



## Milestones

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### A cultural heritage—women divers of Jeju Island

Earlier issues of Yemaya have carried stories about the remarkable women divers (*haenyeo*) of Jeju Island—see, for example, Yemaya Issue 35. Recently, a milestone occurred in the lives of *haenyeo*, when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed *haenyeo* culture onto the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Jeju Island, off the southern coast of mainland Korea, is a volcanic island with a population of about 600,000 people, famous for its community of *haenyeo*, some in their 80s, who dive underwater without the use of oxygen masks to gather shellfish, such as abalone or sea urchins. During the 90 days of the year when harvest is available, these women work for up to seven hours a day, holding their breath for up to one minute as they dive and making a unique sound, called *sumbi-sori*, as they surface. Based on their level of experience, divers are categorized into three groups, with the most experienced, the *sanggun*, guiding the others.

There are about 4,500 such *haenyeo* on Jeju Island who are part of *haenyeohoe* (organizations), which in turn are affiliated with village fishery cooperatives. These bodies jointly petitioned the Jeju Provincial government seeking formal recognition of the Jeju *haenyeo* culture.

The provincial government deemed that not only did the culture of Jeju *haenyeo* represent the island's character and people's spirit, it also contributed to the advancement of women's status and promoted environmental sustainability and community involvement in the management of fishing practices. The Jeju provincial government has undertaken several comprehensive measures to safeguard this culture.

The decision to include it in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity was taken at the 11th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage that met in Addis Ababa, from 28 November to 2 December 2016.