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Environmental Risk Assessment for Heritage and Tourism Projects

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Key Takeaways

An environmental risk assessment is a structured way to identify what could go wrong for people, nature and cultural heritage because of a project, how likely it is and how serious it would be, and what must be done about it. For heritage and tourism projects in places such as Berat, Gjirokastra and Ohrid, it is now the step that decides whether works continue or stop.

- Risk, not just impact - an environmental risk assessment ranks hazards by likelihood and consequence, so teams know which problems need action first.
- Wider than an EIA - an EIA or ESIA is usually a one-off legal report on a defined project, while risk assessment continues through design, works and operation.
- Heritage is part of the environment - under the World Bank's ESS1 and ESS8, cultural heritage risks must be assessed alongside air, water, land and people.
- UNESCO is asking for evidence - the World Heritage Committee has kept works near Berat and Gjirokastra suspended until heritage and environmental assessments are reviewed.
- Cumulative risk matters most - several small tourism works can together harm a historic town, which is why UNESCO asks for cumulative assessment.

In short: An environmental risk assessment identifies hazards from a project, estimates their likelihood and consequences for the environment, communities and heritage, ranks them and sets controls using the mitigation hierarchy. An EIA or ESIA is a formal, usually statutory study of a specific project's impacts at one point in time; a risk assessment is the method that sits inside it and continues to be updated during works and operation.

Introduction

Tourism investment in historic places is growing across the Western Balkans, the Caucasus and beyond, often financed by the World Bank, the EBRD and the EU. A new road to a castle, a riverbank wall or a visitor facility can bring income to a town. It can also damage the views, buildings and landscapes that visitors come to see, or create flood, waste and traffic problems for residents.

Albania is a clear example. The World Heritage Committee has asked for heritage impact assessments and an environmental impact assessment for works around the Historic Centres of Berat and Gjirokastra, and has kept several projects suspended until those studies are reviewed. In the Ohrid region shared by Albania and North Macedonia, the Committee has asked for a strategic environmental assessment of cumulative impacts. This guide explains the environmental risk assessment method, how it relates to EIA, ESIA and heritage impact assessment, what these cases show, and the practical steps that project teams, tourism ministries and municipalities can take.

What Is an Environmental Risk Assessment?

Risk combines two ideas: how likely something is to happen and how bad it would be if it did. An environmental risk assessment applies this to a project or activity. It asks what in the project could cause harm (the hazard), who or what could be harmed (the receptor), how the harm would reach them (the pathway), how likely that is, and how serious the consequence would be.

In a heritage tourism project, the receptors are not only rivers, soils and habitats. They include historic buildings, archaeological deposits, traditional views, and the residents and businesses of the historic town. A heavy vehicle route through a narrow historic street, for example, carries risks of vibration damage to buildings, road accidents, dust and noise, and loss of the street's character.

The result of an environmental risk assessment is a ranked list of risks with owners and controls, usually held in a risk register that the project updates as design and works progress.

How Environmental Risk Assessment Differs from EIA and ESIA

The terms are often used loosely, which causes confusion in PIUs and ministries. An environmental impact assessment (EIA) is normally a legal procedure required by national law for projects above certain thresholds. It produces a report, involves public consultation and ends in a permit decision. An environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) adds social impacts and is the usual format required by international financiers for higher-risk projects.

Environmental risk assessment is the analytical method used inside these studies and beyond them. It is used earlier, to screen sub-projects and choose between options, and later, to manage risk during construction and operation. A project can have an approved EIA and still face unmanaged risks if nobody updates the assessment when designs change, contractors arrive or visitor numbers grow.

The Method Step by Step

Most environmental risk assessments follow the same sequence, whatever the sector. For heritage and tourism works it can be applied in six steps.

1. Hazard identification

List the project activities and what each could cause: excavation, piling, demolition, new structures, traffic, water diversion, waste, lighting, and the increase in visitors once the site opens. Include construction and operation.

2. Receptors and exposure

Map what could be affected and how: listed buildings, buried archaeology, river banks, protected species, drinking water, residents and businesses. Note how exposure happens, for example vibration through the ground, runoff into a river, or a new structure in a protected view.

3. Likelihood and consequence

Estimate how likely each harm is and how serious it would be, using a simple scale such as one to five. Consequence for heritage should reflect whether damage is reversible: a lost historic façade or disturbed archaeological layer cannot be restored.

4. Risk ranking

Multiply or combine the two scores to place each risk on a matrix. High risks need design change or a decision not to proceed; medium risks need specific controls and monitoring; low risks are recorded and watched.

5. Mitigation hierarchy

Controls follow a fixed order: avoid the risk first, then minimise it, then restore, and only then offset or compensate. For immovable heritage, avoidance usually means changing the route, footprint or height of a project, because conservation in place is preferred.

6. Monitoring and review

Assign each control to an owner, monitor it during works and update the register when designs, contractors or conditions change. Chance finds of archaeology and unexpected ground conditions are common triggers for review.

Cultural Heritage in the World Bank ESF: ESS1 and ESS8

For World Bank investment projects, the Environmental and Social Framework makes this method mandatory. ESS1 requires the borrower to assess the environmental and social risks and impacts of the project, including direct, indirect and cumulative effects. ESS8 on cultural heritage applies where that assessment shows heritage may be affected.

The World Bank's ESS8 guidance note sets out what this means in practice. Impacts on cultural heritage must be avoided first, with the mitigation hierarchy applied where avoidance is not possible. Where appropriate, the borrower prepares a cultural heritage management plan with a timeline and resources. Every construction contract must include a chance finds procedure. Projects in legally protected areas or buffer zones must follow the applicable regulations and management plans, and rehabilitation of built heritage must respect the authenticity of form, materials and techniques and the visual setting of historic structures. Where heritage is used for commercial purposes, such as tourism, communities must be consulted and benefits shared fairly.

The EBRD has equivalent rules. Its 2024 Environmental and Social Policy includes Environmental and Social Requirement 8 on cultural heritage, which also requires early identification of heritage risks, the mitigation hierarchy, chance finds procedures in contracts and meaningful consultation with heritage users and communities. This matters in Albania, where the EBRD and EU co-finance the Albania Infrastructure and Tourism-Enabling Project in Berat, Fier, Korçë and Shkodër.

Heritage Impact Assessment as a Specialised Risk Assessment

A heritage impact assessment (HIA) applies the same logic to the values of a heritage place. Instead of starting with pollutants, it starts with the attributes that carry the site's significance, such as the townscape of Ottoman houses, the silhouette of a castle, or the relationship between a lake and its settlements. It then asks how each project element could affect those attributes, directly, indirectly and cumulatively.

For World Heritage properties, the reference is the Guidance and Toolkit for Impact Assessments in a World Heritage Context, published in 2022 by UNESCO, ICCROM, ICOMOS and IUCN. It sets out a process for assessing development inside and around World Heritage sites, with tools and checklists. The World Heritage Committee's decisions on Albania refer to it

directly and ask that projects be notified to the World Heritage Centre before any irreversible decision is taken.

In practice, the environmental and heritage assessments should share a baseline, a project description and a consultation process, so that a riverbank wall, for example, is assessed once for flood risk, ecology and heritage rather than in three separate reports that may contradict each other.

Berat and Gjirokastra: What UNESCO Has Asked Albania to Assess

The Historic Centres of Berat and Gjirokastra have been reviewed by the World Heritage Committee many times since 2015. In 2025, decision 47 COM 7B.94 asked Albania to carry out heritage impact assessments covering the specific and cumulative impacts of projects already implemented or planned, including the Gjirokastra bypass road and projects under the World Bank-financed Integrated Urban and Tourism Development project. It urged Albania to suspend further decisions and work on the Shkëmbi Road and Osum River projects until comprehensive HIAs, including visual impact assessments, were completed, and asked for an environmental impact assessment of the Osum riverbank protection works as a matter of urgency.

The 2026 decision, 48 COM 7B.27, went further. It kept the Osum River bank works suspended until both the HIA and the EIA are reviewed by the Advisory Bodies, and kept the Shkëmbi Road suspended pending a single project covering both phases and a revised HIA with a robust baseline, a clear significance method, analysis of direct, indirect and cumulative impacts including traffic and tourism, and a full visual impact assessment. It also suspended the Gjirokastra Castle masterplan and asked for an updated state of conservation report by 1 February 2027.

For a project team, the lesson is that the weaknesses UNESCO lists are the standard parts of a risk assessment: baseline, method, cumulative effects and visual setting. Getting them right at the start is cheaper than redoing them after works are halted.

The Ohrid Region: Cumulative Risk Across Two Countries

The Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid Region is shared by Albania and North Macedonia. In 2025, decision 47 COM 7B.54 found that the conditions for listing the property as World Heritage in Danger were met. It asked for a strategic environmental assessment that comprehensively assesses the cumulative impacts of infrastructure and development, asked Albania to halt further development on the Drilon-Tushemisht waterscape project and the Pogradec bypass until revised impact assessments are complete, and asked North Macedonia to suspend development in the Corridor VIII project areas until assessments are reviewed.

In July 2026, BTA reported that the Committee had postponed the In Danger listing and given North Macedonia until 2030 to implement its recommendations, with a progress report due in early February 2027. The same report cited audits finding 4,847 illegal structures and no adopted urban plans for 20 settlements in Ohrid municipality. These are risk management failures as much as planning ones: individual buildings and roads were approved or tolerated without anyone assessing their combined effect on the lake and the historic town.

Practical Steps for PIUs, Tourism Ministries and Municipalities

For project implementation units

Screen every sub-project for heritage and environmental risk before design is fixed, not after. Keep one risk register for the whole programme so that cumulative effects are visible. Write terms of reference for HIAs and ESIAs that require a shared baseline and a cumulative

assessment, and include chance finds procedures and heritage clauses in every works contract.

For tourism and culture ministries

Agree a single procedure for notifying the World Heritage Centre about projects near World Heritage properties, with clear timing before irreversible decisions. Make sure the site management plan and any tourism destination management plan are consistent, and that visitor growth is treated as a risk with indicators and thresholds.

For municipalities

Use urban plans and building control to manage the cumulative risk that no single project assessment can see. Record and act on unauthorised construction, and involve residents and businesses early, especially where works change access, traffic or livelihoods.

Where tourism works affect people's land or income, risk assessment should also feed the resettlement and livelihood planning required by financiers, as explained in Risalat's guide to livelihood restoration under World Bank ESS5.

Critical Questions Government and Project Leaders Should Be Asking

Do we have one risk register for the whole programme?

If each sub-project has its own assessment but nobody looks at them together, cumulative impacts on a historic town will be missed. UNESCO's requests for Berat, Gjirokastra and Ohrid all centre on cumulative effects.

Were heritage risks screened before designs were fixed?

Avoidance is the first step of the mitigation hierarchy, and it is only possible while routes, footprints and heights can still change.

Do our HIA and ESIA share a baseline and project description?

Separate studies with different baselines produce conflicting conclusions and delay review by heritage bodies and financiers.

Have we notified the World Heritage Centre in time?

The Operational Guidelines expect notification before irreversible decisions. Late notification is a common reason for suspended works.

Who updates the assessment when designs or contractors change?

A risk assessment that is not updated during works stops protecting the site. Name an owner and a review trigger for each high risk.

Is visitor growth treated as a risk with thresholds?

Tourism success can become the main pressure on a site. Visitor numbers, traffic and short-term rentals should have indicators and agreed responses.

How Risalat Can Help

Risalat works with ministries, heritage institutes, municipalities and PIUs to build practical assessment and management skills. Our Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Tourism Training in Turin covers heritage impact assessment, environmental and social risk in tourism works, visitor management and the delivery of donor-financed heritage projects. Teams can also

start with Risalat's free tools to review their current systems.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is an environmental risk assessment?

It is a structured process that identifies hazards from a project, estimates how likely and how serious their effects on the environment, people and heritage would be, ranks the risks and sets controls using the mitigation hierarchy.

How is an environmental risk assessment different from an EIA or ESIA?

An EIA or ESIA is a formal study of a specific project's impacts, usually required for a permit or by a financier. Risk assessment is the method used inside those studies and continues to be updated during works and operation.

Is heritage impact assessment a type of environmental risk assessment?

Yes, in practice. It applies the same logic to the attributes that give a heritage place its value, following the 2022 UNESCO, ICCROM, ICOMOS and IUCN guidance for World Heritage contexts.

Why has UNESCO suspended works near Berat and Gjirokastra?

The World Heritage Committee kept the Osum River bank and Shkëmbi Road works suspended in 2026 until heritage and environmental impact assessments, including cumulative and visual impacts, are reviewed.

Sources

- UNESCO World Heritage Committee Decision 48 COM 7B.27: Historic Centres of Berat and Gjirokastra (2026)
- UNESCO World Heritage Committee Decision 47 COM 7B.94: Historic Centres of Berat and Gjirokastra (2025)
- UNESCO World Heritage Committee Decision 47 COM 7B.54: Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid Region (2025)
- North Macedonia gets UNESCO extension on Ohrid region (BTA, 24 July 2026)
- World Bank ESF Guidance Note for Borrowers: ESS8 Cultural Heritage
- EBRD Environmental and Social Policy 2024: ESR 8 Cultural Heritage
- Guidance and Toolkit for Impact Assessments in a World Heritage Context (IUCN library record, 2022)
- Albania Infrastructure and Tourism-Enabling Project (EU Neighbours East)

Related Risalat programmes

- Environmental and Social Safeguards Training and Tour in Copenhagen, Copenhagen (8 Feb 2027)
- Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESF) for Project Teams in Kigali, Kigali (8 Feb 2027)
- Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESF) for Project Teams in Bali, Bali (15 Feb 2027)
- Hydropower Dam Safety, Operation and Environmental Flows in Geneva, Geneva (4 Jan 2027)

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