry crops that completely surround the park. The main crops grown on the estate are rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*), shade-grown coffee (*Coffea spp.*), cacao (*Theobroma cacao*), sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*) and three species of timber trees.

The initial protection zone consists of a wide strip, except for a corner to the southwest near a pig farm, where the strip is narrower. The two rivers that run parallel to the nominated area are also part of the zone: the Nimá River approximately 300 m from the western edge of the Archaeological Park and the Ixchiyá River almost 200 m from the eastern edge. The entire archaeological site is located in the piedmont, which is an area between the volcanic zone and the coastal plain, so its topography is sloping. These rivers are found in steeply sloping terrain and descend towards the plains of the Pacific Ocean.

There are several legal instruments for the conservation of the nominated property and its surroundings, which can strengthen the future creation of a buffer zone. For example, the Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala establishes that archaeological monuments and relics are state property (Article 121, paragraph f) and the Protected Areas Law (Article 90, paragraph 35) recognizes the archaeological site Tak'alik Ab'aj as one of Guatemala's Special Protection Areas, i.e., it is declared as a conservation protection area.

Also, due to the geographic location of the nominated property between two nearby rivers (Ixchiyá and Nimá rivers), there is another layer of environmental legal protection, which currently favors the conservation of the natural environment and could also be taken into account. In this sense, forests and vegetation on the banks of rivers, lakes and near water sources enjoy special protection (Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala, Article 126). In addition, the State of Guatemala must ensure a balance in the water systems and for this purpose it is necessary to conserve the flora, mainly the forests of lake, river and spring basins (Law for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment of Guatemala, Decree No. 68-86, Article 15, paragraph i). In general, it is established that watersheds must be protected (Forestry Law and its regulations, Decree No. 101-96, Article 47). Specifically, as a measure for the protection of water sources, it is strictly prohibited to cut trees up to 25 meters from the banks of rivers, streams, lakes, lagoons and water sources (Decree No. 90-97, Health Code).

Another favorable aspect is that Finca Santa Margarita (immediate surroundings of the nominated property) is registered in the Association of Private Natural Reserves of Guatemala. In other words, it is a private property voluntarily destined for conservation, where land use is exclusively for environmentally compatible activities, such as sustainable agroforestry management. All of this can contribute to the increase of biodiversity and connectivity through biological corridors. On the other hand, the four remaining private estates provide a security shield to the nominated property, which has allowed there to be no threats or records of illegal acts.

It is necessary to emphasize that a buffer zone should surround the nominated property to provide an additional layer of protection and should not be part of the nominated property, but should be approved and registered by the World Heritage Committee. Furthermore, the use and development of this zone must have legal and/or customary restrictions (Operational Guidelines, Paragraphs 104 and 107).

The State Party expresses its commitment to make efforts and take actions to ensure compliance with regulations and land use parameters friendly to a buffer zone in these private estates that make up the entire archaeological site. The proposed initial protection zone covers land in Finca Santa Margarita, between the two rivers. The State Party is reaching a consensus with the landowners to maintain the land use as a private natural area, with agroforestry activities that do not cause a major impact on the nominated property.

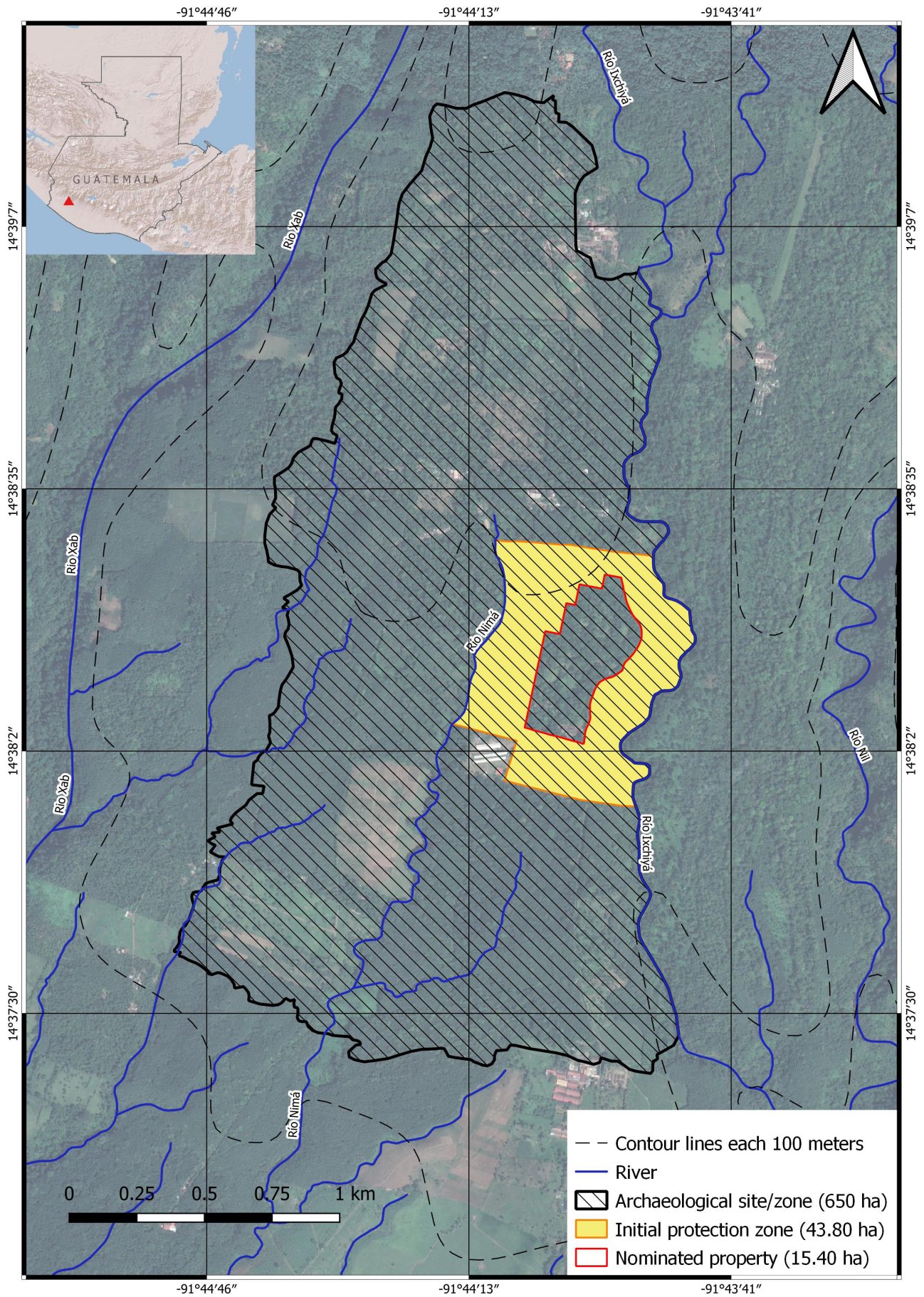


Figure 3. Proposal “initial protection zone” to be consensual as a buffer zone for The National Archaeological Park Tak’alik Ab’aj. Source: National Archaeological Park Tak’alik Ab’aj

Site Museum Tak'alik Ab'aj  
"El Caracol del Tiempo"



# Site Museum Tak'alik Ab'aj

## Site Museum Tak'alik Ab'aj

### “El Caracol del Tiempo”

ICOMOS notes that the planned Site Museum is to be located within the nominated property in the sector of the original historic entrance, in the south of the city, where the ancient travelers coming from the long-distance trade route arrived. The nomination dossier states that the design and construction of the building are already approved by the Ministry of Environmental and Natural Resources. ICOMOS would be pleased if the State Party could provide additional information on the current proposal as follows:

- Has a Heritage Impact Assessment been carried out before the approval of the project?
  - What is the timeframe for the completion of the museum project and what has prevented its initiation / completion until now?
  - Have other possible locations for the museum been considered?
  - Are there other projects under consideration for the development of the site or its preparation to receive a larger number of tourists?
- 
- **Has a Heritage Impact Assessment been carried out before the approval of the project?**

Before starting the construction of the museum, an archaeological survey of 90 test pits was conducted in the southern area of the nominated property and it was determined that the area has little archaeological evidence (Fig. 5). In 2005, an archaeological investigation program was carried out in this area that also covered Terrace One and part of Terrace Two, to verify and confirm the presence of sensitive archaeological evidence in this sector. This area was covered with a sequence of 90 excavations that summarized 2,421 m<sup>2</sup> excavated. The results of this investigation revealed that the southeastern part of the nominated property presents very little archaeological evidence that is limited to ground leveling. For the same reason this sector is confirmed as strategic and appropriate for the construction of the Museum (Annex 6).

EXCAVATION MAP, SOUTH AREA "C"  
National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj

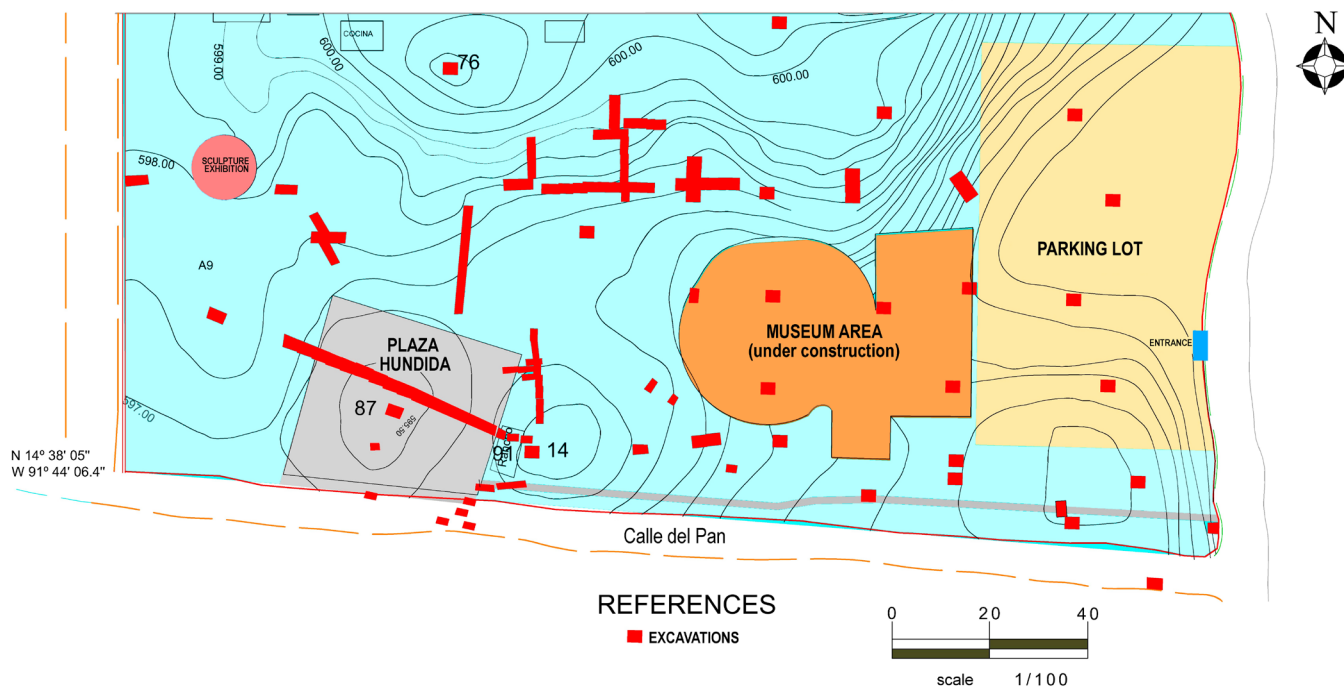


Figure 4. Archaeological survey map to establish the construction area of the Site Museum Tak'alik Ab'aj "El Caracol del Tiempo". Source: Annex 6.

The West and Central Area of Terrace One presents strong archaeological evidence where Structure 14 is located with a steam bath on its west side, which in turn adjoins Structure 87 called "Plaza Hundida" (Fig. 5). All this was systematically investigated and resulted in the consolidation of this group that is part of the green area of the museum.



Figure 5. Plaza Hundida (Structure 87) located near the construction area of the Site Museum Tak'alik Ab'aj. Photography: © National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj.

These previous studies made it possible to evaluate the heritage impact and comply with the provisions of the Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation of Guatemala (Decree No. 26-97, Article 16), which requires prior authorization for the implementation of projects in archaeological zones. Likewise, in 2006 an Environmental Impact Study was conducted to acquire an environmental license for the project, in accordance with the Law for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment of Guatemala (Decree No. 68-86) and the Regulations for Environmental Evaluation, Control and Monitoring and its Reforms (Governmental Agreement No. 137-2016, Article 60). In 2019 the environmental license was updated (No. 04784-2019/DIGARN) and is valid until 2024.

Due to the above, and the special design of the museum that seeks not to impact the environment, it is considered that this project does not represent a threat to the cultural and natural heritage of the nominated property. Rather, it represents an urgent need to safeguard and exhibit the pieces of the important archaeological findings.

- **What is the timeframe for the completion of the museum project and what has prevented its initiation / completion until now?**

The construction of the Museum called “El Caracol del Tiempo, José Luis Ralda González” began in 2008, but was suspended in 2012, due to breach of contract by the construction companies, which generated a long legal process that prevented the resumption of its construction despite the goodwill of the State Party of Guatemala. At the end of 2017, a consensus was reached between the plaintiff and the defendant. In this consensus hearing, the separation of the judicial process from the executing administrative party was requested so that the construction of the museum could be resumed, to which both parties were in agreement. The Hearing Room “B” of the Court of the Department of Retalhuleu ruled in favor of this request, which granted “The judicial authorization to continue the construction of the Archaeological Museum called “El Caracol del Tiempo, Tak’alik Ab’aj”, located in the municipality of El Asintal, Retalhuleu. (Annex 7).

As part of the commitment to resume construction work in 2020, a structural study was carried out to evaluate the condition of the work, which revealed the need to make structural modifications due to the deterioration and abandonment to which the construction was exposed, as well as for safety reasons. This served to rethink the construction work in accordance with quality and safety standards. In the year 2021, the hydro-sanitary study is being concluded as part of the previous technical studies that will allow the formulation of new bidding bases to resume construction.

The State Party of Guatemala affirms that there is the political will to complete the total construction of the museum, and for this purpose has allocated a budget of approximately two million dollars (17 million Quetzales, in local currency). To date, the Ministry of Culture and Sports is making all the preparations (legal, administrative and technical) for the presentation of the bidding conditions that will allow the resumption of the execution of the project. According to the planning that will be submitted to the Secretariat of Planning and Programming of the Presidency of the Republic of Guatemala (SEGEPLAN for its acronym in Spanish), which is the State planning body in charge of designing, coordinating, monitoring and evaluating the National System of Public Investment Projects, construction of the museum is scheduled to continue in the second half of



2022 and to be completed in 2023.

Likewise, thanks to the sponsorship of the UNESCO Guatemala Office, a Risk Management Plan is currently being developed, which will allow, in the first instance, to know the risks to which the nominated property and its surroundings are subjected, establish mitigation measures and the protection of the Outstanding Universal Value represented by The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj.

- **Have other possible locations for the museum been considered?**

Studies have shown that the southeastern area of the nominated property is the only part where archaeological prospection indicates low archaeological and natural sensitivity. Therefore, this area was designated as strategic for the construction of the museum, as explained above. In addition, it also does not affect the original or historic entrance to the ancient city of Tak'alik Ab'aj. Its current location is strategic to be part of the tourist route within the nominated property. On the other hand, there is certainty of land tenure, since the land donated for the construction of the museum is free of any legal inconvenience. That is why part of the name of the museum refers to the family that donated the land. For the above reasons, no other area has been considered for its construction.

- **Are there other projects under consideration for the development of the site or its preparation to receive a larger number of tourists?**

**About other projects under consideration:** There are no new infrastructure projects under consideration, except for the museum that is already planned. It is necessary to clarify the cable car project. In the deeds of donation of the land for the construction of the museum, the desire of the donors to establish a cable car is mentioned. However, it should be clarified that the construction of this project was not a condition for the donation and acceptance of the land in favor of the State of Guatemala. In view of the above, the State Party affirms that the nominated property is free of any problems related to certainty of land tenure, such as mortgages or charges. But mainly, it should be clarified that the cable car project is not feasible for the following reasons:

a) No mutual agreement has been signed on this project by the donors and the Ministry of Culture and Sports.

b) Prior to the authorization and development of projects, heritage and environmental evaluations are required according to National Legislation. The Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation of Guatemala (Decree No. 26-97, Article 16) establishes that prior to the execution of projects of any kind in archaeological zones, they must be submitted to the General Directorate of Cultural and Natural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture and Sports for approval and compliance with the technical conditions required for the protection and conservation of the site. On the other hand, the Law for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment of Guatemala (Decree No. 68-86) and the Regulations for Environmental Evaluation, Control and monitoring and its Reforms (Governmental Agreement No. 137-2016, Article 60), establish that projects must have an environmental license, as a result of the resolution of their approval.

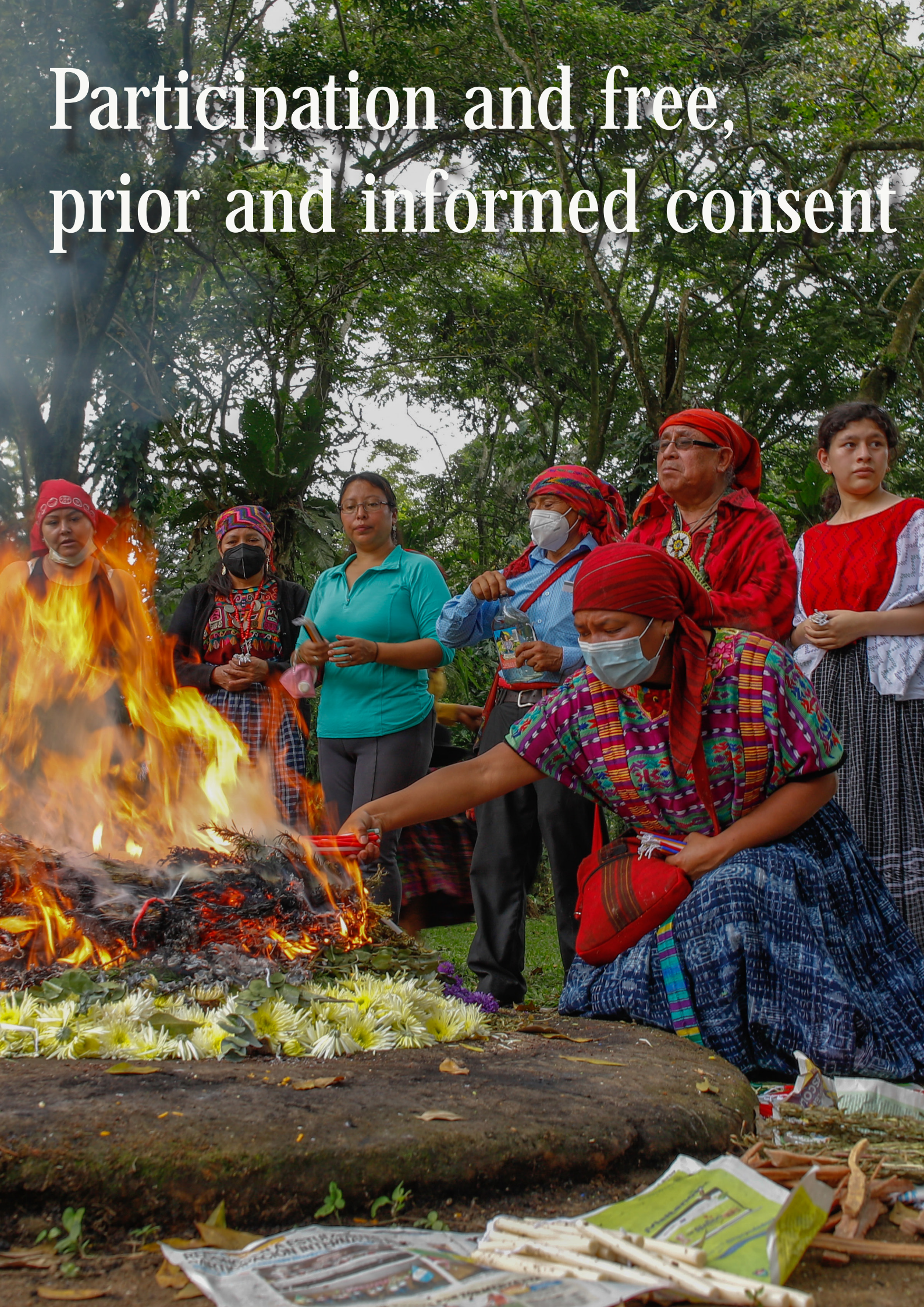
c) Finally, the Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation of Guatemala (Decree No. 26-97, Article 47), specifically prohibits the placement of cables, antennas and conductors in archaeological areas. It is understood that the operation of communication antennas requires the placement of large towers, and therefore such towers are also prohibited. Therefore, this prohibition can be applied to the towers and cables of a cable car.

For all of the above reasons, we reiterate that the cable car project is not viable and therefore should not represent a future threat to the inscription of The National Archaeological Park as a World Heritage Site.

**About the preparation of the nominated property to receive a larger number of tourists:** The existing infrastructure is considered to be in accordance with the carrying capacity of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj. According to the Management Plan it is 350 people (175 during the COVID-19 pandemic). This carrying capacity is considered adequate for the management, conservation and protection of the cultural and natural heritage within the nominated property and should be maintained.

However, it is expected that with the declaration of the nominated property as a World Heritage Site, there will be an increase in the number of visitors. For this reason, the implementation of a visitor group management plan is contemplated, with guided tours and stipulated times. For example, while one group visits the museum region, another group can visit the archaeological structures. This approach also represents an opportunity to reach agreements and strategic alliances with local authorities. For example, it is possible to promote the development of other tourist attractions that involve local communities, such as gastronomic routes, or the establishment of parking areas, environmentally friendly transportation services and a bicycle route leading to the archaeological park, with other possible future connections. This will help to promote not only the nominated property but also the rest of the region and other potentially attractive areas for visitors, which has been the desire expressed by some participants in the socialization processes as part of capacity building.

# Participation and free, prior and informed consent



# Participation and free, prior and informed consent

The nomination dossier highlights the continuing use of the archaeological property as a sacred site for different indigenous communities. The ritual use is regulated to ensure the conservation of the archaeological remains. Community workshops with indigenous participation, focused on the World Heritage nomination, have shown that there seem to be further needs for communication and the possibility of more active participation. In this regard, paragraph 123 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention states that: “States Parties are encouraged to prepare nominations with the widest possible participation of stakeholders and shall demonstrate, as appropriate, that the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples has been obtained, through, inter alia, making the nominations publicly available in appropriate languages and public consultations and hearings”.

Therefore, ICOMOS would appreciate if the State Party could provide information regarding the process implemented to obtain the free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous communities. ICOMOS also wishes to understand how the participation of indigenous communities is organized and what their opinions are on the whole World Heritage nomination process, the planned museum and their access to the site. Could the State Party specify what impact their opinions have had in the past on the management of the nominated property?

- **ICOMOS would appreciate if the State Party could provide information regarding the process implemented to obtain the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous communities.**

Two socialization processes were performed in 2014 and 2020, in both processes there was a broad participation of stakeholders from the Municipality of El Asintal and other representatives from surrounding areas. The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj belongs to this township, whose municipal head city is located approximately five kilometers south of the nominated property.

The socialization process can be described as a work of more than five years, in which the community has had an active participation. The nomination process has been made public not only in popular consultations, but also in the national media (television, written and social networks). Likewise, the dissemination work about the nomination of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj has been present in the different activities with social projection promoted by the Archaeological Park (Table 1). These activities include: gastronomic festivals, educational, cultural, environmental activities, guided tours, among others (Fig. 6, Annex 8).

Table 1. Summary by themes and participants of the activities carried out in The Nationa

| <b>Scientific activities</b>                                 | <b>Participants</b>  |
|--|--|
| <b>First Mesoamerican Congress of Cultural Astronomy</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Archaeoastronomers</li> <li>• Ethnoastronomers</li> <li>• Astrophotographers</li> <li>• Dark skies observers</li> </ul>   |
| <b>First Archeoastronomy Encounter in Guatemala</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Archaeologist</li> <li>• Antropologist</li> <li>• Astronomers</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Environmental activities</b>                              | <b>Target audience and participant</b>   |
| <b>Yellow-Naped Parrot Festival</b>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children / Students</li> <li>• Teachers</li> </ul>  |
| <b>The Importance of the Natural World of Tak'alik Ab'aj</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children / Students</li> <li>• Staff Support</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Academic activities</b>                                   | <b>Participants</b>  |
| <b>Tak'alik Ab'aj Archeology Interactive Workshop</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth / Students</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Technicians and staff support</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Cultural activities</b>                                   | <b>Activities</b>  |
| <b>El Asintal Patronal Fair (Local Festival)</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Artistic Events (The Ancestral Dance of the Maidens of Tak'alik Ab'aj, Choreography)</li> <li>• Arte-Sanías (Handicraft and art production)</li> <li>• Culinary Art and Gastronomic Festival</li> </ul> |
| <b>Social activities</b>                                     | <b>Participants</b>  |
| <b>National Independence Day</b>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children / youth</li> <li>• Athletes</li> <li>• Local community</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Mayan Rituality / Spirituality</b>                        | <b>Participants</b>  |
| <b>Meeting of Mayan Spiritual Guides</b>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mayan spiritual guides</li> <li>• Staff support</li> </ul>  |

Source: National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj (Annex 8).



Figure 6. Examples of social projection activities carried out by the National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj, which include artistic, cultural, environmental and social events. Photographs: © National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj.

Some of the main actors of civil society, there was community participation through different organizations and community representatives. Regarding the indigenous population who are recognized as Mayan Spiritual Guides, it should be clarified that they represent a small but significant number of visitors to the archaeological park. Likewise, most of them come from other regions, especially the highlands of the country, in other words, they do not belong to local communities. In addition to the Mam ethnic group, which is the one present in the township of El Asintal, they belong to other ethnic groups (K'iche's, Kaqchikeles and Tz'utujiles).

The State Party guarantees that the socialization process was performed in accordance to the provisions of paragraph 123 of the Operational Guidelines, by holding the popular consultations in a public, participatory, free, voluntary manner and in a language accessible to all attendees, as described below:

**Methodology:** The State of Guatemala recognizes the importance of the local and indigenous communities' participation in the nomination process of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which contributes positively to guarantee the conservation of the nominated property and the continuity of sustainable use by all stakeholders. For this reason, a process of socialization and consultation program was held, which had the participation of a wide and diverse number of stakeholders related to the management of the nominated property. The first phase took place in 2014, and was used to develop a first draft presented to the World Heritage Centre in September of the same year (Annex 9). From this process, timely feedback from the Nominations Unit was obtained, which laid the basis to keep working on the process of developing the nomination dossier. The second phase of socialization took place in 2020, providing additional inputs to the results already obtained in the year 2014, and which concluded with the official presentation of the nomination dossier of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj in January 2021.

In the first phase, five socialization meetings and opinion polls were held for visitors, the results were presented within the draft of the year 2014 and allowed to get the first impressions of the visitors, as well as the endorsement of the nomination. As a result of this process, there are signed letters of free, prior, and informed consent by representatives of local communities, representatives of the central and municipal government, as well as civil society. Regarding the interviews, 1,178 visitors were interviewed, 82% were Guatemalans and 18% were foreigners.

Regarding the workshops, representatives of 21 sectors of the population participated, including representatives of the Municipality of El Asintal, representatives of thirteen Community Development Councils (COCODE by its acronym in Spanish), representatives of organized local peasant communities and a specific workshop with fourteen Mayan Spiritual Guides called Ajq'ijab'. These Mayan Spiritual Guides practice their sacred ceremonies within the nominated property and come from different regions of the country.

Representatives of organizations and sectors already involved in the first phase of the process, as well as other new stakeholders, participated in four workshops during the second phase, which took place in 2020. Besides the participation of the local community, there were representatives of the central government at the departmental level (Departmental Government, Ministries, Institutes), the private sector, productive associations and the tourist sector (hoteliers and tour operators), among others. The participation of local communities was represented by 19 Community Development Councils (COCODE), of which ten had already participated in the

previous phase. Likewise, other civil associations (local transporters) and the media participated.

Guatemala as a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual country recognizes the importance of the involvement of local and indigenous communities who are carriers of living culture. For this reason, a specific workshop for Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq'ijab' was once again held, with the participation of thirteen people. They continue to manifest the importance of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as a sacred site in the practice of their ancestral traditions.

In total, 159 people (113 men and 46 women) representing various organizations and civil society attended. The Departmental Governor, the Mayor of the township of El Asintal and two Mayors of other nearby municipalities participated (Annex 10). To obtain free, prior, and informed consent at this stage, people raised their hands to express their approval and support for the nomination for World Heritage status. Likewise, "Goodwill Agreements" were reached, which are mutually agreed commitments between the administrators of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj and the departmental and municipal authorities, related to the management of the nominated property.

As part of the Risk Management Plan currently in process, in October 2021, five Mayan Spiritual Guides who participated in the workshops were interviewed again. They were consulted about the way they are treated by the Park staff and whether they have been able to perform their ceremonies freely, along with their opinion about the nominated property as a sacred place and also regarding the nomination to UNESCO. Taking advantage of this participatory situation, letters of free, prior, and informed consent were again requested from the COCODEs who have participated in the different socialization processes.

**Population:** During the socialization process, much emphasis was placed on the participant population's representativity. According to the results of the last national census held in 2018 (INE 2018), the township of El Asintal has a population of 36,882 inhabitants. Most of the local population (62.31%) identify themselves as mestizo ladinos (not indigenous), followed by people who identify themselves as indigenous of the Maya Mam People (37.51%) and the rest belong to other population groups (Table 2). For both socialization processes (2014 and 2020) there was broad community participation, represented through COCODEs and other civil society associations.

Table 2. Number of inhabitants and percentage according to population group of El Asintal township, Retalhuleu. National Census 2018.

| Population     | No. of inhabitants | Percentage  |
|----------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Ladino         | 22,982             | 63.31%      |
| Maya (Mam)     | 13,834             | 37.51%      |
| Afrodescendant | 28                 | 0.08%       |
| Garífuna       | 21                 | 0.06%       |
| Xinca          | 1                  | 0.00%       |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>36,882</b>      | <b>100%</b> |

Source: INE 2018



**Language:** In accordance with paragraph 123 of the Operational Guidelines, both socialization processes (2014-2020) were held in an appropriate language accessible to all participants. Socialization was in the Spanish language, because 88% of the population identifies as Spanish speaking and the remaining 12% has the Maya Mam language as their mother tongue (INE 2018), however, even though this group identifies as Mayan Speaking, they also have knowledge of the Spanish language, meaning, they are bilingual. Therefore, in both socialization processes an understandable and accessible language was used for all participants.

**Dissemination of the socialization process:** Both socialization processes were performed publicly, with a broad invitation and voluntary participation. In 2014 it was conducted through direct interviews and participatory workshops. In 2020, of the four socialization workshops, two were broadcast on television and other in local media. With this, the scope of dissemination of the socialization process among local communities and civil society was expanded.

The State of Guatemala, as a country that has ratified ILO Agreement No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (Article 6.1a), and as adopter of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (Articles 18 and 19), affirms that it has held popular consultations with representatives of community organizations. In good faith, it has involved local and indigenous communities in the information process regarding the nomination of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as a UNESCO World Heritage site, in order to obtain their free, prior, and informed consent.

- **ICOMOS also wishes to understand how the participation of indigenous communities is organized and what their opinions are on the whole World Heritage nomination process, the planned museum and their access to the site.**

About organization of indigenous communities: In El Asintal municipality, in the Department of Retalhuleu, as in the rest of Guatemala, local communities are organized and represented in the local government through the Community Development Council - COCODE - (By its acronym in Spanish). COCODEs are groups made up of community members, and are legally constituted and recognized at the local level. Some of its main actions are the promotion and involvement of the local community in development issues. They also propose, implement and evaluate public policies that promote community development, such as access to basic services, equal opportunities, human rights and land use planning, among others. Such actions are coordinated at the central and local government levels (Fig. 7), actions are also coordinated with the different stakeholders. COCODEs are part of the National System of Development Councils and are legally constituted and regulated by the Law on Urban and Rural Development Councils of Guatemala (Decree No. 11-2002).

El Asintal Municipality has 34 legally constituted COCODEs (Annex 11). In both socialization processes (2014 and 2020), there was the participation and attendance of 20 of them, which means that the nomination process of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as World Heritage Site, had a reach of 60% of the representatives of the community population. In addition to the COCODEs, there are other groups organized in Associations, such as: Taxi Drivers Association, Transporters Association, Peasants and Farmers Association, who also participated in both socialization processes.

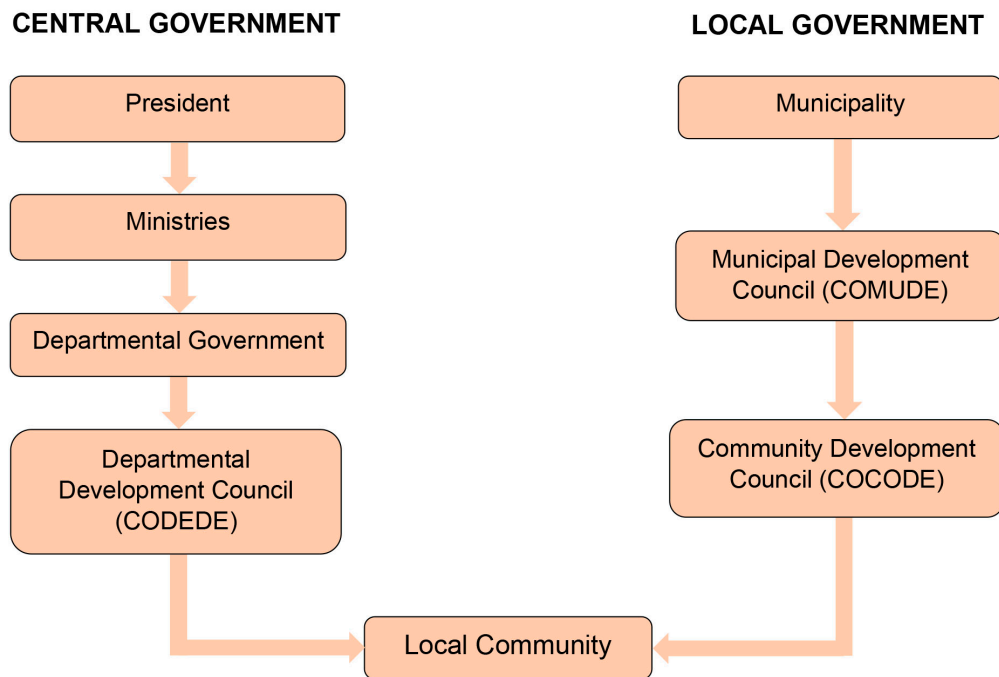


Fig. 7 Community organization in Guatemala and its participation at departmental and municipal government level. Source: National System of Development Councils of Guatemala

**Opinions on the whole World Heritage nomination process:** According to the results of the socialization process, most of the stakeholders' opinions were in favor of the nomination of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In the first phase, 100% of those attending the workshops expressed their full acceptance and support for the candidacy, 99% of the interviewees (1,164 people) also agreed with the nomination, as they acknowledged, after a guided tour, the cultural importance of the park and the fact it should transcend national borders. In addition, nine letters of support for the nomination were obtained. (Annex 12.1).

In the second phase, the approval of the majority of the participants was obtained (Fig. 8). Also, two "Goodwill Agreement" documents were obtained, signed by the local authorities and the directors of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj. They commit to carry out actions to safeguard and promote the heritage of the nominated area, and other specific actions such as encouraging and supporting local artisans on the issue of the cultural importance of the nominated property (Annex 12.2).

Overall, opinions highlight the positive benefits that the nomination of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as a World Heritage Site can bring. Specifically, the inhabitants of the municipality of El Asintal identified different opportunities and actions that involve local communities. Among these opportunities are mentioned: local and community economic development and growth associated with increased tourism, strengthening and greater tourist projection of the nominated property and the region, as well as training for the development of local cultural managers and guides of sustainable community tourism. They also emphasize the benefits related to local culture, such as the revitalization of artisan and culinary traditions.

Furthermore, other areas of opportunity were identified, which are future challenges derived from the inscription of the nominated property. For example, develop a closer approach with the neighboring communities of the Archaeological Park to create greater awareness and appreciation of the cultural richness it represents. In the same way, local communities must organize and seek strategic alliances with other stakeholders, which allow significant community participation aimed at the integral development of the township through community tourism. This should be a strategic and joint effort between local communities, the private sector and the central government, through their different ministries and local representatives.

In conclusion, the socialization process indicates that the local population is motivated to contribute to safeguarding the cultural and natural heritage of the area, especially through sustainable community tourism. In addition, it highlights the importance of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj for the inhabitants of El Asintal Municipality due to its sacred, cultural, archaeological, historical and natural value.

Specifically, for the Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq'ijab' it constitutes a sacred site where they carry out current spiritual practices of the Mayan culture, which represent the harmonic bond between the human being and nature. The results of the surveys done in October 2021 to Mayan Spiritual Guides (Annex 13) indicate that there is a general feeling of acceptance towards the declaration. Moreover, they indicate that the nominated property represents a Heritage of the Mayan Culture, where they can freely perform spiritual ceremonies to have a connection with their ancestors. They emphasize that the treatment they receive within the facilities of the archaeological park is of great respect, they have a lot of freedom and adequate space for their ceremonies (Table 3).

The State Party of Guatemala commits itself to fulfill the requirements and responsibilities involved in the inscription of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It emphasizes the compromise to continue looking after its protection and maintenance in optimal working conditions. Likewise, it is committed to promoting both nationally and internationally its importance as a sacred place and center of cultural knowledge of the national identity of Guatemalans.



Figure 8. Socialization processes of the Nomination of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, carried out in 2014 and 2020. In which there were various local participants, as well as Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq'ijab' who visit the Park from other regions because they consider it a Sacred Place. Photographs: © National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj.

Table 3. Questions and summary of responses made to five Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq'ijab' who visited the Tak'alik Ab'aj National Archaeological Park in October 2021.

|   |
|---|
| <b>1. Do you consider Tak'alik Ab'aj as a holy place?</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Heritage of the Mayan People</li> <li>● Sacred Natural Place</li> <li>● Place of spiritual connection with ancestors</li> <li>● A legitimate holy place</li> <li>● It is part of the whole Sacred Mother Earth</li> </ul>                      |
| <b>2. Do you consider that you have been able to celebrate your ceremonies freely?</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Yes, due to the good conduct toward us</li> <li>● There has been no inconvenience</li> <li>● The treatment has been respectful</li> <li>● There is enough freedom and space</li> <li>● Practices for more than forty years</li> </ul>          |
| <b>3. Have you been treated with dignity and respect when you celebrate your Mayan ceremonies?</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The personnel is very friendly</li> <li>● Everything has passed normally</li> <li>● There is a lot of respect</li> <li>● Free development of ceremonies</li> <li>● The respect has been mutual</li> </ul>                                      |
| <b>4. What does Tak'alik Ab'aj mean to you?</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Place of their ancestors (grandparents)</li> <li>● High energy place</li> <li>● Bridge between the natural and the spiritual</li> <li>● Ceremonial, legitimate, genuine, unique place</li> <li>● Sacred place, site of two cultures</li> </ul> |
| <b>5. What implications do you think the nomination of Tak'alik Ab'aj to UNESCO has for Mayan spirituality and indigenous peoples?</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● International assistance</li> <li>● Greater valuation of the site</li> <li>● Something very important</li> <li>● Publicize the site</li> <li>● Reaffirmation as Heritage</li> </ul>  |
| <b>6. What suggestions or comments could you share with us?</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Guarantee access</li> <li>● Generate more confidence to access</li> <li>● Continue with proper maintenance</li> <li>● Archaeological work has been beneficial</li> </ul>   |

Source: National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj (Annex 13)

**Opinions about the planned museum:** 99% of those interviewed in 2014 (1166 people) expressed their desire and expectation for the conclusion of the Museum Site “El Caracol del Tiempo”. In addition, generally, the community believes that the museum project is important and positive, however, they are concerned about the delay in its construction and yearn for its early completion. As mentioned above, the legal problems that stopped progress have already been resolved, so construction will be resumed in 2022 and will end in 2023.

Some community members would like the museum to be located at the municipality of El Asintal, to make it a tourist attraction. However, this is not feasible, since the museum will be strategically built inside the Archaeological Park for safety and security reasons, as well as to be part of the visitors’ journey. In addition to this, there is already a piece of land donated in favor of the State of Guatemala (Government Agreement 61-2016 of the Ministry of Public Finance) destined exclusively for the construction of the museum, which was stipulated in the legal documentation that supports the donation. On the other hand, the museum will allow the exhibition of archaeological pieces that are currently in specialized warehouses and that are not visible to the visiting public, which is considered an important benefit, especially for the Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq’ijab’.

On the other hand, in the Goodwill Agreement documents it is mentioned that local artisans will be trained for the production of handicrafts that recreate the archaeological designs and motifs documented in Tak’alik Ab’aj (Schieber de Lavarreda 2016), and the manufacture of replicas of the sculptures exhibited in the nominated property and in the Museum Site, which will be placed on the main access road to El Asintal township for the tourist promotion of the site.

**Opinions about the access to the site:** In the socialization process, most of the opinions were favorable to the nomination, however, certain concerns also arose. Specifically, some of the Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq’ijab’ asked if the declaration and registration of the nominated property would imply the privatization of The National Archaeological Park Tak’alik Ab’aj and if it would affect their free access to it, since it is considered as a sacred place for the practice of Mayan ceremonies. Along this, the archaeological site generates a feeling of identity and belonging among the Mayan population, as it is a historical and cultural legacy inherited from their ancestors.

In this regard, the State Party clarifies that neither the nomination nor the inscription of the nominated property as a World Heritage site will affect the access to the Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq’ijab’ who visit the archaeological park, who belong to the four most represented ethnic groups (K’iche’s, Mames, Kaqchikeles and Tz’utujiles) and others of the 22 Mayan ethnic groups of the country. This represents a challenge and an indicator regarding the areas where further awareness and outreach work is required on behalf of the stakeholders involved, to confirm and guarantee that the Archaeological Park will not be privatized and that their rights will not be violated. Likewise, there are plenty legal and technical supports that guarantee this indigenous right, including:

a) **Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (Paragraph 12).** Indicates that the State Party must adopt an approach based on human rights and ensure the participation of a wide variety of stakeholders, such as local communities and indigenous peoples. Participation should occur throughout the nomination process of the site, its protection and management. This has been respected by the State of Guatemala, which guarantees its full compliance.

**b) United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Article 11).** Establishes the right that indigenous people have to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological or historical sites, among others.

**c) Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala (Article 66). Protection of Ethnic Groups.** Guatemala is formed by diverse ethnic groups among which are found the indigenous groups of Mayan descent. The State recognizes, respects and promotes their forms of life, customs, traditions, forms of social organization, the use of indigenous attire by men and women, and their languages and dialects.

**d) Ministerial Agreement Number 981-2011 of the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Guatemala (Article 9).** Guarantees that the identified and accredited Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq'ijab', as well as their companions, are exempt from paying the entrance fee to the Sacred Places for the performance of their spiritual ceremonies (Annex 14).

**e) Management Plan 2021-2025 of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj.** The current management plan of The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj recognizes as a strength the existence of regulations and facilities that allow the performance of Mayan or ancestral ceremonies, which includes the designation of specific areas within the Park, religious altars, extraordinary hours and free access according to their proper identification, accreditation and registration, and that of their companions.

- **Could the State Party specify what impact their opinions have had in the past on the management of the nominated property?**

Since investigations and restorations began in December 1987, The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj has opened its doors to the public, allowing visitors to observe the research process. The archaeological park has always maintained an approach with local communities and visitors. As is mentioned above, there have been multiple special events and educational, cultural and environmental activities, among others, within the Park facilities. This social projection has allowed since 2014, the appreciation and positive perception of the park through its nomination as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

An important sector of the visitors of the National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj are the indigenous people, since the site is considered as a Sacred Site where their ancestors dwell. The Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq'ijab' can celebrate their spirituality in complete freedom, with respect and in harmony with the cultural and natural heritage within the nominated property. In this sense, their opinions on aspects directly related to the management and conservation of the nominated property have been taken into account. For example, a mutual agreement has been reached with these Mayan Spirit Guides, with the aim of preserving the original altars. For this, alternative altars have been set up in specific places designated by the Spirit Guides themselves, as well as special deposits of sacred ashes, so that at the end of the ceremony they can leave them placed there.

A reservation system has also been provided, mainly for certain special days in their sacred calendars on which many Guides wish to do ceremonies. This has been very well received by ethnic groups, since each group needs privacy and its own space to practice their spirituality.

Given the fact that indigenous people consider The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj as a sacred place, being able to perform their traditional ritual practices represents the most precious value of the nominated area. Therefore, its significance as a place of an ancestral, but still living, culture is granted. The invocation of the ancestors during their rituals represents one of the axes of ancient cultures and the strength of their social cohesion, the most important that still persists to this day (Schieber de Lavarreda y Orrego Corzo 2013).

Constant contact with the Mayan Spiritual Guides or Ajq'ijab', who are the carriers of this ancient culture, since the beginning The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj has created a relationship of trust that has allowed the exchange of information about their ritual tradition. This has also been the subject of the First Mayan Spiritual Guides meeting held on the summer solstice in 2015, while the second is scheduled for June 21, 2023. This interrelation, communication and careful documentation constitutes one of the axes of research and is part of the Annual Operational Programs of the Archaeological Park. (Schieber de Lavarreda y Orrego Corzo 2016).



# Glossary

**Afro-descendant:** They identify themselves as descendants of Africans living in the Americas.

**Ajaw:** Ajaw is the creator of everything, according to the Mayan belief. He is the owner, the universe itself and life, he is pre-existent to everything created and in whom the masculine/ feminine principles are united (García, Curruchiche & Taquirá; Palma, 2006).

**Alternative altar:** Circular construction of approximately 1.5 m diameter and 10 cm thick. It is made with material construction from the region. The alternative altars are those currently used in ceremonial practices and are located in the vicinity of the original altars in locations selected by the Mayan Spiritual Guides. The alternative altars have been well received by the indigenous peoples, in view of the fact that it allows them to perform their rituals, without affecting the original altars. In this sense, this solution offers freedom for the practice of the ancestral ritual tradition and at the same time it is a measure of preservation and conservation of the unique and unrepeatable archaeological pieces.

**Agroforestry:** Refers to plantations that combine, at the level of productive plots, agricultural crops with forestry species.

**Ajq'ijab':** In singular Ajq'ib, is a Maya scientist, accountant and interpreter of time and space. One of his functions is to orient, guide and help keep the life of the being in balance, through the practice of a sacred Maya ceremony.

**Bidding conditions:** The bidding bases or terms of reference, establish the requirements, conditions and specifications of a product or service to be contracted: for example, description, quantity and terms, technical specifications that make known the evaluation criteria to be applied in the process, the guarantees associated with the process and clauses of conditions of the good.

**Garifuna:** An ethnic group of African descent and aboriginal people from various regions of the Caribbean, mainly residing in Honduras, Belize, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

**Indigenous:** The indigenous population, classified by the population census as Mayan (with its 22 ethnic groups), Garifuna, Xinca and Afro-descendants, is present in all departments and municipalities of Guatemala, obviously with a territorial emphasis for each people. The term indigenous is applied to a population that is native to the territory that inhabits and whose presence is long enough to be considered native.

**Kaqchikeles:** One of the indigenous Mayan peoples of the western highlands of Guatemala. K'iches: (or Quiché') is the name of one of the native peoples of the Guatemalan highlands, also the name of the language they speak.

**Ladino:** Also known as mestizo or non-indigenous. The term ladino is derived from the word “Latino” and is used in Central America and Chiapas. The term arose during the colonial period, to indicate the Spanish-speaking population that was not part of the colonial elite made up of the peninsular and Creole population, nor of the indigenous population.

**Local community:** It is a group of people who share a settlement of residence and a set of institutions based on this fact, such as language, customs, values, etc. In the Guatemalan context, a local community can be multiethnic, i.e. with the presence of indigenous and non-indigenous groups.

**Mam:** It is a Mayan ethnic group that inhabits mainly in the departments of Huehuetenango, San Marcos, Quetzaltenango and a small part of Retalhuleu, and their main language is Mam and Spanish.

**Mayan People:** They have existed for about five thousand years and are present in a region of about 325,000 square kilometers: it covers the southern part of Mexico, southern Belize, Guatemala and the western part of Honduras and El Salvador. It is made up of 30 “ethnic groups” or linguistic communities defined by their language, of which 22 are in Guatemala, and 8 in Mexico and Belize.

**Private nature reserve:** These are areas that belong to individuals or legal entities, which the owners voluntarily set aside for the conservation and protection of flora and fauna habitats. These reserves have the backing and full recognition of the State for the protection of the integrity of the land and its resources.

**Tz’utujiles:** An ethnolinguistic group, whose members currently inhabit the municipalities of San Pedro La Laguna, Santiago Atitlán, parts of San Lucas Tolimán and San Pablo La Laguna, all in the department of Sololá in Guatemala.

**Wayeb’:** According to the Mayan calendar, it is a period that includes the last five days of the solar or agricultural calendar. They are dedicated to reflecting on the year just ended to plan and harmonize the year to come. The solar calendar comprises 18 months of 20 days in which daily activities, planting, work and education, among others, take place.

**Xinca:** Ethnic group located in what is now Guatemala and El Salvador. At present, Xinca, the only indigenous language whose origin does not go back to the ancient Mayas, is in clear disappearance, since it is spoken by only between 100 and 250 people.

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# Signature on behalf of the State Party



MINISTERIO  
DE CULTURA  
Y DEPORTES



Delegación de Patrimonio Mundial  
GUATEMALA

This additional information is hereby submitted to The International Council on Monuments and Sites -ICOMOS- and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre for application to be inscribed in the World Heritage List as:

## **National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj**

**Felipe Amado Aguilar Marroquín**  
Minister of Culture and Sports

Republic of Guatemala  
November 05th of 2021



TAK'ALIK  
AB'AJ



PARQUE ARQUEOLÓGICO NACIONAL