



DEMOCRACY, IDENTITY, CULTURE

**Sport, Heritage and Cultural Diplomacy:
The Heyday Road Experience in Sparta**

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April 2026
Policy Paper #205/2026

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Summary

- The Heyday Road in Sparta revives the ancient Olympic Truce (ekecheiria) as a contemporary cultural and athletic initiative.
- It demonstrates how sport and cultural heritage can function as tools of cultural diplomacy and peace-building.
- The initiative aligns with global frameworks such as the UN 2030 Agenda, Kazan Action Plan and Pact for the Future.
- It represents a bottom-up, community-driven model, emphasizing participation, volunteerism, and local engagement.
- The Camino de Santiago serves as a comparative case, illustrating a highly institutionalized cultural route with global recognition.
- Key differences include:
 - scale and institutionalization
 - degree of community participation
 - underlying values (religious pilgrimage vs Olympic ideals)
- Both routes promote engagement with tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
- The Heyday Road Significance Index (HRSI) offers an innovative framework for assessing cultural impact.
- There is a need for standardized data collection across similar routes to enhance comparative analysis.
- Future potential lies in:
 - network-building among cultural routes
 - global advocacy platforms
 - participation in international policy fora (e.g. COP, MONDIACULT)
- Heritage-based routes can evolve into actors of global cultural governance.

Introduction

The Heyday Road in Sparta constitutes a contemporary cultural initiative that revives an ancient historical narrative through sports and civic participation. Inspired by the legendary route connecting Sparta with Ancient Olympia, the Heyday Road draws on the tradition of the Olympic Truce (*'ekecheiria'*),¹ which enabled safe passage for athletes and spectators during the ancient Olympic Games and symbolized the suspension of hostilities in the name of peace. Rooted in archaic Greek practices, the Olympic Truce is widely regarded in classical scholarship as one of the earliest institutionalized mechanisms for the regulation of conflict and the facilitation of interstate mobility in the ancient Greek world. By reactivating this route in the present day, the Heyday Road seeks to reconnect local heritage with global values, positioning culture and sport as vehicles for dialogue, solidarity, and sustainable development.

Historically, Sparta occupies a central place in the establishment of the Olympic Truce, which was formalized in the 9th century BC through a treaty concluded among three kings, Iphitos of Elis, Cleisthenes of Pisa, and Lycurgus of Sparta, highlighting the city's symbolic role in early peace-building practices in the ancient Greek world.² Ancient sources, most notably Pausanias,³ refer to the truce as a sacred and binding institution, publicly inscribed at Olympia and respected across Greek poleis, while modern historiography has interpreted it as an early form of normative peace practice. The revival of this heritage through the Heyday Road transforms a historical reference into a living cultural experience, where athletic endurance, memory, and collective participation converge. As such, the road functions not merely as a sporting event, but as a cultural route, embedding historical meaning within contemporary social practice.

The Heyday Road also reflects the Olympic ideals and universal values that continue to inform international discourse on peace, cooperation, and mutual respect. These values, revived institutionally through the modern Olympic Movement and the United Nations (UN), align closely with broader global commitments to peace and human dignity. In this context, the Heyday Road contributes to ongoing efforts to translate symbolic principles, such as the Olympic truce, into community-based initiatives that foster intercultural understanding beyond state-level diplomacy. At the policy level, the initiative resonates with international frameworks that recognize the role of sport and culture in sustainable development and peace-building. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies sport as an enabler of tolerance, social inclusion, and community empowerment⁴, while UNESCO and the United Nations have further reinforced this link through initiatives like the Kazan Action Plan⁵ and the Pact for the Future,⁶ that will be further explored in this study. By combining cultural heritage, grassroots participation, and

¹ Heyday Road. *Heyday Charter – Our Foundation*. <https://www.heydayroad.org/charter>

² International Olympic Committee. *The history of the Olympic Truce*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/the-history-of-the-olympic-truce>

³ Foundation of the Hellenic World. *The truce during the games*. <https://www.fhw.gr/olympics/ancient/gr/204c.html>

⁴ United Nations, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, A/RES/70/1 (2015), <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

⁵ UNESCO, *Kazan Action Plan* (2017), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245581>

⁶ United Nations, *Pact for the Future*, <https://www.un.org/en/pact-for-the-future>

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international symbolism, the Heyday Road exemplifies a bottom-up approach to cultural diplomacy that complements institutional efforts and local development strategies.

Against a backdrop of global uncertainty, initiatives such as the Heyday Road highlight the continued relevance of participatory models for fostering peace and resilience. By grounding universal values in historically informed and locally embedded practices, the Heyday Road offers a culturally resonant response to contemporary challenges facing peace and international cooperation. This policy paper examines the Heyday Road as a case that illustrates how sporting routes can operate at the intersection of cultural policy, diplomacy, and sustainable local development.

Framework and Key Concepts

*Sport may seem trivial in times of tragedy but a growing critical mass of studies, when viewed collectively, provide a sense that sport can, when used in a nuanced culturally informed way, be a tool that can enable cultural and political outcomes. Sport alone will not solve the worlds challenges, but it is a proven pillar of connectivity that has a part to play. **Grant Jarvie**⁷*

Why reviving the Heyday Road in a world of uncertainty?

We live in a world of polycrisis, marked by interconnected, multifaceted challenges; in an era of existential threats ranging from climate change to the destabilization of the world order as we know it. Long-established value systems and institutions of the international society are now widely contested or sidelined. The greatest spiritual and political achievements of humanity, including principles and institutions that emerged from centuries of cultural development, collective struggle, reflection and negotiation, now face unprecedented pressures. It is now that these achievements require renewed commitment, endurance and thoughtful stewardship.

Leveraging athleticism towards this aim may seem unrealistic at first sight. However, the long-standing tradition of sports, from antiquity to present day, as well as the enduring values attached to it offer a unique opportunity for intercultural dialogue between individuals and nations at several levels: from the local to the national level, and from the national to the international spheres. Long running events, endurance races, such as the Heyday Road, hold a special place within athletic competitions at all levels. The main feature of these competitions has to do with overcoming one's limits and unlock human potential, both physical and mental, towards the accomplishment of one's goals. This human-centered feature of these races enhances understanding, human empowerment and solidarity, since all individuals must face similar challenges and draw on their inner strength that finally unites them in the pursuit of a common goal: to race.

⁷ Grant Jarvie, 'Sport, Cultural Relations and Peacekeeping', British Council, 2023, p. 34.

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Sports, culture and sustainable development

In 2015 the value of sports and all cultures and civilizations was recognized as a ‘crucial enabler of sustainable development’ in the UN 2030 Agenda. More specifically, the Agenda recognized

‘the growing contribution of sport to the realization of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives’.

This approach transcends the conceptual silos regarding the role of sports in the 2030 agenda, moving beyond a perception of sports as a tool for the realization of SDG 3, integrating their contribution to various SDGs such as making cities and settlements safe, inclusive and resilient (SDG 11), offering quality education and promoting lifelong learning (SDG 4), building peaceful, inclusive and equitable societies (SDG10), contributing to economic growth and full and productive employment and work (SDG 8), promoting gender equality (SDG 5), ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns and take urgent actions to combat climate change and its impacts (SDG 12), peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) in line with the 2017 Kazan Action Plan.

In 2018 the UN General Assembly endorsed the Political Declaration adopted in the Nelson Mandela Peace Summit (A/RES/73/1) that underlined that

‘Sports and the arts in particular have the power to change perceptions, prejudices and behaviours, as well as to inspire people, break down racial and political barriers, combat discrimination and defuse conflict’.

With the adoption of the Pact for the Future in September 2024, the UN reaffirmed the above in its Action 11, while the General Assembly in its Resolution A/79/L.10 in November 2024 calls states to adopt policies that use sport as a strategic tool for sustainable development, recalling the significance of the Olympic movement ideals, including the institution of Olympic Truce, and reiterating sport’s role in **conflict prevention, post-conflict recovery, and community resilience**.

The concept of Olympic Truce today

The International Olympic Committee revived the ancient Greek tradition of “*εκεχειρία*”, Olympic Truce, on the occasion of the XXV Olympiad held in Barcelona in 1992 and launched an appeal to all states and international institutions to support the initiative. The UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 48/11 on 1993 through which it

‘urge[d] Member States to observe the Olympic Truce from the seventh day before the opening and the seventh day following the closing of each of the Olympic Games, in accordance with the appeal launched by the International Olympic Committee;

[and noted] the idea of the Olympic Truce, as dedicated in ancient Greece to the spirit of fraternity and understanding between peoples, and urge[d] Member States to take the initiative to abide by

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the Truce, individually and collectively, and to pursue in conformity with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations the peaceful settlement of all international conflict’.

The modern concept of Olympic Truce encompasses the same fundamental ideas as ancient counterpart: support of friendship, solidarity, understanding and peace. Of course, the religious character of the ancient notion and practice of truce is absent. The obligation of observing the truce does not stem from peoples’ respect or awe for a deity but from a profound respect for humanity and for the principles of international law. The Olympic ideals, especially the concept of the Olympic Truce, closely resemble those of the UN in seeking peace and understanding among nations and peoples. Thus, members of the contemporary international society of states are called to respect the institution of Olympic Truce in the name of the fundamental goals of the United Nations Charter, namely:⁸

- The maintenance of international peace and security
- The development of friendly relations among nations
- The achievement of international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

According to the UN Secretary-General ‘*Olympic ideals are also United Nations ideals: tolerance, equality, fair play and, most of all peace*’.⁹

Apart from the affinity between the Olympic ideals and those enshrined in the UN Charter and resolutions, and beyond their symbolic value, emphasis should be given on their practical potential and their implementation in contemporary international relations. The implementation of the Olympic Truce concept today may seem a utopian aspiration. Nevertheless, we should not forget that the UN recognition of the Olympic Truce as a unique instrument for the promotion of global peace has led to the adoption of several diplomatic initiatives that led to concrete results.

Namely, during the 1994 Olympic Games in Lillehammer, Norway, the Olympic Truce was observed in Serajevo (the host city of the 1984 Olympic Winter Games). Cease-fire arrangements permitted the supply of humanitarian aid to the population suffering the deprivation caused by the armed conflicts in Bosnia.

In 1998, the Olympic truce during the Olympic Winter Games in Nagano, gave the opportunity to the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, to intervene to seek a diplomatic resolution to the crisis of Iraq. It is true, that apart from the UN resolution, members of the International Olympic Committee were lobbying Washington to refrain from military action against Iraq during the Winter Games. It should be noted that the US was among the countries that signed the General Assembly resolution in support of the Olympic Truce during the Nagano Games.¹⁰

During the opening ceremony of the Games of the XXVII Olympiad in Sydney in 2000, the South and North Korea delegations marched in the stadium together, under the same flag.

⁸ See *Charter of the United Nations*, Chapter I – Purposes and Principles, Article 1.

⁹ Excerpt from Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s message to the Games of the XXVII Olympiad, Sydney, Australia, SG/SM/7523, 31 August 2000.

¹⁰ ‘Building a Peaceful and Better World through Sport and the Olympic Ideal’, A/52/L.23/Rev.1/Add.1, 25 November 1997.

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These examples may appear to be only a drop in the ocean of today's vast humanitarian crises and shifting geopolitical and institutional environment. Yet, they demonstrate the tangible potential of sport-based initiatives to foster dialogue, alleviate tensions, and promote human dignity or in other words, as granting space for 'giv[ing] peace a chance'.¹¹

Sports as a tool of cultural diplomacy: where do we stand today?

Sports is inextricably linked to cultural heritage and values, since its evolution is based on traditions, social norms and principles that have formulated human societies since antiquity. Sports, as a bearer of culture, reflects values and practice as expressed across multiple spheres of human activity — social, economic, environmental, and political.

In light of the above, the concept and practice of sports as a manifestation of the broader human culture, falls into the seminal definition of culture provided by UNESCO in 1982, still valid today:

'that in its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs; that it is culture that gives man the ability to reflect upon himself. It is culture that makes us specifically human, rational beings, endowed with a critical judgement and a sense of moral commitment.

It is through culture that we discern values and make choices. It is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his own achievements, seeks untiringly for new meanings and creates works through which he transcends his limitations'.¹²

Sports as a means of cultural diplomacy is not a domain restricted to states and the organization of mega-athletic events. A broadened perception and understanding of cultural diplomacy entail grassroots initiatives and the cultivation of a culture of peace through continuing physical education, promotion of human rights and inclusivity, the empowerment of individuals and the respect of diversity, and the appreciation of tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage. These initiatives, considerably restricted in scale and political footprint compared to mega-events, may serve twofold: on the one hand, they signal the return to the primordial values of athleticism: participation, fair-play and mutual respect; on the other hand, they offer a unique psychological element since they connect through broad participation, different generations with (local) history and universal values. Finally, they constitute a shift to track III diplomacy, that is citizen's diplomacy, that may gradually inform official policy-making.

¹¹ Paraphrasing John Lennon's famous song 'Give Peace a Chance', 1969

¹² Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, World Conference on Cultural Policies Mexico City, 26 July - 6 August 1982.

Methodological Approach

This policy paper adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach in order to examine the Heyday Road in Sparta as a cultural, social, and policy-relevant initiative. Qualitative orientation allows for an in-depth analysis of the symbolic, cultural, and participatory dimensions of the road, focusing on meanings, narratives, and practices. The methodology combines mapping, comparative analysis, and case study research. Mapping is employed both to document the characteristics of the Heyday Road and to situate it within a broader international landscape of comparable cultural roads. These include cultural routes and initiatives that link sport, culture, and community engagement at regional or global levels. Through this mapping process, the study identifies common features, divergences, and policy-relevant patterns across cases.

A comparative perspective is applied to assess how different cultural roads mobilize heritage, participation, and symbolic capital, and how these elements contribute to social impact and sustainability. Heyday Road serves as the primary case study that, compared with other sports routes, allows for focused analysis and enables broader insights relevant to cultural policy and diplomacy.

Overall, this methodological approach is designed to bridge academic analysis and policy relevance. By integrating qualitative inquiry with comparative mapping and structured impact assessment tools, the paper seeks to generate insights that can inform cultural diplomacy strategies, local development policies, and future initiatives linking sport, heritage, and peace.

Heyday Road & Camino de Santiago as a Field of Analysis

Global advocacy (esp. in view of the new UN Development Agenda and the Implementation of the Pact of the Future and the UN 80 initiative).

The Heyday Road and the Camino de Santiago represent two distinct models of heritage-linked routes that engage with cultural memory, mobility, and shared values, yet they differ substantially in scope, organization, and relationships with local society. More specifically, the Camino de Santiago is an extensive network of pilgrimage routes leading to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain, where the apostle Saint James is traditionally believed to be buried.¹³ These routes span Western Europe, with the Camino Francés being the most frequented trail, attracting hundreds of thousands of walkers and pilgrims annually. Camino's contemporary revival has turned it into a globally recognized cultural corridor, culminating in its designation as the first Cultural Route of the Council of Europe (1987) and as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (1993).¹⁴

By contrast, the Heyday Road is a more recent grass-root initiative grounded in the specific classical heritage of Sparta and the Olympic Truce. Its foundational orientation emphasizes the revival of ancient ideals, particularly the Olympic Truce and values associated with classical Olympism, combined with community participation, cultural education, and endurance sport. While participants on the Camino de Santiago are motivated by a mix of spiritual, cultural, personal challenge or recreational reasons, the

¹³ Council of Europe, *Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/the-routes-of-santiago-de-compostela>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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Heyday Road's orientation is explicitly directed toward symbolic engagement with universal values and classical heritage through a peace-oriented athletic route.¹⁵

A notable difference between the two routes concerns local community engagement and volunteerism. The infrastructure supporting the Camino de Santiago, while robust and networked, has been historically shaped by tourism development and regional economies, with varying degrees of formalized volunteering by local associations. In comparison, the Heyday Road's identity embeds community involvement and volunteer support as integral elements, with activities aimed at strengthening connections between participants and local stakeholders and emphasizing co-creation of cultural memory as part of the event's impact. Another point of distinction lies in the ideational foundations of the two routes. The Camino de Santiago is deeply rooted in Christian pilgrimage traditions and historical practices of devotional walking. Although many contemporary pilgrims approach the route in secular terms, the historical symbolism remains central to its cultural resonance. The Heyday Road, in contrast, draws on classical antiquity and Olympic heritage, with its spiritual or moral dimension articulated through Olympic ideals and universal values rather than through religious pilgrimage narratives.

Despite these differences, both routes facilitate engagement with material and intangible cultural heritage. Walkers on the Camino de Santiago encounter medieval architecture, religious artefacts, and landscapes laden with centuries of European heritage, creating an immersive cultural experience. Similarly, the Heyday Road invites participants to encounter both tangible heritage (archaeological and natural landscapes) and intangible heritage through narratives, rituals, and symbolic practices connected to classical history and Olympic memory.

Finally, the two cases also highlight contrasting approaches to social responsibility. Camino's scale and institutional backing have led to sustainability planning and regional coordination that primarily respond to economic development and heritage tourism imperatives. By contrast, Heyday Road positions social responsibility through heritage values and cultural diplomacy, emphasizing not only physical challenge but also the transmission of universal peace-oriented values, intercultural understanding and broader societal engagement.

In summary, while the Camino de Santiago and the Heyday Road share a form of heritage revitalization and experiential engagement with the past, they differ markedly in scale, institutional integration, volunteerism and community engagement, foundational ideals, and modes of cultural mobilization. This comparative perspective underscores how different historical traditions and organizational models shape varied pathways through which cultural heritage informs contemporary practice, community participation, and international cultural exchange.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The comparative examination of the Heyday Road in Sparta and the Camino de Santiago highlights the transformative potential of heritage-based routes as instruments of cultural diplomacy, community building and sustainable development. While differing in scale, historical trajectory, institutional

¹⁵ Heyday Road. Code of Conduct. <https://www.heydayroad.org/code-conduct>

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consolidation and ideational foundations, both initiatives demonstrate how historically rooted mobility corridors can be reactivated to foster shared values, intercultural dialogue and transnational engagement.

The Camino de Santiago represents a highly institutionalized and internationally recognized cultural route supported by intergovernmental frameworks such as the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme and UNESCO's World Heritage List. Over decades, it has developed structured governance mechanisms, systematic data collection and measurable socio-economic impact at local and regional levels. This long-term consolidation provides a benchmark for understanding the potential outcomes of comparable heritage routes.

In parallel, the Heyday Road operates as an innovative community-driven initiative with growing international orientation. This distinction positions the Heyday Road as a laboratory of methodological experimentation and bottom-up diplomacy, with its Heyday Road Significance Index (HRSI) serving as a notable example.¹⁶ The Index constitutes an ambitious attempt to evaluate the cultural and intergenerational impact of heritage routes, integrating qualitative and digital metrics to assess dimensions such as heritage significance, participation, memory transmission, and engagement. While the pilot phase of the HRSI reveals areas for methodological consolidation, it serves as the basis for comprehensive monitoring and assessment of heritage-route impacts moving forward. For the Index to evolve into a robust comparative research instrument, it should be systematically tested against verified and officially provided data from event organizers. Standardized datasets, including participant numbers, local economic impact, demographic diversity and community involvement, would allow for more reliable cross-case comparisons. A meaningful comparative study requires that all participating routes provide harmonized and transparent data under common criteria.

In particular, the degree of local community engagement should become a central evaluative variable. Both the Heyday Road and the Camino de Santiago demonstrate that the creation of a sustained community of participants, including repeat participants who travel across events internationally, amplifies local impact and strengthens transnational networks. The mobility of participants between comparable events may generate not only economic spillovers but also durable cultural linkages. A second step forward involves the selection of a pilot network of routes and organizations willing to share data systematically, potentially on a multicontinental and five-year assessment cycle. Such periodic evaluation would allow for longitudinal analysis and the tracking of cultural, social, and diplomatic impacts over time. The categorization of routes into typologies, such as (a) elite professional athletic events, (b) sport-centred competitions primarily focused on performance and awards, and (c) hybrid models combining athletic achievement with heritage and cultural diplomacy objectives, would further refine comparative evaluation.

Looking ahead, the strategic question concerns network building and global advocacy. How might heritage-based endurance routes be interconnected into a structured international network? How could such a network articulate common positions on issues of shared concern, including sustainable mobility, community resilience, cultural preservation and peace-building? The creation of a coordinated platform could enable joint participation in major international policy fora, such as United Nations COP forums or UNESCO's MONDIACULT, thereby amplifying visibility and policy relevance. A shared advocacy framework

¹⁶ Heyday Road. Heyday Road Significance Index. <https://www.heydayroad.org/el/node/114>

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would also encourage convergence of principles among participating routes, ensuring coherence in the values projected internationally. This could include commitments to inclusivity, sustainability, community participation, and peace-oriented narratives. At the same time, enhanced participant mobility across routes could strengthen the emergence of a global community of engaged citizens, reinforcing cultural diplomacy at the societal level.

In conclusion, comparing the Heyday Road and the Camino de Santiago underscores both the promise and the challenges of heritage-based sporting and cultural routes as vehicles of cultural diplomacy. While the Camino illustrates the long-term institutionalization of such a model, the Heyday Road demonstrates the dynamism of a new-generation initiative that integrates technological innovation, community participation, and peace symbolism. The further development of structured networks, harmonized data collection, and coordinated advocacy could elevate such initiatives from local cultural projects to influential actors within global cultural governance.

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