



EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION
LANDSCAPE AWARD OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

6th Session – 2018-2019

APPLICATION FORM

Presentation

The European Landscape Convention aims to promote the protection, management and planning of landscapes and to bring together European co-operation in this field. It is the first international treaty exclusively devoted to all dimensions of European landscape. Taking into account the landscape, natural and cultural values of the territory, it contributes to promoting the quality of life and well-being of Europeans.

The Resolution on the Rules governing the Landscape Award of the Council of Europe, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 20 February 2008 at the 1018th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies, draws attention to the fact that Article 11 of the Convention institutes the Landscape Award of the Council of Europe and that it is in keeping with the work carried out by the Council of Europe concerning human rights, democracy and sustainable development. It effectively promotes the territorial dimension of human rights and democracy by acknowledging the importance of measures taken to improve the landscape for people's living conditions.

Opened to the Parties to the Convention, the Award is intended to raise civil society's awareness of the value of landscapes, of their role and of changes to them. Its objective is to reward exemplary practical initiatives aimed at successful landscape quality objectives on the territories of the Parties to the Convention. The Award is conferred every two years and the files presenting applications must reach the Secretariat General of the Council of Europe.

At its meeting held in Strasbourg on 28-29 April 2008, the Steering Committee for Cultural Heritage and Landscape (CDPATEP) decided that applications should be submitted to the Council of Europe Secretariat through the Permanent Representations of the Parties to the Convention.

*We would be very grateful if you could send no later than **30 January 2019** the following elements of the candidature file (20 pages maximum) established for your country on the basis of the proposals forwarded to you by the Ministries:*

- by E-mail, the Application form completed to: maguelonne.dejeant-pons@coe.int; susan.moller@coe.int;*
- by post, a copy of the Application form completed together with a CD-Rom, DVD or USB key, containing the all the additional material to: Maguelonne Déjeant-Pons, Executive Secretary of the European Landscape Convention, Council of Europe, Agora (A4-15V), F- 67075 STRASBOURG Cedex.*

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Please note that:

- participation to the Landscape Award of the Council of Europe is only open to local and regional authorities and their groupings and non-governmental organisations, as stated in the Resolution CM/Res (2008)3, Appendix, Article 2;*
- the application form must be completed in all its parts, in one of the two official languages of the Council of Europe (English or French);*
- the materials submitted must be copyright-free, for use by the Council of Europe in communications aimed at promoting the Award or any other publications or activities relating to the Convention. The Council of Europe undertakes to cite the authors' names;*
- files that are incomplete or fail to comply with the rules will not be taken into consideration.*

For further information please visit the Landscape Award section of the Council of Europe website: www.coe.int/EuropeanLandscapeConvention

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I. STATE CONCERNED AND APPLICANT

1. State	Belgium
Represented by	Ms Sonja Vanblaere, administrator-general
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	Please also include Jonas.vanlooveren@vlaanderen.be in any further communication
2. Applicant	
<i>Name of the local, regional authority(ies) or NGO(s)</i>	
Represented by	Vzw Kempens Landschap Mr. Philippe De Backer (director)
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II. PRESENTATION OF THE PROJET

3. Name of the Project

Wortel- and Merksplas-Colony:
a cultural landscape revalued

4. Location of the Project

Colony 5-7, or Wortel and Merksplas Colony, is in the municipalities Hoogstraten (Wortel Colony, address vagrants' farm is Kolonie 41 in 2323 Wortel) and Merksplas (Merksplas Colony, address Visitors Centre Colony 5-7 is Kapelstraat 10 in 2330 Merksplas).

5. Summary of the Project (10-12 lines)

Wortel and Merksplas Colony together form an exceptional cultural landscape. This 1000-hectare, manmade compartmental landscape established in the nineteenth century consists of open and closed areas, farmland and forest and nature reserves. No less than 32 km of historical lanes and other linear elements such as canals and hedges divide the landscape into orthogonal forms filled in as grasslands, brush, forests and buildings. Some of the remaining heaths and fens offer a picture of what the landscape was like before the creation of the Colonies. Until 1993, Wortel and Merksplas Colony were shielded from the outside world. After more than 150 years of service as agricultural colonies, the landscape was left largely untended. The area was briefly under threat until citizens sounded the alarm. Over the past decades, governments and associations have successfully worked together to secure and restore the identity and unity of both Colonies. This way everyone can continue to enjoy this historical landscape, now and in the future.

6. Photo representing the Project (high definition – JPEG 350 dpi) and name of the author of the photo please



Copyright Ludo Verhoeven

7. Website of the Project *(if exists)*

www.kolonie57.be/en

www.kolonienvanweldadigheid.eu/en

III. CONTENT OF THE PROJECT

8. **Start of the Project** month year

The project must have been completed at least three years previously

9. **Partners**

vzw Kempens Landschap, NGO
Province of Antwerp, public administration
Municipality of Merksplas, public administration
City of Hoogstraten, public administration
Vlaamse Landmaatschappij, public administration
Bouwmaatschappij De Noorderkempen, company
Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos, public administration
agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed, overheidsinstelling
Pidpa, overheidsinstelling
Red Merksplas-Kolonie NGO (no longer active)
Also see <https://www.kolonie57.be/en/partners>

10. **Financing bodies**

Most of the partners contribute also financially in the project as owner or supporting government.

11. **Central aims of the Project**

Introduction

At the end of the twentieth century, the landscape of Wortel and Merksplas Colony was under severe pressure. Until 1993, the areas were still active as Colonies of Benevolence of the Belgian state. Afterwards they were threatened with fragmentation and decay. The areas were even listed on the World Monuments Fund of the 100 most endangered heritage sites in the world. Citizens, local and supra-local governments happily worked together to secure, manage and upgrade Wortel and Merksplas Colony as a whole. To this end, the non-profit organisation Kempens Landschap was founded in 1997.

Since then, Kempens Landschap has supported the Technical Coordination Commission, which was created to secure and manage the landscape of Wortel and Merksplas Colony in community hands. One thousand hectares of land have been managed for more than twenty years through cooperation and commitment among various authorities, companies and partners. The vision for the future of Wortel and Merksplas Colony was laid out in a development plan, a compromise in which nature, agriculture and recreation all receive their share of opportunities together. The plan forms the basis for the ownership status, layout and redevelopment of the Colonies.

Each partner has a well-defined role as owner of part or parts of the landscape. As an owner, each partner is also responsible for taking care of its property with due diligence, as the entire landscape is protected by law. Allocation has been handled in such a way that individual partners can concentrate on managing an area in which they have the most expertise. The Agency for Nature and Forests manages the wooded areas and many homes are owned by the housing association Bouwmaatschappij De Noorderkempen. The local authorities of the city of Hoogstraten and the municipality of Merksplas typically purchase empty buildings that are then developed and occupied step by step.

Since its foundation, Kempens Landschap has played a coordinating role in this process. Twice a year, the landscape organisation chairs the Technical Coordination Commission, a body in which the partners discuss and coordinate the management and policy of Wortel and Merksplas Colony. All new management plans or development visions are discussed in this Commission in order to preserve the unity and special character of the landscape. Though Commission has no legal foundation, it has been working for more than twenty years on the basis of commitment and trust between the various partners.

Central aims of the project

The main objective of the project is to preserve and strengthen the identity and unity of the landscape of the Wortel and Merksplas Colony. Visitors must be able to enjoy its special, highly legible landscape, now and in the generations to come.

The future of Wortel and Merksplas Colony's landscape was far from certain at the start of the project in 1997. After more than 150 years of service as agricultural colonies, the landscape fell into relative neglect after it ceased to serve this function in 1993. The buildings and avenues were not maintained, and the grounds were in danger of being broken up.

As a guideline for achieving its main objectives after Wortel and Merksplas Colony was secured as a protected landscape, the Technical Coordination Commission established three basic principles based on the protection decree:

- to maintain and reinforce the pattern of the avenues
- to preserve and reinforce the greenbelt between the two colonies
- to maintain the balance between nature, culture and agriculture

12. Outcome

1. *The unity of the 1,000-hectare landscape is guaranteed by sustainable local management.* After citizens advocated the preservation of the area during the ‘March on Wortel Colony’, the landscape was securely placed in the hands of the community. Different partners each acquired part of the area so that each partner could make optimal use of its expertise. For example, the Flemish Land Agency owns most of the agricultural land in the area. Joint management preserves the unity of the landscape. The Technical Coordination Commission meets twice a year to monitor the implementation of the project.
2. *The purpose, heritage value and nature value of the landscape has been researched, recognised and legally established in spatial zoning plans and protection decrees that protect the character and structure of the landscape in a sustainable way.* The landscape of Wortel and Merksplas Colony was protected in 1999, ensuring that new developments are always undertaken with respect for the historically evolved character of the landscape.
3. *The vision of the landscape’s future management and its revaluation and reinforcement has been laid down in several official management plans and vision documents.* This guarantees the uniform management of Wortel and Merksplas Colony and sets high standards for the desired landscape quality. *Local farmers and residents were actively involved* in the preparation and development of these plans. During workshops and opportunities for public participation, locally supported workgroups were created around themes such as accessibility, fauna and flora, and recreation, giving local associations and interest groups a chance to help determine the policy that is now being implemented.
4. *In recent years, this vision has also been effectively applied in practice, resulting in a remarkable improvement and reinforcement of the grounds.* Historical land use and water management form the starting point. In 2009, a complete inventory was made of the avenues and management guidelines were laid down in an avenue management plan. The avenues were divided according to type, and specific management guidelines were developed for each type. In order to strengthen important visual axes, for example, undergrowth is systematically cleared from the avenues. As in the past, this management is realised with the help of controlled sheep grazing with a shepherd and sheepdog (see photo 3 in annex). Crown projection of the trees in the main avenues is completely safeguarded. This means that in the meadows adjacent to the main avenues, an uncultivated strip of up to fifteen metres wide was created. The historical water management of the area with drainage canals parallel to the avenues and fens was also inventoried and restored. Thirty active local farmers work the historical agricultural land. The protection decrees of the sites stipulate that these areas must remain field parcels.

In order to improve the quality and uniformity of the landscape, a vision for the restoration of hedges was worked out in 2003. The appearance of the wardens’ houses, which are part of the meticulously designed landscape, had lost its unity over the years. By once again surrounding the plots with beech hedges, the landscape was restored to its original quality. The more than 300 inhabitants of the houses

contribute to the uniform and attractive appearance of the landscape by maintaining their gardens and façades according to established regulations. For each of these houses, Kempens Landschap drew up a physical construction file with similar restoration requirements.

The buildings that are part of the landscape are also systematically restored and redeveloped. In 2010, for example, a master plan was drawn up to restore the site of the Grote Hoeve in Merksplas Colony in ten phases. As of 2019, four phases have been completed, including the reconstruction of the surrounding landscape of Grote Hoeve according to historical models.

5. *Wortel and Merksplas Colony continues to be a living landscape.* Local farmers (about 30), residents (about 300) and businesses will be permanently involved in the project. Recently, a ‘visitor giving’ project was started to develop a network of companies and partners who want to be economically active in the area in a sustainable way.
6. *The landscape was also put on the map in terms of tourism.* Wortel and Merksplas Colony has evolved from being an almost unknown destination with rather negative connotations into a new tourist asset in the region. A range of recreational infrastructure was developed for hikers, cyclists, mountain bikers, equestrians and covered wagons. At Wortel Colony, visitors are welcomed in De Klapekster, a visitor centre that focuses on nature education. In 2017, Merksplas Colony opened visitors centre Colony 5-7, where the story of the Colonies and the landscape is offered in four languages. Visitors are welcome here free of charge six days a week. They will not only find information but also an attractively landscaped car park, accessible sanitary facilities and a brasserie. Visitors can also take guided tours of the landscape and in 2019 a bicycle rental point will open in Merksplas. Adventurous families can enjoy Vossenstreken (Fox Tricks), a hiking app with surprising trails (for the moment only available in Dutch). If you want to learn more about the vagrants’ story, you can download the Colony app (for the moment only available in Dutch). For more information, visit the website www.kolonie57.be/en.

IV. RESPECT OF THE CRITERIA OF THE ATTRIBUTION OF THE AWARD

13. Sustainable territorial development

Is the project part of a sustainable development policy?

Does it contribute to the enhancement of environmental, social, economic, cultural or aesthetic values of the landscape? How?

Has it successfully countered or posed a remedy to any pre-existing environmental damage or urban blight? How?

Sustainable development policy

From the start of the project, thought was given to how the area could be preserved, protected and managed in the long term. It was never the intention to place a glass dome over the entire landscape, so to speak, and freeze the situation indefinitely. The cultural landscape of Wortel and Merksplas Colony is the result of successive evolutions and periods of development, and even now evolution is still possible. Developments are, however, framed within and tested against the various existing management tools and visions. For example, high-rise buildings are excluded, and farmers may not use the meadows for (large-scale) greenhouse horticulture. The new visitor car park in Merksplas Colony is constructed in permeable semi-pavement and the parking areas are embedded in the orthogonal structure of the landscape.

Where possible, interventions and management works are carried out using the most sustainable methods available. To give one example: for the last eight years, a flock of around 200 sheep has been grazing along the avenues between April and October in order to manage the verges ecologically. This vision is also reflected in the restoration of the buildings. In Grote Hoeve in Merksplas Colony, the various buildings are heated from a single central boiler room. A project is currently underway to switch to heating with biogas in collaboration with an inter-municipal waste management organisation.

Enhancement of values

Environmental value

The landscape has great ecological potential. The avenues, for example, function as ecological corridors where bats like to forage. The clay pits and pools have become important habitats for fauna and flora. There are crested newts and viviparous lizards. The most important natural values are legally protected. Management aims to increase the ecological value of the area, especially in places where nature development is desired. Several parcels of the landscape are located in the Habitat Directive area, and some areas in Wortel Colony have been designated as Special Protection Zones in the Flemish Ecological Network. Pine forests – formerly planted as production forests – are gradually being converted into deciduous forests, mainly with oak, birch and beech with gradual forest edges. The main avenues are designed as ecological corridors, with varied verges and uncultivated strips of brush; pools and fens have been deepened and re-profiled where necessary for the benefit of amphibians and other fauna and flora. The existing areas of heath are maintained as such. Since 2010, sheep have grazed the avenues between April and October each year. The sheep provide more variation in the vegetation, which benefits biodiversity. Konik horses are also used to graze Wortel Colony.

Social value

The landscape of Wortel and Merksplas Colony was shaped by a nineteenth-century social experiment. Promoting this past and preserving the legibility of the landscape as a whole enhance its social value. This story is presented in detail in visitors centre Colony 5-7. An educational package for secondary school pupils is currently being developed in collaboration with the Centre for Agricultural History. In addition, social organisations are still active in Wortel and Merksplas Colony. WIDAR, for example, is housed in Wortel, where small groups of people with disabilities live and work. Several houses are also owned by a social housing association, giving people who qualify for subsidised housing the

opportunity to live in a green and quiet environment. Every year thousands of school children can enjoy a taste of farm life for a few days in the youth centre De Bonte Beestenboel in Wortel Colony.

Economic value

The project contributes in various ways to the economic value of the landscape. The area has been developed for tourism through the construction and maintenance of infrastructure such as cycling and hiking trails, picnic benches and signposting. Various functions were accommodated in the empty buildings, such as a successful youth accommodation centre, offices, a brasserie with space for conferences and parties, and a bicycle rental point. Empty houses that previously served as staff accommodation for the agricultural colonies are once again inhabited. Recently, a ‘visitor giving’ project was started to develop a network of companies and partners who want to be economically active in the area in a sustainable way. Visitors will make an indirect financial contribution to the development and management of the site. Anyone who now books a Colony 5-7 guided tour with a group, for example, automatically contributes to the management of the landscape.

Cultural value

The project strongly emphasises the cultural value of the protected landscape. The landscape was created by human hands and is therefore a true cultural landscape. Wortel and Merksplas Colony has also been nominated under this category as a UNESCO World Heritage Site together with five other sites in the Netherlands. The nomination dossier was submitted in January 2017, and in June 2018 the dossier was handled by the World Heritage Committee in Bahrain. The dossier was given ‘referral status’ which means that its exceptional values are recognised, but that a number of points must still be revised before it can be definitively registered on the World Heritage List. The history and story of the landscape are kept alive in the visitors centre Colony 5-7. Visitors can also discover this story in the landscape itself thanks to two free hiking apps, one of which – Fox Tricks – is specifically made for children and their (grand)parents.

Aesthetic value

Working together on a uniform management policy has helped to ensure a high level of aesthetic quality in Wortel and Merksplas Colony. In 2003, for example, a vision for the restoration of the hedges was worked out. The appearance of the prison wardens’ houses, which are part of the meticulously designed landscape, had lost its unity over the years. By once again surrounding the plots with beech hedges, the landscape was restored to its original quality. In Merksplas, the new landscaped car park has greatly improved the view of the avenues, which was previously cluttered by cars parked in the verge. Road signs and signage generally are limited as much as possible and worked out in a uniform style to prevent visual pollution of the landscape.

Protection from degradation

Thanks to the project, the area was protected from degradation by fragmentation and large-scale development. Situated in a rural area, both Wortel and Merksplas Colony are close to densely built-up village centres. After 1993, the future of the Colonies was uncertain, as the federal government wanted to divest and sell the areas. Joint purchase, mutual determination of how the areas would be used, and protection of the cultural heritage and nature values of the landscape have enabled its preservation as a whole. New developments are possible insofar as they can be integrated into the landscape and do not exceed its carrying capacity.

14. Exemplary value

*Can the project be considered of exemplary value? Why?
Which are the good practices that it implemented?*

Exemplary value

The project shows that it is possible to transform the future of a landscape from an endangered area to a cultural landscape worthy of inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List through long-term vision and coordinated cooperation. Wortel and Merksplas Colony are endowed with a supra-local importance and appearance. Historically, they are also linked to the five other Colonies of Benevolence in the Netherlands. In 2012, the seven Colonies decided to prepare a joint dossier for nomination as UNESCO World Heritage sites. The nomination dossier was submitted in January 2017, and in June 2018 the dossier was handled by the World Heritage Committee in Bahrain. The dossier was given ‘referral status’ which means that its exceptional values are recognised, but that several points must still be revised before it can be definitively registered on the World Heritage List.

The functioning of the Technical Coordination Commission and the results, visible in the landscape, are sure to inspire other projects. The landscape of Wortel and Merksplas Colony is managed from the perspective of an interdisciplinary vision: nature, agriculture, culture and recreation are all important. A balance is always sought between these different pillars.

Good practices

Landscape recovery in accordance with historic use

Since 1997, several initiatives have been taken to upgrade the landscape of Wortel and Merksplas. Management of the avenues, sheep grazing, restoration of the historical water management system and restoration of the typical beech hedges are good examples.

Responsible tourism

The landscape was developed for tourism with integrity and respect for the area’s carrying capacity. Peace and quiet are promoted as assets and part of the landscape’s appeal. The landscape was designed to teach poor city dwellers – and later vagrants – peace, order and regularity. The landscape still has this calming effect; Wortel Colony was recognized as a ‘quiet zone’ by the Flemish government in 2017.

Living landscape

Thousands of people used to live and work within the boundaries of Wortel and Merksplas Colony. Even though there are no more vagrants, the landscape is still in use. About thirty farmers work the fields, over 300 people live in the area, and the central buildings were given a new function. This gave the landscape a new, added meaning with local support.

International recognition

The project has already received several awards:

- In 2013, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development designated the project as an *Outstanding Rural Project 2013* under the category ‘Sustainable management of open space’.
- In 2014 Kempens Landschap received an *EU Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Award* and Grand Prix in the category ‘Dedicated service’. The jury could hardly conceive a more powerful example of the implementation of the European

Landscape Convention at the end of its first decade. Kempens Landschap has worked out a unique approach to conserving and managing a variety of built and natural heritage sites, located across most of the 70 municipalities of Antwerp province. The jury was particularly impressed with the new future now assured for the unique 'Rijksweldadigheidskolonies' or Colonies of Benevolence.

- Recently, the project was awarded the *Sustainable Cultural Tourism Destination 2018 Award* by the European Cultural Tourism Network.

15. Public participation

Does the project actively encourage the public's participation in the decision-making process? How?

Is the project in line with the wider policies implemented by national, regional or local authorities?

The project was initially started by a citizens' movement and is therefore very strongly supported by the local community. On 9 September 1995, a 'March on Wortel Colony' was organised to save the landscape. Concerned citizens also united in the non-profit organisation Save Merksplas Colony. The public raised the alarm, and local and regional authorities responded by starting the project. For a long time, the non-profit organisation Save Merksplas Colony was also a member of the Technical Coordination Commission and thus directly involved in the decision-making process. After the future of Wortel and Merksplas Colony was secured, the organisation withdrew from the Commission.

Every time the policy of the area is adjusted or given shape, local stakeholders such as residents, entrepreneurs, associations and interest groups are always consulted. This takes place during evening info sessions, work groups that help draw up policy plans, and through making available to the public the research that precedes the approval of official plans. In addition, the public is involved in events that feature shows and other activities as well as a relevant info session.

16. Awareness-raising

Is the project effectively increasing public awareness of the importance of landscape in terms of human development, consolidation of European identity, or individual and collective well-being? How?

The landscape of Wortel and Merksplas Colony is an enduring witness to the interaction between humankind and nature over time. The 1,000-hectare area was created in 1822 and 1825 with a clear purpose. Poor city dwellers and hardened vagrants would not only labour to provide for themselves, they were also supposed to be inspired by the landscape to improve themselves, to put their lives in order and thus break the spiral of poverty into which they had fallen. The regularity, discipline and quiet atmosphere of the landscape reflect this ideology. The environment in which the poor lived and worked was part of their treatment, as it were.

The Colonies of Benevolence were created from an enlightened, utopian idea about the makeability of man. From this ambition grew a project of unprecedented scope and scale. Innovative agricultural techniques were used, and the Colony formed a sort of microcosm of

society in which new ideas about things such as education and health care were implemented. The initial social experiment largely failed. Nevertheless, many of these innovative ideas have resonated far beyond national borders.

Later, during the Belgian period, the landscape was adapted to the needs of the newly established state Colonies of Benevolence. Men without a steady job, permanent address and money were sent to Wortel or Merksplas Colony to work until they had earned enough money to stand on their own two feet again. In this period, too, the landscape was carefully redesigned with attention to meaningful patterns. The façades of the personnel housing, for example, immediately revealed the status or rank of the inhabitants. Wortel and Merksplas Colony were a calling card for the way in which society dealt with weaker citizens: the elderly, beggars, addicts, people with mental health problems.

Through research, publications, educational packages, guides and visitors centre Colony 5-7, the project aims to tell this fascinating story to the public. Not only in theory, but also in practice by inviting people to experience the landscape. The Colony app can be downloaded for free, enabling visitors to learn more while exploring the landscape itself. For children and their (grand)parents, there is Fox Tricks in both Wortel and Merksplas, a free hiking app tailored to this target group. A visit to Wortel and Merksplas Colony is also completely free of charge, which lowers the threshold. Visitors centre Colony 5-7 and the surrounding area is also accessible for people in a wheelchair and has been awarded an A-label for accessibility from Tourism Flanders. There is extensive communication about the project and it also has its own website (www.kolonie57.be).

V. ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

17. List of photos

1. Areal view of Merksplas-Colony – Ludo Verhoeven
2. Tree alley – Dirk Broeckx
3. Sheep grazing – Wim Verschraegen
4. Biking – Raf Ketelslagers
5. Heather – Wim Verschraegen
6. Cemetary – Dirk Broeckx
7. Grazing Konik horses – Wim Verschraegen
8. Fen – James van Leuven
9. Equestrianism – James van Leuven
10. Fall – Wim Verschraegen

18. List of attached documents

- Annex 1: Maps on management
- Annex 2: Involvement and awareness-raising
- Annex 3: Recreation

19. Poster

1. Wortel- and Merksplas-Colony
 - a. High resolution
 - b. Low resolution

20. Video

1. Video_EU_MRKSPLS - WRTL_Final

Together with the printed version of the Application form, additional material in digital format should be included in one CD-Rom, DVD or USB key, and returned by post or courier to:

Maguelonne Déjeant-Pons

Executive Secretary of the European Landscape Convention

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- Text (20 pages max.): *PDF format*
- Photos (10 max.): *JPEG 350 dpi high definition*
- Posters (2 max.): *PDF format high definition or JPEG 350 dpi high definition*
- Video (15 min max.): *mpeg 2 format - It is recommended to present a video (even of amateur quality).*

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