



The 7th International NGO Forum on World Heritage at Risk

Baku, Azerbaijan, 29 June 2019

Resolution

Protection of Freshwater Ecosystems and River-Related Cultural Values from Destruction by Hydropower and Other Water Infrastructure

We, the Civil Society Organizations who have attended the 7th International NGO Forum on World Heritage at Risk organized by World Heritage Watch on 29 June in Baku, Azerbaijan, coming from 19 countries in 5 continents, as active and concerned citizens dealing with Natural and Cultural World Heritage properties at different places, would like to bring the following to the attention of the World Heritage Committee:

Hydropower development has caused a dramatic world-wide decline in the number of free-flowing rivers due to haphazard planning and disregard for environmental and social values. Only one quarter of sizeable rivers, longer than 1.000 km, remain in near-natural condition from the source to the sea, with the rest no longer free-flowingⁱ. Further degradation of intact river ecosystems should be stopped.

As noted in "Dam Damage" Resolution issued by the 5th NGO Forum on World Heritage at Risk in June 2018, for WH properties located within water basins, impacts from water infrastructure development appear to be the most serious and irreversible factor in these properties' degradation. According to the "Heritage Dammed" CSO Report, at least 50 World Heritage sites in 35 countries are affected or threatened by impacts from hydropower or other water infrastructure. While construction of hydropower is slowing down, number of affected freshwater ecosystems continues to increase.

The recent IPCC Special Report reaffirms the urgent need to limit global temperature increase to 1.5° Celsius. The Paris Agreement calls for achieving a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of GHGs in the second half of the century. Damming rivers disrupts hydrological processes, diminishing the possibility of nature-based solutions, carbon sequestration and in many cases exacerbating carbon release. At the same time, hydro infrastructure often magnifies the long-term effects of climate change on river ecosystems, including on riverside world heritage properties.

Though free-flowing rivers and their ecosystems around the world satisfy six World Heritage outstanding universal value selection criteria ((v)-(x)), they are not yet adequately represented on the World Heritage List, and this holds true for all other types of protected areas, with the exception of sites listed under the Ramsar Convention as wetlands of international importance.

Freshwater biodiversity disappears from the Planet twice as fast as terrestrial or marine populations of biological species. Yet, the 2013 IUCN World Heritage gap analysis for biodiversity underrepresented on the World Heritage List, undertaken in 2013ⁱⁱ: "does not specifically deal with freshwater biodiversity." The systemic analysis of freshwater ecoregions, which host about 30% of diversity of vertebrate species and display a tremendous spectrum of geomorphological and ecological processes is yet to be undertaken for the purposes of the Convention. The 2013 IUCN Report calls for the next more comprehensive analyses of gaps to be undertaken by 2020. We argue that the most urgent part of that effort should focus on the previously not covered freshwater realm.

Many important cultural phenomena are also inseparable from natural rivers, and the human dimensions of riverine heritage should be also subject to conservation efforts. Many river valleys, while not necessarily representing wilderness areas, are likely qualify for nomination as cultural landscapes. We believe that the World Heritage Convention is uniquely positioned to become one of the most important platforms to promote comprehensive preservation of the outstanding values of free flowing rivers and their ecosystems in each region of the world. For a start we need a series of new nominations dedicated to the protection of free flowing rivers and their ecosystems in each biogeographic region of the planet representing the most important ecological processes.

The Convention effectively calls on States Parties to support timely basin-wide Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) before decisions on any water infrastructure projects which may be planned in a basin containing a World Heritage property. This requires site-specific follow-up from World Heritage Centre and the Convention advisory bodies. For example, in Nepal, where a large part of the 400 hydropower proposals are concentrated in Gandaki (Narayani) River basin with Chitwan National Park World Heritage in its downstream section, it is necessary to ensure that individual impacts of planned large dams (e.g. Budhi-Gandaki) and the cumulative impacts of all approved and projected hydropower on the World Heritage sites in Nepal are assessed and limits of allowable change (environmental flow regimes) defined before any decisions on dam construction are taken. Such strategic assessments must incorporate fair analysis of technological alternatives, especially now that hydropower is losing relative advantages to other types of renewable energy generation.

Decision 40 COM 7 and Decision 42 COM 7 provide specific requirements for preventing damage from dams and other large infrastructure, but so far degradation continues. Safeguarding world heritage demands finding ways to deal with freshwater biodiversity crisis by means of the World Heritage Convention.

In view of the foregoing, we call upon the World Heritage Committee and its Advisory Bodies to address the protection of freshwater ecosystems and river-related cultural values from destruction by hydropower and other water infrastructure by including in its relevant 2019 Decisions the following language:

"The World Heritage Committee

"recommends that IUCN and - where applicable - ICOMOS prepare a global thematic study for the identification of rivers, their ecosystems and landscapes, and freshwater ecoregions which should be represented in the World Heritage List. The study should review opportunities to nominate new WH properties and revising the state of significance of existing inscriptions to include free flowing river values (e.g. Lena Pillars (Lena River in Russia) and Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan PAs (Nu-Salween River and Tiger Leaping Gorge stretch of Jinsha River)). This study should include guidelines for the engagement of other relevant mechanisms, and the role of local and indigenous communities in the safeguarding of these areas;

"requests the World Heritage Centre in its Periodic Reporting to include information on riverine values in and around existing properties, and mainstream this theme in its deliberations with other international bodies as well as with other conventions' secretariats, World Bank, UNISDR and UN Habitat;

"calls upon States Parties to identify free-flowing rivers, their ecosystems, landscapes and watersheds, provide measures for the safeguarding of these areas and collaborate with neighboring States Parties to declare them as IUCN trans-boundary protected areas;

"calls upon IUCN and ICOMOS in their evaluation of such relevant nominations and in the State of Conservation reporting of listed properties, to apply to these properties pro-active tools such as Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and comprehensive re-active tools through Impact Assessment (IA) and include the watersheds of these free flowing rivers;

"recognizing the importance of sustainable development (for example, the 2015 World Heritage Policy on the integration of a sustainable development perspective into the processes of the Convention), requests IUCN to provide guidelines to determine the limits of alteration in watersheds containing World Heritage properties allowing for renewable energies at a scale in support of the local communities and preventing adverse impacts on World Heritage properties;

"In addition to the requirement on the incompatibility of large dams with existing World Heritage sites prescribed by Decision 40 COM 7), *recognizing* the necessity to avoid conflict between dams and properties on the Tentative List of candidate sites, the WH Committee *requests* that no dams and other large infrastructure be built in the respective river basins without proper assessments and a review of assessment results by the Convention bodies. NO flooding by reservoirs of the sites placed on a Tentative List should be allowed;

"requests the World Heritage Centre to engage in consultations with secretariats of other biodiversity conventions and the UNFCCC to mainstream nature-based solutions into climate change mitigation and adaptation, and to avoid maladapted greenhouse gas mitigation measures that may cause irreversible negative impacts on the World Heritage properties, biodiversity and protected areas;

"requests that State Parties in cooperation with IUCN identify and assess all properties which may be impacted by water infrastructure located in the same basins. Impacts already exerted by water infrastructure should be measured and mitigated. Already existing hydropower and other water infrastructure should be aligned with requirements for World Heritage protection or decommissioned. The opportunities for infrastructure decommissioning should be identified by

the States Parties as soon as possible to remove additional undue pressure affecting wilderness areas and cultural landscapes;

"reminds any State Party planning or permitting large project investments in a basin where a World Heritage Site is located, to notify the World Heritage Center on the nature of the planned investment and whether, in the Party's opinion, it may affect OUVs and thus require an EIA/SEA, before making any decisions that would be difficult to reverse, which in the case of such infrastructure should typically be at the earliest stage of planning. Information on intended infrastructure which may have impact on the OUVs of World Heritage properties which is to be provided according to §172 Operational Guidelines should also include a complete list of the institutions financing and executing the project. To prevent persistent non-compliance, the World Heritage Committee will examine whether, where the Committee finds that its decisions and guidelines have not been followed (repeatedly), the WH sites will be automatically placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. The Lake Turkana case provides overwhelming evidence in favor of such regulations;

"requests that IUCN develop specific criteria for SEA assessments and specify requirements on the contents of, and processes for, specific types of assessment in a binding guideline (e.g. basin-wide assessment of cumulative impacts from water infrastructure). The Assessment Reports should be public and made available on the UNESCO website (except for sensitive information protected by relevant laws on national secrets)."

Baku, 29 June 2019

i G.Grill et al. Assessing global river connectivity 2 to map the world's remaining free-flowing rivers. Science. 2019

ii Bertzky, B., Shi, Y., Hughes, A., Engels, B., Ali, M.K. and Badman, T. (2013) Terrestrial Biodiversity and the World Heritage List: Identifying broad gaps and potential candidate sites for inclusion in the natural World Heritage network. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge, UK.