The Batanes Cultural Landscape, as proposed for nomination to UNESCO’s List of World Heritage Sites, comprises the 11 islands of the Batanes archipelago, the smallest and northernmost province of the Philippines. The location of Batanes—closer to Taiwan, to the north, than the Philippines main province of Luzon, to the south—contributes to the islands’ (only three of which are inhabited) unique and multiple cultural influences. In addition, the relative isolation of the islands has allowed many of the region’s historic traditions to persist into the modern era.

Recognized for its role as a site in the migration of the Austronesian people across the Pacific (5,000 BCE – 1300 AD); the unique response of the local population, the Ivatan, to the challenges of their environment; and the fusion of Spanish colonial influences into local culture, the Batanes Cultural Landscape was nominated for inscription on UNESCO’s List of World Heritage Sites in 2007. However, the World Heritage Committee referred the application back to the nominating party, with a recommendation for revised site boundaries and nominating criteria, as well as additional research to better document a number of issues.

To facilitate the requested revisions, UNESCO asked the Center for World Heritage Studies (CWHS) to work with officials in the Philippines, to provide expert consultation and technical assistance in the process of developing, reworking, and resubmitting the nomination dossier. CWHS Director, Arthur Chen, and Research Fellow, Benjamin Ibarra-Sevilla, conducted a research mission to Batanes in September 2007. Over the next few months CWHS staff developed recommendations for the revised dossier, to be resubmitted in fall 2008.

Recommendations included reducing the number of nominating criteria from six to three, to create a more focused argument, and increasing the nominated area to include the entire archipelago of Batanes—an area that coincides with the provincial boundary. CWHS staff also recommended an increased concentration on the cultural and ecological value of traditional land-use patterns and practices in Batanes, as well as the interaction between man and nature, which has shaped both the cultural and the natural landscapes of the islands.

Among the issues to be highlighted in the revised dossier are the traditional settlement patterns of Batanes as a reflection of the uniquely cooperative nature of Ivatan society; the absorption of Spanish, American, and other influences as evidence of cultural exchange; the role of Batanes in Austronesian migration; and the extent to which these developments are reflected both in the wealth of archeological evidence and in the living cultural practices of the islands’ present day inhabitants.