



Press Release

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World Heritage Watch: Countries must act!

On the occasion of today's commencement of the General Assembly of the States Parties to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, World Heritage Watch has called upon them to initiate urgently needed reforms. The Berlin-based non-governmental organization, which coordinates a global network of over 200 civil society groups, indigenous peoples and individuals, has presented a 12-point plan to this end. Among other things, the influence of geopolitical and economic interests in decision-making must be reduced, the financing of the world heritage secured and the requirements for entry in the world heritage list increased. It is incomprehensible that the World Heritage Sites are still not required to submit tourism plans. Instead of adding more and more sites to the list, priority must now be given to preserving the existing world heritage sites.

"The World Heritage Convention is one of the most successful international agreements of all, but it threatens to become inflationary and to fail because of its own success," explains Stephan Dömpke, founding chairman of the organization. "Its 50th anniversary, which is coming up next year, offers a great opportunity to celebrate what has been achieved, but also to initiate the necessary reforms so that we do not lose it again. A renewed commitment by the States Parties, and the political will to abide by the rules, are the first prerequisites for this."

World Heritage Watch directs specific demands to rich countries that already have a large number of sites on the World Heritage List,

- not to nominate any further sites for ten years and instead to support the countries of the global south in preparing their nominations;
- to make world heritage a topic of development cooperation;
- to recognize and promote the potential of world heritage sites for sustainable development, climate and species protection; and
- to codify the rights of civil society and indigenous peoples to full participation in all procedures relating to world heritage.

In addition, they must implement the decisions and requirements of UNESCO in their own countries. One cannot preach multilateralism on the international stage, but violate international agreements if it serves one's own interests.

At the General Assembly, the member states will discuss the future of the world heritage and a program for the 50th anniversary. It is also expected that UNESCO will announce a successor to the recently resigned Director of the World Heritage Centre.

The full text of World Heritage Watch's 12-Point Program:

12 Priority Fields of Action for the Future of the World Heritage

A. Reforms of the working modalities of the World Heritage Convention

1. Strengthen professional decisions against non-professional interests

The World Heritage Committee is increasingly taking decisions against the recommendations of its Advisory Bodies and, in response to pressure from individual members, overrules draft decisions of its own secretariat. This increasing politicization of decision-making processes must be countered, and the expertise of specialists must be given more weight again in order to stop the obvious erosion of the credibility of the World Heritage List.

2. Prevent loss of value due to an inflation of the list

An inflation of the World Heritage List through unlimited growth (presently about two dozen new sites every year) and qualitatively questionable selection processes must be prevented. In the medium term, the question of limiting the list must be raised, while at the same time achieving the goal of greater regional balance. Those countries in Europe that already have many sites on the World Heritage List are therefore called upon to consider a temporary nomination moratorium. In view of the increasing threats to the World Heritage sites from a variety of new types of dangers, the protection, preservation and development of the already designated World Heritage sites must be given priority over the registration of new sites.

3. Codify the rights of civil society

Civil society is becoming increasingly important in the protection and preservation of World Heritage sites. With hundreds of millions of Euros annually, non-governmental organizations contribute significantly to the preservation of the sites. Their commitment to their respective World Heritage sites can significantly strengthen and guarantee their preservation. The decision that civil society should be involved in all World Heritage processes from nomination on must be implemented by all States Parties. Educational offers must increase the population's understanding and appreciation of World Heritage sites. As in many other conventions, the role and rights of non-governmental organizations need to be codified in the statutes of the convention, possibly through an Intersessional Committee, to be established for coordination between States Parties and Civil Society, following the model of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Civil Society should have access to all documents, their requests and reports should be kept on file and incorporated transparently into the decisions of the committee. As part of the annual meeting of the World Heritage Committee, information and speaking rights before decisions are adopted should be guaranteed, as well as the inclusion of a regular agenda item with reports from civil society.

4. Expand the financing of the world heritage in solidarity

Overall, the UNESCO World Heritage system is severely underfunded at the international, national and local levels. Funds do not increase in step with the rising demands of the growing number of World Heritage Sites. In order to make World Heritage sites fit for the future, their preservation and the exploitation of their development potential must be included as a separate topic in the programs of international donors. With inscription on the World Heritage List, a site becomes the "common heritage of humanity". This means that

the international community has a responsibility for safeguarding the World Heritage that must be reflected in development policy funding guidelines and the allocation of funds.

5. Deepen cooperation with other conventions

The goals of the World Heritage Convention partly coincide with those of international environmental conventions, and they also affect human rights in particular: the nomination and protection of World Heritage sites must, under all circumstances, respect human rights, especially those of indigenous peoples and cultural minorities. In this sense, a mutual reporting obligation should be introduced between the World Heritage Convention, the Human Rights Conventions and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

6. Review the guidelines for nominations, management and monitoring

In the nomination dossiers of World Heritage sites, there is often a lack of crucial information on the basis of which a subsequent monitoring of their state of conservation can be conducted, for example lists of the objects (attributes) that embody the outstanding universal value of the site, or specifications for the human, material and financial resources of the sites. Monitoring missions often cannot achieve their goals because they are delayed, too short, or understaffed, or because their mandate does not cover important areas such as the violation of human rights. By increasing the requirements for protection, management, and funding of the World Heritage Sites prior to inscription, many later problems can be avoided.

B. Contributions of World Heritage Sites to Sustainable Development

7. Make tourism plans a binding requirement for all World Heritage sites

World Heritage Sites are being preserved so that they can be visited for purposes of education and enjoyment. In addition, tourism is the main source of income not only for the sites themselves, but also for the nearby population. In recent years, however, tourism has gained the upper hand in many places (overtourism) and threatens to become a threat to World Heritage sites. Therefore, tourism plans developed in a participatory manner should become a binding requirement for all World Heritage sites in order to define and adhere to a sustainable level of tourist use.

8. Make the establishment of buffer zones a binding requirement

Buffer zones are essential for the visual integrity and protection of world heritage sites; their designation must therefore become a mandatory requirement for inscription on the World Heritage List. Clear and binding principles for their demarcation are required so that they can be easily understood by the local population, especially in nature reserves, and easily monitored by the local supervising authorities. Binding regulations and standards for buffer zones, which can be checked by the World Heritage Committee on the basis of clear criteria, should be laid down in the Operational Guidelines.

9. Support practicing sustainable development

The general guideline of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which applies to all countries, should be given special priority in the buffer zones as model regions. To this end, local administrations and private stakeholders must be provided with practical instructions on how sustainable development can be realized in practice at their sites. To

achieve this goal, opportunities for economic cooperation and development aid must be used. This will give local populations the opportunity to develop new sources of income in the vicinity of World Heritage sites, thereby winning them over as supporters of the World Heritage and at the same time keeping non-sustainable interests away.

10. Protect World Heritage from dams and water dilution in water catchment areas

Dams are often justified as a climate-friendly energy generation technology while dramatically contributing to the destruction of habitats, biodiversity and arable land. Special regulations need to be found for possible threats to World Heritage waters from dams located far upstream or large-scale irrigation projects in their water catchment areas. Strategic World Heritage Impact Assessments must be submitted to the World Heritage Committee for such projects.

11. Strengthen the role of World Heritage sites in tackling the climate crisis

The World Heritage Convention requires States Parties to do “everything in their power” to protect their sites. Since the climate crisis threatens almost all World Heritage sites, States Parties also have a legally binding obligation under the World Heritage Convention to do everything in their power to counter the climate crisis. At the same time, World Heritage sites offer excellent reference areas of high biodiversity for observing climate change, as they have been particularly protected and well researched for a long time.

12. Develop guidelines for change in cultural landscapes

Historically grown cultural landscapes are living landscapes that preserve their traditional forms of settlement and architecture, use of land and natural resources, ways of life and often spiritual traditions related to places. World Heritage cultural landscapes must be large enough to exist as representative functional units. At the same time, they are exposed to the changes that modern developments bring. Site-specific guidelines must therefore be developed as to how far changes in the cultural landscape can go in order to still be in harmony with its traditional character, and how the population can be supported in maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity.