

Hemingway's Cuba home on list of endangered places

by Sue Fleming

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Classic American author Ernest Hemingway's beloved house in Cuba joined former homes of U.S. presidents and King Island in Alaska on an annual list issued on Thursday of "America's Most Endangered Historic Places."

It is the first time a property outside of the United States has been included on the list, but National Trust for Historic Preservation president Richard Moe said the estate's great cultural value to America made it an easy decision.

"Even though it's outside of the United States, it's an important part of our cultural heritage. Hemingway is such a revered literary figure in this country and around the world," Richard Moe told Reuters. "It deserves to be preserved."

The crumbling 9-acre estate on a hill just east of Havana was left to the Cuban people after Hemingway's death from suicide in 1961 and is now a museum, housing books and manuscripts of the famed American novelist.

Hemingway lived at Finca Vigia (Lookout Farm) from 1939 to 1960 and it was there he wrote "The Old Man and the Sea," the story of a struggle between a fisherman and a giant marlin that won a Pulitzer and the Nobel Prize in literature.

The estate is a shrine to Hemingway, who entertained celebrities there like Ava Gardner and Gary Cooper.

"PRESERVATION EMERGENCY"

Battered by hurricanes and exposed to the tropical climate of Cuba, the villa now has serious structural problems and experts have labeled it a "preservation emergency," said Moe.

The U.S. Treasury Department granted the Trust and the Massachusetts-based Hemingway Preservation Foundation a license last month to send a team of surveyors to the house.

Permission is needed from the U.S. authorities because of an American embargo against Cuba. An earlier request was denied by the Bush administration which said the project would support tourism and help the economy.

Cuban-American Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Florida Republican, reacted with outrage to the granting of a license.

"The Hemingway House is for tourists and the people of Cuba are not even allowed to set foot on tourist areas in their own country. The Cuban people are kept starving and virtually imprisoned by a ruthless police state," she said. "If Castro wants to have a pretty tourist attraction, let him pay for it."

Moe said cooperation had been good with the Cubans who were doing their best to preserve the home with limited resources. "The Cubans have been excellent stewards of this property but time and weather have taken their toll," he said.

Hemingway's home joined 10 other places on the annual list, like North Alaska's King Island where structures that represented the rich culture of the Inupiat Eskimos were in danger of being washed into the Bering Sea. Suburban sprawl threatens a 175-mile-long swathe of Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania, which encompasses hundreds of historic sites including six homes of U.S. presidents, African-American historic sites, Civil War battlefields and scenic roads and rivers.

In the West, the National Landscape Conservation System, involving dozens of national monuments, historic trails, and thousand-year-old archeological sites in 12 states, is being ravaged by theft, vandalism and unauthorized land use.

The sole remaining site of a Revolutionary War prison camp in York County, Pennsylvania, was also threatened and a hotel in Florida, the Belleview Biltmore, faces destruction.

Catholic churches of greater Boston made the list along with historic buildings of downtown Detroit, Michigan, and Ennis-Brown House in Los Angeles, the grandest of architect Frank Lloyd Wright's textile-block houses.