

Committee: Environment

Question of: Measures to protect UNESCO World Heritage Sites

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Introduction

UNESCO World Heritage sites provide food, water, and shelter to millions of people, contain ecosystems that are essential to many species and to the environment, and contribute to economic and social development. Of the 1073 World Heritage sites, 54 have been listed as ‘World Heritage in Danger’, but these are by no means the only areas suffering from devastating environmental damage. Threats including urban development, pollution, illegal activities, resource extraction, and forest loss affect over half of World Heritage sites. If urgent measures are not taken to protect World Heritage sites, some of their natural and cultural beauty and value could be lost forever.

The Issue

World Heritage Sites are cultural and/or natural sites considered to be of ‘Outstanding Universal Value’, which have been inscribed on the World Heritage List by the World Heritage Committee. These places or buildings are thought to have special importance for everyone and represent unique, or the most significant or best, examples of the world’s cultural and/or natural heritage. Outstanding Universal Value is considered to transcend national boundaries and to be of importance for future generations. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) seeks to protect and preserve such sites through the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. This international treaty was drawn up in 1972. Governments of countries that have ratified the Convention (States Parties) identify and nominate suitable sites to the World Heritage Committee for inscription on the list maintained by UNESCO. World Heritage status is a high accolade that brings with it responsibilities and international scrutiny.

A unique aspect of The Convention is that host nations are held accountable for the preservation of their World Heritage Sites by the international community, and must report on their progress to UNESCO. Over 190 countries are signatories to The Convention, committing to conserving the 1073 World Heritage Sites. Of these, 832 are Cultural sites, 35 are mixed Natural and Cultural sites, and 206 are Natural World Heritage Sites, inscribed for their unique natural beauty and biological importance, including many of the world's most important places for biodiversity conservation such as the Great Barrier Reefs of Australia, Pantanal Conservation Area in Brazil and the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania.

Main threats to Heritage Sites

UNESCO has identified 14 primary threats/factors affecting the Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage properties, each encompassing a number of secondary factors. The full list can be found here: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/factors/>.

An article in the Biological Conservation journal assessed forest loss and ‘human pressure’ across Natural Heritage sites.

Forest Loss: North American sites accounted for 57 percent of all forest loss in Natural World Heritage Sites worldwide, despite their protection and management being considered highly effective. Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park, for instance, lost 12 percent of its forest cover over roughly the first decade of this century, and Yellowstone National Park lost 6 percent — both almost certainly because of pine beetle outbreaks that have gotten worse because winters are no longer cold enough to kill back populations of these tree-killing insects. Unsustainable logging practices cost 5 percent of the forest cover around Russia's Lake Baikal and 8 percent in Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in Honduras.

'Human Pressure': Built environments, crop lands, pasture lands, population density, night lights, railways, major roadways and navigable waterways were all found to have an effect on Heritage sites. Human pressure increased in the majority of Natural heritage sites, and across all continents except Europe. The Manas Wildlife Sanctuary in India and the Komodo National Park in Indonesia underwent some of the largest increases in human pressure. The largest increases in human pressure occurred in Asian sites, while Oceania and South America also underwent relatively large increases in human pressure.

Key States involved

Australia: Australia has 19 World Heritage sites, of which 16 are Natural/ Mixed sites. Australia had lobbied the World Heritage Committee to block proposed 'World Heritage in Danger' listing for at least two of its sites – The Great Barrier Reef (coral bleaching) and Kakadu National Park (uranium mining). With the Great Barrier Reef, Larissa Waters, a senator from Queensland for the Greens Party, accused the government of "spending money on bribing the rest of the world rather than fixing the problem." The threats to the reef included construction of two liquefied natural gas facilities within the World Heritage Site, and the attendant dredging of shipping channels. The World Heritage Committee ultimately voted not to add the Great Barrier Reef to its "in danger" list, after Australia committed to spend an additional \$6.1 million "for enhanced reef monitoring."

Belize: According to the World Wildlife Fund, Belize's Barrier Reef Reserve System is facing a turning point toward either conservation or irreversible development. Although more than half of the country's people earn their primary income from reef-related tourism and protection, 40 percent of the coral system has been damaged since 1998. Belizean government has broad plans to protect the barrier reef region, which comprises around 14 percent of the country's marine environment. But separate commitments to allow oil and gas drilling in the remaining 86 percent of the country's ocean areas could cause "widespread environmental damage," even if such protections are in place.

Democratic Republic of Congo: All five of the DRC's Natural Heritage sites are designated as 'World Heritage in Danger'. Political instability has hindered government efforts to protect the sites, which are currently threatened by oil drilling and poaching.

United States of America: The Everglades National Parks has been designated 'in danger', as it is threaded by expanding urban development, resulting in habitat destruction and challenging water management. In addition, many of the USA's forested Natural Heritage sites are suffering from forest loss as a result of pine beetle outbreaks and forest fires.

Key Bodies Involved:

The World Heritage Committee: The World Heritage Committee meets once a year, and consists of representatives from 21 of the States Parties to the Convention elected by their General Assembly. The Committee is responsible for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, defines the use of the World Heritage

Fund and allocates financial assistance upon requests from States Parties. It has the final say on whether a property is inscribed on the World Heritage List. It examines reports on the state of conservation of inscribed properties and asks States Parties to take action when properties are not being properly managed. It also decides on the inscription or deletion of properties on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN): The IUCN is a membership Union composed of both government and civil society organisations. It provides public, private and non-governmental organisations with the knowledge and tools that enable human progress, economic development and nature conservation to take place together. The IUCN is not a UN body, however it provides the World Heritage Committee with technical evaluations of natural heritage properties and, through its worldwide network of specialists, reports on the state of conservation of listed properties.

Possible Solutions

- Reconsideration of a framework to designate ‘World Heritage in Danger’ status
- Encouraging states to set up government bodies responsible for the management of World Heritage sites
- Restrictions on commercial mining and oil/ gas development allowed within World Heritage Sites
- Protection requirements for Member States before designating World Heritage Sites
- Additional intervention for UNESCO or the World Heritage Committee on threatened sites (maybe helping States develop management strategies)
- Education campaign about the importance of UNESCO World Heritage Sites and in particular Natural Heritage Sites as they are more commonly ignored

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