



The World Heritage is on a Dangerous Path

A critical review of this year's meeting of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee

by Stephan Doempke

Over the past two weeks, UNESCO's World Heritage Committee came together for its annual meeting. Since it had been cancelled last year because of the Covid-19 pandemic, parts of last year had to be made up, which is why the conference was extended from 10 to 14 days. At the same time, however, the ongoing pandemic conditioned to hold the session only with a minimum occupation in the host country of China; all other participants - including the voting members of the Committee - were joined by zoom. The result was a hybrid event which took place only during the four European midday hours due to the time lags. The result was a completely overfraught program with limited communication possibilities, especially for participants with observer status.

The agenda foresaw 4 full days to discuss 42 new nominations (and 3 extension) to the World Heritage List, but only two and a half days to assess the conservation status of 202 already inscribed World Heritage Sites - only 17 of which were discussed; the other 185 sites were decided without discussion. Two sites - the Acropolis of Athens and the Curonian Spit - which are in acute risk due to construction projects and tourism development, were not even on the agenda. Another 52 sites that are on the List of World Heritage in Danger are usually discussed - this year they were limited to no more than 4 of them.

Of the 17 sites that were discussed, the draft decisions of the technical advisory bodies (IUCN for natural sites, ICOMOS for cultural sites) suggested to inscribe 7 of them in the List of World Heritage in Danger - including Venice, the Kathmandu Valley and Australia's Great Barrier Reef. All seven drafts were shredded by an ever-same phalanx of states whose stooges and spokesmen were Russia, China, Brazil, Egypt, South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Thailand and Saudi Arabia. The few other states that made efforts to adopt decisions based on technical evaluations - especially Norway and, with qualifications, Australia and Spain - fought a lost battle. Governments are allowed to continue neglecting or damaging their world heritage sites as before.

The most hair-raising case in point was undoubtedly the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, in whose center the government is building a huge dam and has divided the protected area into two areas with lower protection status. Selous' deletion from the World Heritage List appeared to be compulsory, but the above-mentioned countries averted this decision indicating that Tanzania must be given the opportunity to develop. The background of this may not only be that dams are still financed as a form of sustainable energy production by the large development banks who do not worry about beautician stuff like the protection of

nature and cultural heritage. Such mega projects also offer particularly favourable conditions for corruption.

For Liverpool, the deletion from the World Heritage List had also been recommended. First, it looked like this would be prevented, too. Only when Norway demanded a secret vote, the majorities changed. One may assume that political pressure on former colonies in the World Heritage Committee no longer worked at this moment, and that some of them didn't hesitate to teach a lesson to the former motherland / Europe / the West.

As for the new nominations to the list, the fateful trend of the World Heritage Committee continued to inscribe sites in the World Heritage List against the recommendation of the Advisory Bodies. 34 of the 42 nominated sites were inscribed, out of whom 15 - over a third! - against the advice of the experts. A Canadian consultant had a sarcastic comparison with the Olympic Games: "We give gold medals to all participants because we are sure that this will encourage them to train harder and to do better in future Olympic games."

It is also striking that seven of the new nominations were introduced by countries that even sit in the World Heritage Committee and vote on their own nominations - and all these countries belong to the above-mentioned group. One does not need to be an expert to realize this to be a textbook case of conflict of interest. For exactly this reason, UNESCO has called on the Member States of the World Heritage Committee not to submit any nominations, but the race for more and more world heritage sites does not seem to know moral considerations.

The efforts for a globally balanced World Heritage List were counteracted once again by the European countries. 18 of the 34 newly-inscribed sites came from them, while on the other hand, only two each were from Africa and the Arab states. All developing countries together came to only seven nominations! Germany has excelled particularly ingloriously with 5 (five!) nominations (three of them with other countries). It helps little to support developing countries by sending German experts to draft their nominations, or to balance their Covid-19-conditioned revenue losses: the way Germany presents itself on this enormously important international stage is miles away from its declared policy goals.

Non-governmental organizations from all over the world tried as much as they could in their contributions to draw realistic pictures of the situation at the World Heritage Sites (it is usually painted rosy in the official reports), but under the leadership of the Chinese chairman they had nothing to laugh. First, he reintroduced the practice abandoned three years ago that the NGOs were given the floor only after decisions were adopted - which excluded them from even minimal participation in the decision-making of the World Heritage Committee. Then, under ever greater time pressure through the overburdened agenda and hours of procedural discussions, he even reduced these contributions from two minutes to one, only to delete them entirely at the end. Norway alone pointed out the important contributions of civil society.

The same fate was met by the representatives of indigenous peoples who had to refer again and again that the United Nations give them a right to "free, prior and informed consent" to all decisions that affect them, while this right had been disregarded in many nominations for the World Heritage List and other decisions.

Actions against civil society reached an unfortunate peak when Venezuela accused the SOS Orinoco organization to follow a fascist agenda and to receive its instructions from Washington. While little else was to be expected from the Maduro regime, the above states, spearheaded again by Russia and China, immediately came to its support and accused the NGOs in a total twist of facts to abuse the UNESCO meeting for political statements. Almost more depressing was that not even one of the 194 Member States of the World Heritage Convention took a stand against these attacks on civil society. It was on the following day that the representative of the Biden Administration repudiated them.

With this state of affairs it is difficult to see much positive in the present work of the World Heritage Committee. One may take comfort from the fact that decisions were taken for 185 sites which were at least not diluted by amendments. The practice to put new sites on the World Heritage List at almost any cost, without increasing the financial and personal resources of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, must inevitably lead to an increasing number of sites on the World Heritage List that do not meet the standards for this status and, on the other hand, that UNESCO will be ever less likely to live up to its task of monitoring their state of conservation.

It helps little, however, to only point fingers at the current members of the World Heritage Committee. Responsible countries must run for membership so that the fateful course of the World Heritage can be changed. In November, most of the above countries rotate out of the World Heritage Committee. This would be the hour for countries like Germany, France, the USA, Mexico, Japan, New Zealand and others, to throw their hat in the ring together and to bring the urgently needed changes on the way in the run-up the 50th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention next year.

But that alone will not be enough either. The international community must realize that by inscribing sites as "the common heritage of humankind" they assume a responsibility for their safeguarding. This must be reflected in the policies of the donor community: World Heritage sites, in particular those in developing countries, can become engines of sustainable regional development, and the populations in their environment must finally feel the benefits they are rightfully expecting.

The outgoing director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Mechtild Roessler, who has earned lasting merits for the World Heritage, closed her farewell words with the sentence: "If we do not manage to protect the most precious sites on our planet, what then will be left?"

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