

Digitization for Cultural Preservation in Tuvalu

DAI and RNI project strengthens cultural resilience in the face of climate change

The Pacific island nation of Tuvalu stands as a stark example of the devastating impacts of climate change: rising sea levels, intensifying extreme weather events, and accelerating land loss are not only threatening livelihoods but also endangering the country's cultural heritage. Many of Tuvalu's cultural practices and knowledge systems are closely interwoven with the land on the respective islands and have remained largely undocumented. Without active preservation, this unique heritage faces irreversible loss. The **Tuvalu Digital Repository for Cultural Heritage** seeks to address this urgent need: The project aims to systematically document, digitize, and preserve both tangible and intangible cultural assets – ensuring their transmission across islands and generations.

Where Climate Mobility Meets Cultural Preservation

The project was officially presented at the Berlin Climate Mobility Forum, held on June 16 to 17, 2025, under the patronage of the Global Centre for Climate Mobility (GCCM) and the Robert Bosch Stiftung. The forum convened high-level stakeholders from politics, research, civil society, and affected communities to shape global strategies for climate-induced mobility: "Preserving Tuvalu's cultural heritage is an urgent priority – it is inseparable from identity, genealogy, and human dignity. Climate change threatens this legacy every day and at an accelerating pace. Our interdisciplinary approach combines traditional knowledge systems with scientific methodologies and digital safeguarding technologies. Working closely with local communities, we document endangered sites, objects, and traditions to protect knowledge for future generations – efficiently and respectfully," explained Dr. Annette Kühlem, project lead at the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) during a panel discussion.

Cooperation for the protection of intangible heritage

A core principle of the project is its community-led design and governance. The repository is developed and managed by the Tuvaluan community itself, ensuring local ownership and relevance. The goal is not only to create a digital memory but to build local capacities and enable a sustainable, self-determined approach to cultural preservation. All decision-making processes are guided by local value systems. Sensitive or sacred cultural knowledge is protected and only accessible to authorized knowledge holders – reinforcing cultural sovereignty. In addition to three-dimensional models of cultural sites, artifacts and objects as well as the transcription of oral histories and interviews, the project also includes the audiovisual documentation of traditional dances, songs, music, crafts and practices: "I want music to continue to have a place in Tuvalu. I want future generations to compose, play, and sing our songs in the land of our ancestors," said Kato Ewekia, Tuvalu Youth Ambassador and Climate Mobility Fellow at GCCM, who accompanied the forum with musical contributions and cultural insight.

International partnership for the protection of cultural identity

Ahead of the forum, the Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations in New York signed an agreement with UNOPS to support the DAI's project partner, the Rising Nations Initiative (RNI), with a €1 million contribution: "Cultural heritage holds immense emotional power. On the one hand, it manifests itself in anger and sadness when cultural heritage is destroyed or lost. On the other hand, it is also visible in the infectious joy and pride of the people who successfully

help to preserve it. We want to tap into that positive energy. That's why the Federal Foreign Office is supporting the Tuvalu Digital Repository for Cultural Heritage," emphasized Dr. Volker Erhard, Head of Division for Cultural Preservation at the German Federal Foreign Office, during the Berlin Climate Mobility Forum.

The project is implemented by the DAI in close cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of Tuvalu and financed by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany. It draws on DAI's long-standing expertise in heritage preservation and digital innovation. The project reaffirms the commitment to climate justice and cultural resilience, especially in particularly vulnerable regions such as the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The joint digital repository project is part of a broader partnership with the GCCM and underscores Germany's role in combating climate-induced displacement and protecting cultural identities.

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Fig. 1: from left to right: Andrea Milan (GCCM), Ashok Adicéam (Deputy Special Envoy of the President of France/UNOC3 Managing Director), Annette Kühlem (DAI), Volker Erhard (German Federal Foreign Office) and Kato Ewekia (GCCM Fellow) during the panel discussion at the Berlin Climate Mobility Forum © *Sebastian Dobberstein // DAI*

Fig. 2: Kato Ewekia, Youth Ambassador Tuvalu, GCCM-Climate Mobility Fellowship © *Sebastian Dobberstein // DAI*

Fig. 3: Cultural preservation measures and coastal protection on Funafuti go hand in hand © *Annette Kühlem // DAI*

German Archaeological Institute

Global Research

The German Archaeological Institute (DAI) is an internationally active research institution under the Federal Foreign Office. Since its establishment in 1829, it has evolved into one of the largest research organizations in archaeology and classical studies. Through its global initiatives and versatile network, the DAI fosters intercultural dialogue and plays a vital role in Germany's foreign cultural and educational policy.

With a total of eleven major branches – comprising the headquarters in Berlin, three commissions in Bonn, Frankfurt am Main, and Munich, and seven departments in Athens, Berlin, Cairo, Istanbul, Madrid, and Rome – the DAI maintains a presence in Germany and abroad. In addition, its departments and commissions operate offices in Tehran, Sana'a, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beijing, as well as research centers in Lisbon, Ulaanbaatar, and Budapest. These offices and centers enhance collaboration with local scholars and institutions, contributing significantly to the protection and preservation of cultural heritage worldwide.