Statement by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

“The rock art of Africa makes up one of the oldest and most extensive records on Earth of human thought. It shows the very emergence of the human imagination. It is a priceless treasure. And it is irreplaceable.

But Africa’s rock art is not just about the distant past. It is about today and tomorrow as well. Scientists, historians, artists and students must be able to study and understand its significance for decades and centuries to come.

Africa’s rock art is the common heritage of all Africans and all people. It is a cultural gift from our ancestors that can bring diverse people together - with pride and a common commitment to share it and preserve it.

Yet, today, Africa’s rock art is severely threatened. Its future is uncertain. Perhaps the greatest threat is neglect. A lack of resources, combined with a lack of official interest, has left too many rock art sites unguarded against vandals and thieves.

It is time for Africa’s leaders to take a new and more active role. We must save this cultural heritage before it is too late. Two initiatives are especially critical: educating our children, and engaging local communities.

To Africa’s children I would like to say, “You are the future of Africa. Study your proud history, and protect Africa’s rock art.”

I would also like to ask private businesses, foundations and individuals to contribute their expertise and resources.

We at the United Nations will continue to do our part.

Finally, I am pleased to join my dear friend Nelson Mandela in supporting TARA, the Trust for African Rock Art, in its work to preserve this vital cornerstone of our world’s cultural heritage.

THE TRUST FOR AFRICAN ROCK ART

TARA, a Nairobi based non-governmental not-for-profit organization, is committed to promoting the awareness and preservation of Africa’s unique rock art heritage. Its mission is to “create greater global awareness of the importance and endangered state of Africa’s rock art; survey sites; monitor status; be an information resource and archive; and promote and support rock art conservation measures”.

The Trust for African Rock Art (TARA) was founded in 1996 by international photographer David Coulson with the support of palaeontologist Mary Leakey. The goals of TARA are to create a permanent visual archive of Africa’s rock art before it is too late, share this priceless archive with the world community, and, to the extent possible, preserve today’s most threatened rock art sites, however remote, across the African continent.

Since 1996 TARA has recorded rock art in over 16 African countries; created an archive of over 60,000 rock art photographs; produced a major illustrated book, African Rock Art, Paintings and Engravings on Stone, by David Coulson and Alec Campbell; published articles in National Geographic Magazine, Time Magazine, USA Today, London Times and other international publications; worked with the Government of Niger to conserve that country’s rock art; helped to prevent destruction of 10,000 year old rock engravings by oil prospectors, hosted an international rock art conference in Nairobi (2004); staged East African rock art awareness exhibitions in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar; made videos; conducted lecture tours and generally promoted the conservation of African rock art round the world.

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From Kisumu, a good road runs along the north shore of the Winam Gulf to Lwanda Kotieno, where there is a ferry service to Mbita Point. From Nairobi, Mbita can be reached via Narok and Kisii. Mbita, or the more southern town of Sindo, can also be reached from the Mara via Kilgoris. Boats can easily be hired at Mbita or Sindo to reach Mfangano Island, and there are regular motor boat services from Mbita.

With prior arrangement, it is possible to camp at the Abasuba Community Peace Museum at Sena on Mfangano island. The museum staff can arrange for hikes into the hills to see the rock art sites. The Abasuba Community Peace Museum can be reached on 0723 898406.

WHERE TO STAY

Luxury camps: Mfangano Island Camp; Rusinga Island Camp; Takawiri Island Resort; Midprice hotels: Lake Victoria Safari Village; Icipe Guest House (Mbita); School visits: please contact Suba Museum; Camping: Suba Museum.
Lake Victoria is the largest lake in Africa and the source of one of Africa’s mightiest rivers, the River Nile. Its northern shores are situated just below the equator and three countries – Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda – share its waters. Looking out from the shores visitors have the impression of being at the edge of an ocean for it is impossible to see the far side. Many islands punctuate this vastness, most of them in Uganda and Tanzania, yet Kenya also has its islands. Two of these, Mfangano and Rusinga, with their adjacent shores, provide the nucleus of Suba District. The largest island, Mfangano, rises steeply from the great lake, a hunched-over giant clothed with green vegetation. Its rocky backbone rises over 300 metres (1000 feet) above the lake and is exposed as tall red cliffs in some places. The shore is edged by black rocks with overhanging fig trees, beaches with black volcanic sand and narrow stands of reeds.

The people cluster in small villages along the narrow shoreline, or live in widely-scattered homes on the steep slopes. They grow fields of maize, millet and beans, some fruit trees, and keep cattle, goats, sheep, ducks, chickens and dogs. Many homesteads are bordered by hedges of yellow-flowered *Thevetia* bushes, and wild morning-glories abound in fallow fields. Beautifully painted canoes are lined up on the beaches or at work out on the lake. Rusinga Island is connected to the mainland by a causeway allowing vehicles to access its limited network of roads, but on Mfangano Island there are no roads and transport here is mostly by boat or donkey, on foot, and very occasionally by light aircraft.

Narrow paths wind up the steep slopes. The land is rocky and the soil shallow, but a stunted dry forest of olive and associated trees survives on the higher slopes. On the south-eastern side, the climate is drier and the plants tend to be bushy and thorny, including Acacias, the invasive *Lantana* bush and its indigenous cousin *Lippia*. To the north and west there is a little more rain and a more diverse dry forest.

This region is the site of many ancient migrations and the setting for a large number of rock art sites. Rock art makes up one of the oldest and most extensive records of human thought on earth. Found all over the world, it is richly represented in the Lake Victoria region and particularly in the Suba District of Kenya. The art in Suba District was created long before the arrival of the Abasuba people roughly two centuries ago. In some cases it has retained power and importance in the culture of the Abasuba and this has helped protect it from damage and oblivion. Several sites are available for visitors to view; please treat these sites with care and respect so the art can be conserved for future generations in Suba.

More general information about rock art in East Africa can be found in a short guidebook: *Rock Art in East Africa*, Trust for African Rock Art (Nairobi, 2005), available at the Suba Museum or bookshops and museums around Kenya.

Below: *Shoreline at Mfangano Island Camp*
The Abasuba are Bantu-speakers who are believed to have originally come to this area from Uganda more than 200 years ago. Some of them went first to Tanzania before settling here. The name “Suba” means “the people who are always wandering”. The arrival of the Abasuba displaced the Nilotic cattle-herding Luo people, who moved further north.

The rock art, however, pre-dates these migrations and is thought to be the work of ancestral Twa, a forager-hunter, Ndarobo-type people. Meanwhile the Abasuba long ago embraced the art as part of their own ancient heritage.

The Abasuba community is divided into 14 clans, and different clans have different ritual responsibilities, such as for rain-making ceremonies or ritual cleansing. Each clan has its own special relationship with the others. In Suba culture, male circumcision is important and only those circumcised were allowed to go to war or to step in some of the Abasuba sacred places.

The Suba make their living along the shore from fishing; the catch is exported to major towns in Kenya and from there to Europe. Further inland they are agriculturalists; Suba District is well known for its fruit production, especially oranges and bananas.

Living along the water, with a developed system of water transport, the Suba people are highly mobile and will often move throughout the Lake Victoria region in search of fishing and trade.

Like everywhere in Kenya, Suba is changing and adapting to the modern world. Iron-sheet roofs are replacing the traditional thatch, which is more difficult for the people to maintain and for which it is increasingly difficult to find sufficient grass.

Television and mobile phones are available in many parts of Suba District. Nonetheless, even along the mainland shoreline many towns and villages still have no vehicles or roads and can only be reached by boat.
The Rock Art

Africa has the greatest variety of any other continent as well as some of the oldest. Over 30 different African countries have rock art which represents the earliest cultural and sometimes historical records of humankind. Kenya itself has several different styles of art and a large number of sites scattered through different regions.

In the Suba District there are two different types of rock art – rock paintings and rock engravings or carvings. Most rock painting sites in the area feature a geometric style of art usually consisting of concentric circles painted in red and white. This particular style is the dominant style in the Lake Victoria Basin and is also found in a number of different parts of Kenya including one site only 70 kilometres from Nairobi.

These paintings are attributed to ancestral Twa, a forager-hunter people who may have originally been related to the Pygmies of the eastern Congo. Most of these paintings are thought to have been made between 1000 and 4000 years ago and may have been used for rain-making purposes. It is known for instance that similar paintings in eastern Uganda only 200 kilometres north of Suba District were used for this purpose.

Rock engraving sites in the area include “cupule” sites, where cup-shaped depressions have been ground into the rock surface, as well as a rock gong. Although cupules often resemble a Bao game their original use is likely to have been for ritual purposes, such as initiation.

Cupules are found all over the world and are thought to be amongst the oldest form of rock art, probably predating paintings such as those at Mawanga and Kwitone by thousands of years.

Rock gongs are normally free-standing boulders balanced on the living rock which have a natural resonance, and often bear a number of cupules. When the boulders are struck with a stone they emit a ringing tone like a beaten gong. Rhythmic striking produces a series of notes that carry great distances. A number of rock gongs are found in the Lake Victoria basin and in the Moru Kopjes in Tanzania’s Serengeti National Park, as well as in the Mt Kenya region.

Entry tickets are issued at each site against a small visitors fee. More information is available at the Abasuba Community Peace Museum.

Facing page: A typical Lake Victoria canoe, for many people the only form of transport in this area. Below: Geometric rock paintings at Mawanga cave on Mfangano Island.
SUBA ROCK PAINTING SITES

MAWANGA
The cave at Mawanga on Mfangano Island is only a five-minute walk from the boat landing, of which the last few metres are quite steep (a railing is provided). The site features paintings thought to have been made by Twa, forager-hunters who predated the Nilotic cattle-keeping Luo who were displaced in historic times by the Bantu-speaking Abasuba. The paintings are similar in style to those found in many places around the Lake Victoria basin and feature red and white painted concentric circles, spirals and sunbursts. They are thought to be between 1000 to 4000 years old.

Although they were painted as part of a vanished mythology, the cave, the paintings and the surrounding area retain powers in the traditions of the Abasuba. The Wasamo clan, who live around the cave, are the rain-makers of the Abasuba, and the elders agree that the paintings have been used for rain-making ceremonies, with the red paintings representing the moon and the white ones representing the sun.
**Kwitone**

On the upland part of Mfangano island is the Kwitone rock shelter. The art here is similar to that at Mawanga, although retaining more of its colour and vibrancy. The elders of the Wagimbe clan explain that if you wanted to come to Kwitone to talk to the ancestors, you were not allowed to call the site by its name or tell anyone that you were coming. You were also supposed to abstain from sex.

If you followed these recommendations, when you arrived at the site you might see hens, old women and women drinking alcohol. If you didn’t follow the recommendations, when you came to the site, you might see nothing at all, not even art. The Wagimbe also say that their grandmothers were the painters, although the paintings were almost certainly made long before the Abasuba arrived.

According to the elders, in times of war and trouble, people would come to the cave to ask the ancestors to bring peace. In the battle between the Wagimbe and the Wasaki (approximately 200 years ago), the Wagimbe had taken refuge in the cave. The women then dressed up as men and, standing in the mouth of the cave, scared the attackers into thinking that there were double the number of warriors as was actually the case. The Wagimbe were victorious and people still come to the cave to ask the ancestors for victory and success in their various endeavours.

Although Kwitone has no special ritual purpose, trees around the site are sacred and should not be cut down.

Kwitone can be visited with a guide from the Abasuba Museum and requires a steep hike of about 1 1/2 hours to reach.

Facing page: Detail showing red and white concentric circles in the Mawanga cave. Below: Concentric circles painted in red and white at Kwitone shelter on Mfangano Island.
In Suba cupules are found both on Mfangano Island and on the mainland. They do not retain any ceremonial powers but are still in use for the traditional game of Bao, which in Suba is played with four rows of eight holes. Cupules can be seen on the same walk that includes Kwitone painting site. Arrangements can be made with Abasuba Museum to visit other cupule sites.

The Abasuba Museum can organise special visits to the rock gong on Mfangano Island.

Above: Cupule site on the mainland opposite Mfangano. Left: Rock gong on Mfangano Island. Facing page: Evening view from the peak on Nzenze Island with Mfangano Island on right.
OTHER CULTURAL FEATURES
OF SPECIAL INTEREST

THE SACRED ISLAND OF NZENZE:
The Wasamo clan are the custodians of Nzenze Island (also called the Moving Island) which is still used for rain-making ceremonies. This island is said to have followed the Wasamo clan in their migration from Uganda and will continue to follow them wherever they go. Only clan members are allowed to land on the island, if others land they meet with unexpected obstacles – they may even find their way blocked by aggressive thorns which disappear as they turn for home! While nobody is allowed to live on Nzenze Island, members of the Wasamo clan have special cultivated plots there.

There is another story told as to why this island is sacred to the Wasamo clan. Long ago the elders realised that the island was directly opposite their sacred cave, Mawanga, and thus the energy from the cave was naturally projected across the waters to the island. Thus in the old days it was said that whenever there were really bad times with no food on Mfangano they knew they would always be able to find food on Nzenze, which means “The Grandfather” (i.e. Wasamu himself, the original person who was making the rain at that place). On the peak of Nzenze they said there was a shrine guarded by a large python. In times of drought, goats or other animals were sometimes sacrificed and given to the python. Typically, they said, when there was no food anywhere else you would go over to the island which was then just bush and would soon come across an exceptionally large goat which would be enough to feed the whole village. Nzenze’s reputation as the emergency granary of the area continues.

As the island is not frequently visited, it is one of the few remaining places in Suba where hippos and crocodiles are still seen.

No visitors are allowed to land on Nzenze island.
On the Suba mainland near Nyandhiwa is a headland revered as the site of the legend of Nyamugondho which is well-known throughout western Kenya. The legend relates that Mbare was fishing in the lake with his net which was called Mugondho. He was a very poor man and had nothing. When he pulled in his net, “Mugondho”, he saw a beautiful woman inside the net. He pulled her onto the land and they agreed that she would stay with him and he would never mention where he had found her. She was called Nyamugondho which means the Net Lady.

They lived together as man and wife and Mbare grew prosperous, acquiring many cattle and several other wives. One day he came home drunk and knocked on one wife’s door to let him in (each wife had her own house). She refused, so he went to the door of his next wife and she also wouldn’t open it. At last he came to Nyamugondho’s door and knocked. She also didn’t open the door so he said “What? Even you, who I found in the lake, you won’t open the door for me?”

Nyamugondho was very angry and told Mbare “What have you said? What was the agreement when we met?”

Mbare could not remember but Nyamugondho immediately started her journey back to the lake where she came from, taking with her the animals. Mbare also went back to where he came from, becoming a poor man again.

Local mythology says that rock formations resembling Nyamugondho’s footsteps and those of her animals can be seen at the point where she entered the water. People in the region believe that the water which flows above “the footsteps” has medicinal powers and they come from as far as Kisumu to collect it.
SACRED FORESTS AND PEACE TREES: Within Suba District are a number of small sacred forests and peace trees. These were very important in the past as locations of communication with the ancestors and even now most are protected and in use, especially for peacemaking in the community or to settle family affairs. Most rituals are performed by male elders, who still retain much of the knowledge of the rituals and ceremonial places. Women and younger men did not perform rituals, although young men were sometimes allowed to sacrifice an animal outside of the sacred place.

Several sacred sites are in walking distance of Sindo town (on the mainland), however visitors should beware – one of the trees is believed to be so poisonous that it kills anyone who touches it; even someone who walks under the shadow of the tree or passes downwind of it may die! Animals and birds are also affected. It is reported that researchers who have attempted to find out more about the tree have not been seen again. While modern science doesn’t know of a tree with such poisonous and instantaneous effects, there are carbon dioxide springs in other places in Kenya that might have similar effects and would be undetected until too late. It is recommended to follow the advice of your guide while visiting Sindo area.

Please contact the Museum if you would like to visit sacred forests or peace trees. Please respect the traditions of the Suba people and accept with good humour any limitations placed on your visits to sacred sites.

Facing page: A lady collecting “holy” water from above the mythical “footsteps” near Nyandhiwa. This page: Natural vegetation on one of Lake Victoria’s many islands.
PALAEONTOLOGY:
*Proconsul africanus*, one of Mary and Louis Leakey’s first important hominid finds, was found on Rusinga Island in 1948. The most complete skeleton of its kind ever found, it has been dated to approximately 18 million years old, the time of the last major volcanic activity in the region. The original can be viewed at the Nairobi Museum. Fossils are also visible in some of the lava flows on Mfangano Island; these are still under investigation by the National Museums of Kenya.

PRE-COLONIAL FORTIFIED SETTLEMENTS:
Western Kenya and southern Uganda are home to a number of pre-colonial fortified settlements. In the rocky areas around Lake Victoria, the fortifications consist of dry stone walls; further north they are earthen ditch-and-embankments. The dry stone walls are free standing and built without mortar. Although they may have been built for defence, it is also possible that they were principally created for prestige. Estimated at 400-600 years old, we know very little about why they were made or who made them. There are several hundred such fortified settlements, of which the largest and best known is at Thimlich Ohinga, just outside Suba district. Within Suba, pre-colonial dry stone walls can be seen near Mawanga or Nyamugondho.

Please do not climb or walk on the walls as this will accelerate their deterioration.

TOM MBOYA MAUSOLEUM:
Tom Mboya was one of Kenya’s most colourful politicians of the Independence era. A charismatic trade union leader, he was the engine behind what came to be known as the “Mboya Airlift” that saw several thousand young Kenyans fly to the USA for university education in the early 1960s, many of whom later became prominent in independent Kenya. After Independence, Mboya became first Minister for Labour, then Minister for Constitutional Affairs and finally Minister for Economic Planning, but was assassinated in 1969 at the age of 39.

The mausoleum near Kasawanga on Rusinga Island contains various mementos and gifts Mboya received in his lifetime and is a moving experience to any visitor.

Top: Fossilised bone on one of Mfangano’s rocky hillsides. Far left: A part of a stone wall enclosure on the mainland opposite Mfangano Island. Left: A Suba elder on Mfangano Island.
Large areas of Suba District are still rich in natural vegetation, with a spectacular variety of birdlife. While visiting rock art sites on Mfangano, visitors can also enjoy these other environmental attractions.

The path to Kwitone rock art site on the northern side of the island passes through the village, past homesteads and Wakula Primary School, and climbs among leafy thickets and past a deep, hidden rock pool. As it climbs, the path becomes a track over rock faces, through an unusual landscape. Pockets of soil in the rock faces create patches of seasonally flooded grass, clumps of succulent aloes, euphorbia, morning glory and ground orchids, as well as small groves of thicket or forest. The trees here include candelabra euphorbia and brown olive. There are a riotous variety of shrubs, climbers and scramblers, including sweet-scented jasmine – a rich diversity of plants in a stark but beautiful setting.

The twin islands of Mfangano and Rusinga are very different, as if they were unrelated. Mfangano, out in the lake, is rocky and steep, the farms are small, and the hilltops still thick with trees and bushes. Rusinga, now connected to the mainland by a causeway, is more densely populated. The shoreline is wide with many farms, sandy soil and layers of sedimentary rocks. The hills that rise from the centre are largely denuded, but feature sites sacred to the local people, important palaeo sites, and unusual habitats such as gravel slopes.

The busy fishing beaches and open country of Rusinga are full of birds, many of them easy to see. Large pink-backed pelicans swim by majestically. Cormorants, kingfishers and little egrets crowd the shore. Noisy black-headed or village weavers nest in colonies in tall trees. In this drier habitat, the common sandy beach on one of the granite islands.
The wild, melodious calls of African fish eagles ring from the tops of lakeside fig trees. Hamerkops, brown birds with a low crest, feed at the water’s edge and build enormous nests in the fig trees. Black and white sacred ibis and dark hadada ibis with a loud harsh call can both be recognized by their long, curved beaks.

Small birds of the shore are just as friendly. Tiny, brilliantly coloured malachite kingfishers and slim, black and white African pied wagtails may perch right on the boats. Pied kingfishers hover in the air and plunge into the water after prey. Weaverbirds build their nests in villages, in homesteads, or next to fishing beaches. There are many kinds of yellow weaverbirds on Mfangano; two likely to be seen near the shore are northern brown-throated weaver with a brown face and white eye, and slender-billed weaver with a black face, black eye and slim black beak.

Inland, birds are a bit more difficult to see, except for the large black kites that continuously patrol the skies, looking for easy prey such as little chicks or dead fish. Swallows skim through the air; along the shore there are Angola swallows and plain martins, and on the rocky ridges, rock martins and others. From September to April, during the northern winter, large flocks of barn swallows migrate to Africa; at that time they may outnumber other swallows.

The cooing of doves fills the air, especially the loud six-note call of the red-eyed dove and the long, mournful dirge of the emerald-spotted wood dove. Birds the visitor is likely to see inland include the common bulbul, grey-brown above and pale below with yellow under the tail, found in most habitats, and the black and white common fiscal shrike, perching on bushes and trees in the open to look for insect prey. Red-chested sunbirds with shiny blue-green head and back, long tails, and red bands across the chest live near the shore. Pairs of large eastern grey plantain eaters call raucously from the treetops, and spectacular black-headed gonoleks, vivid red below, call to each other in the thickest thickets.
THE FISH AND OTHER WATER LIFE

Half a century ago, the Nile perch was introduced into Lake Victoria. The reasoning was that this was a large, tasty and “sporting” fish and that it occurs in the Nile basin. The Nile perch, which can grow bigger than a person, promptly set about eating all the other fish. Today some 300 different kinds of endemic fish are no longer found in the main lake, and fish such as tilapia, once common here, have become scarce.

Fishermen catch Nile perch for the local and export markets. At night, they fish for the small *omena* or *dagaa*, attracted to the lanterns on the boats. The beaches reveal traces of other water life: shells of freshwater clams and snails of different sizes and shapes. In many parts of Kenya, fresh water crabs have been displaced by the introduced Louisiana crayfish, but on the rocky shores of Suba District they seem to be surviving. Crabs and crayfish are important foods for the two species of otters that live in Lake Victoria. Hippos and crocodiles also live in the lake, but here they are shy and wary and seldom seen. The Nile monitor, Africa’s biggest lizard, can sometimes be spotted along the shores of Mfangano Island.

HUMAN LIFE BY THE LAKE

Suba District is held together by water, not roads, and this gives the area a special flavour that can be shared by visitors. Transport between the islands is by motor boat and brightly-coloured water taxis (canoes with outboard motors) are a constant feature of any vista. Boat races (which usually take place in December, but can also be specially organized for an occasion) are an exciting spectacle.

By night, hundreds of sailing canoes string out thousands of lanterns, silently fishing for *omena* (the sound of a boat’s engine is thought to scare them), lighting up the lake in an extraordinary floating display. The *omena* can be seen drying on the beaches of the fishing towns in the morning.

Sport fishing for Nile perch is available to visitors and is one of the major attractions at tourist hotels.

FORESTS

The Gwassi hills – now a gazetted national forest – and Gembe hills can be visited from either Ruma National Park, by road from Mbita or from the lake shore – however prior arrangements should be made with the Forestry Officer at Mbita.
The State of Rock Art Today
During the millennia since the art was originally made, it has survived heat, cold, blown sand, wind and rain, even if some paintings are today faded and pieces of engravings eroded away. The art may look strong, but it isn’t; it is fragile and easily damaged.

Visiting Rock Art Sites
If possible, read about rock art before setting out, this will immeasurably enhance your understanding and, thus, your enjoyment. Take the trouble to make sure you will be travelling with a really knowledgeable guide. Make certain sufficient time is allowed in your schedule to view the art properly. Once at the site you will want to spend time viewing and photographing as well as finding out more about it. Some sites have thousands of images and cannot be appreciated in a mere half an hour.
How to avoid damaging the art or the site

1. Never touch rock art or pour liquids on it. Liquids thrown or sponged over paintings to enhance visibility cause incredible damage. Even touching a painting leaves sweat on rock, speeding up fading.

2. Drawing in with chalk to make images photogenic can destroy later possibilities of scientifically dating their varnish.

3. Walking over engravings eventually leaves ugly scars in the rock varnish and seriously damages fragile images by breaking bits off engraved surfaces. Climbing slopes and cliffs can dislodge or break off loose rocks also causing damage to engravings. It is better to view engravings from a distance rather than to climb up to or over them.

4. Remember others are coming after you. Do not discard litter, take all your rubbish with you.

5. We don’t need to tell you not to add your own graffiti – this destroys the art for all future generations. Think about other visitors who will come after you.

These sites and all you find at them are part of our national heritage so please respect them. Please also respect the traditions and requirements of the Abasuba people. In particular, please ask permission before taking any photos of people.

Engravings are best viewed in morning or evening light when the sun rakes across them creating shadows in their engraved lines. Paintings are usually best seen when shaded, as bright sunlight can obscure faded colours causing them to almost disappear.