

Press release

Governments Must Take Their Commitment to the World Heritage More Seriously

As the annual session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee begins today, World Heritage Watch calls on the member states of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention to take more seriously their obligation to protect and preserve the sites in their care.

"More and more World Heritage sites are threatened by large investor and infrastructure projects that have been approved or even initiated by governments themselves," complains Stephan Dömpke, the chairman of the organization. "Examples of this are the two sites that could be removed from the World Heritage List this year: a new football stadium in the architectural heritage of the Maritime Mercantile City of Liverpool with its docklands, and a huge dam in Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve, the largest in all of Africa."

For a further seven sites - including Budapest and Venice - the draft decision before the Committee envisages inscription in the List of World Heritage in Danger (so-called "red list"). In all cases it is about long-term negligence or new projects by governments, as a result of which the "outstanding universal value" of the site threatens to be irretrievably lost.

In addition, UNESCO complains in 69 of 202 draft decisions - a full third! - that governments have not submitted projects for review before they have been decided, as they are obliged to do under the rules of the Convention.

"Instead of taking enough time to talk about the condition of the existing World Heritage sites and to find sustainable solutions to their problems, the World Heritage Committee will again take four days to decide about the inscription of another 45 (!) Sites on the World Heritage List", explains Doempke. "Many member states seem to have a greater interest in the prestige and tourism promotion that come with new sites, than in preserving the protected assets entrusted to them."

For its 50th anniversary, which is due next year, the world heritage system must be readjusted and priorities reset - away from the inscription of more and more new sites and towards the sustainable preservation and development of the existing ones. The global public and global civil society have the task of reminding governments that political, commercial, and often enough corrupt, interests must find their limits in world heritage sites. A renewed commitment by the international community to the protection of our common heritage is not only indispensable for its preservation, but would also be an important contribution to multilateralism.

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Long version below:

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Governments Must Take Their Commitment to the World Heritage More Seriously

Today the UNESCO World Heritage Committee meets for its 44th annual session to decide on the further fate of 202 of the 1,121 sites inscribed on the World Heritage List. For the first time, two sites could be removed from the World Heritage List this year: the architectural heritage of the maritime mercantile city of Liverpool with its dockland, and the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, the largest in all of Africa.

Liverpool is threatened by plans to fill the largest of its docks and build a new stadium for Everton Football Club there. Despite various warnings from UNESCO, the city administration has stuck to the project, and Westminster has declined to take over the process in order to save the world heritage status. In Tanzania, the late President Magafuli has openly expressed his contempt for the World Heritage Convention and has commissioned a huge dam in the middle of the reserve to supply the entire country with electricity - although this could just as easily be done by solar and wind energy elsewhere.

These are only the two most prominent cases of typical threats to which the world heritage is increasingly exposed: Large investor and infrastructure projects that have been approved or even initiated by governments. For a further seven sites - including Budapest and Venice - the draft decisions envisage inscription into the List of World Heritage in Danger (the so-called "red list"). In all cases, it is about long-term negligence or new projects by governments, as a result of which the outstanding universal value of the site, which qualifies it as a World Heritage Site, threatens to be irretrievably lost.

The picture becomes even clearer if you take a look at the draft decisions: In 69 out of 202 - a full third! - UNESCO complains that governments did not submit their projects for review before they were decided, as they are obliged to do under the Operational Guidelines of the Convention.

The inevitable conclusion is that an increasing number of member states are no longer paying any attention to the World Heritage Convention. Some try to carry out their projects unobserved by the public, others find convoluted arguments to justify them, and some have recently begun to openly disregard this international treaty that has been ratified by the entire international community.

They are not only disregarding international law. They also ignore the fact that their sites have been declared the heritage of all mankind at their own request, and they have solemnly committed to protecting and preserving it. By being inscribed on the World Heritage List, the international community is also entitled to the Member States' compliance with this obligation. The meetings of the World Heritage Committee are concerned with nothing less than the fulfillment of this requirement.

The thing is, however, that on this body, which decides on all world heritage issues, sit the same governments that disregard the World Heritage Convention when it serves their interests.

So instead of taking enough time to talk about the condition of the inscribed World Heritage Sites and to find sustainable solutions to problems such as climate change, mass tourism and sustainable development, the World Heritage Committee will again this year take four days to decide on the inscription of another 45 (!) sites in the World Heritage List. It appears that many Member States have a greater interest in the prestige and tourism promotion that comes with new sites than in preserving the assets entrusted to them.

In the almost 50 years of its existence, the World Heritage Convention has been a huge achievement for the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage of mankind. For its 50th anniversary, however, coming up next year, the world heritage system will have to be readjusted and the priorities reset - away from new inscriptions and towards the sustainable preservation and development of the existing ones. The global public and global civil society have the task of reminding governments that political, commercial, and often enough corrupt interests must find their limits at the boundaries of world heritage sites. A renewed commitment by the international community to the protection of our common heritage is not only indispensable for its preservation, but would also be an important contribution to multilateralism.

Stephan Dömpke is the founding chairman of World Heritage Watch, a global civil society network advocating for the protection of the UNESCO World Heritage.