

Protecting our intangible¹ cultural heritage² 1 In today's ever-changing global landscape, most of us recognize the importance of preserving our own unique cultural heritage. In this age of rapid globalization, when fewer young people are interested in learning about the customs of their ancestors, it may already be too late to preserve much of our diverse and precious cultural heritage. You may already know of UNESCO's famous list of World Heritage Sites, consisting of places selected for special protection because of their value to the world, such as the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt or the Great Barrier Reef in Australia.⁵ Both Jeju Haenyeo and falconry illustrate the tremendous range of cultural practices which the ICH list was created to preserve. 'intangible (adj) something which exists although you cannot touch it 2 heritage (n) traditions, languages or buildings belonging to the culture of a particular society which were created in the past and still have importance These include languages and spoken traditions (such as storytelling and poetry), performing arts, traditional crafts and local knowledge and beliefs. Falconry is practised around the world from France to Mongolia to the United Arab Emirates, which is home to the world's first falcon hospital and each year hosts a falcon 'beauty contest'.² The answer, according to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), is yes. That is why in 2008 it published its first Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) list. And yet, while most of us would agree that UNESCO's efforts are valuable, I find myself questioning the fairness and usefulness of the ICH list. Its purpose is to record living customs and traditions which are endangered by globalization. Two recent entries show us just how rich and varied are the practices selected for protection. All of these are significant, but what about our songs, stories, ceremonies and traditional practices?