

## Report on Participation in the 48th Session of the World Heritage Committee

### WHW NGO Delegation

The WHW delegation consisted of five members of the NGO (Stephan Dömpke (SD), Martin Lenk (ML), Henning Frase (HF), and Manana Tevzadze (MT), as well as Caroline Schmidt as a volunteer) and four individuals from the network who were registered as WHW members (Pratiti Joshi from India, Cirrus Kabaale and Eryn Schornick from Tanzania, and Chee Meng Wong from Singapore).

### WHW Network

In addition, 16 WHW network members participated, registered through their own NGOs:

Toon Bijmens (Save the Tigris)  
Eloise Carr (Wilderness Society – Tasmania)  
In-Souk Cho (International Union of Architects)  
Jon Day, Scott Heron (Climate Heritage Initiative, James Cook University)  
Brian Fung (Athapaska Chipewyan First Nation)  
Yves Lador (Earthjustice)  
Frank Lepine (Mikisew Cree First Nation)  
Maria Llano, Cecilia Garcia (Defensa del Ambiente del Norte)  
Gankhuyag Purev-Ochir (Mongolian Bird Conservation Center)  
Herbert Rasinger (Initiative for the Preservation of Vienna's Cityscape)  
Lissa Schindler (Australian Marine Conservation Society)  
Andry Sculthorpe (Palawa Nation and Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC))  
Eugene Simonov (Rivers without Boundaries International Coalition)  
Carmen Wells (Fort Chipewyan Métis Association)

Two Russian NGOs were excluded at the request of Ukraine and by decision of the Committee:

RAIPON (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North), which Putin has brought under his control and which has lost all legitimacy. One of its former leaders, Rodion Sulyandziga, who now lives in exile, was present.  
The NGO "Expert Council on Protected Areas", represented by former Greenpeace staff members Mikhail Kreyndlin and Irina Panteleeva.

Unfortunately, despite its promise, the World Heritage Centre was unable to prevent this latest incident following the exclusion of "Save the Tigris" last year. In a detailed conversation with Ukraine's Permanent Representative to UNESCO — with whom he maintains an exceptionally friendly relationship — SD explained that NGOs should not, as a matter of principle, be excluded from Committee sessions.

**Action** >> *As the WHW network, we should write a letter — signed by as many members as possible — to all States Parties, urging them to amend the Rules of Procedure of the World Heritage Committee so that an NGO can only be excluded from a session if it has committed specific acts that are punishable under international law. These must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt by the requesting State.*

A highlight was the adoption of a Roadmap for the development of a Proposal to Enhance Indigenous Peoples' Engagement in the World Heritage Convention. It commits Committee members to further recognise Indigenous peoples' rights and beliefs and to increase Indigenous participation in the World Heritage Convention, empowering Indigenous self-determination.

## General Information and Assessment

By general consensus, the Korean president of the session was not up to his task. Right from the start, the session fell a full day behind schedule. He allowed certain delegations, notably Bangladesh, to derail the session by repeated less-than-reasonable interventions. The agenda was repeatedly thrown into disarray, and the chair forgot what he had announced just moments earlier.

The often-criticized politicization of the World Heritage Committee continued. Substantive proposals from individual committee members were voted down without exception. But frustration with the Convention's dysfunctionality was also more clearly evident among many States Parties than before. With the exception of Tauric Chersonese (in Russian-occupied Crimea), which had been nominated by Ukraine itself, all nominations for inclusion on the List of World Heritage in Danger were rejected (Lake Ohrid, Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls, Westminster Abbey, and, most controversially, the Historic City of Vienna), while several sites were inscribed on the World Heritage List against the recommendation of ICOMOS or IUCN (Mt. Olympus (Greece), Gdynia Modernist City Center (Poland), The Roças of São Tomé and Príncipe, and Wadi Wuraya (UAE)).

Not only several delegations, but also senior representatives of the World Heritage Center expressed the view that changes in the Convention's working methods are necessary.

**Action** >> *We are considering organizing a conference in Paris next year on the Convention's working methods and, if possible, enlisting supportive States Parties as partners for this effort.*

## Statements in the Plenary

WHW made statements at the meeting on the following agenda items:

### Statements drafted by WHW

(the texts of those statements presented by WHW are annexed to this report)

#### 7 Opening of the Item

WHW demanded an explanation as to why certain World Heritage sites had not yet been placed on the agenda despite well-documented threats (e.g., Upper Svaneti and the Acropolis of Athens), and who makes these decisions and based on what criteria.

**Action** >> *We will follow up with UNESCO on this matter, requesting an answer.*

#### 7A.30 Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra

WHW stated that the bombing of the Lavra had underscored the nature of the war as one between barbarism and civilization, and called on the General Assembly of States Parties to resolve that the membership of states that destroy World Heritage sites be automatically suspended.

These two statements received a significant positive response and led to WHW being viewed very favourably by a large majority of the States Parties. This became clear in a series of discussions we held when we distributed the WHW Report 2026 to all committee members and requested publications on the newly nominated sites for our World Heritage Library.

### Statements drafted by, and presented on behalf of network members

7B.26 Butrint (anonymous)

7B.36 Historical Monuments of Mtskheta (Georgian nongovernmental organizations)

7B.46 Tauric Chersonesos and its Chora (Evelina Kravchenko)

7B.62 Historical and Natural Region of Lake Ohrid (anonymous)

7B.83 Doñana National Park (WWF Spain)

7B.86 El Piñacate and Gran Desierto de Altar (Center for Biological Diversity)

7B.87 Canaima National Park (SOSOrinoco)

7B.93 Mosi-oa-Tunya / Victoria Falls (Keep Victoria Falls Wild)

### Statements by WHW network members under their own names

7B.69 Great Barrier Reef (Lissa Schindler, Australian Marine Conservation Society)

7B.80 Lake Baikal (Eugene Simonov, Rivers without Boundaries Coalition)

## Meetings

We held in-depth discussions with the following individuals:

### **Valery Freland (Executive Director of ALIPH) and David Sassine (Project Manager at ALIPH)**

SD and MT presented our global civil society network and discussed opportunities for future collaboration. We emphasized that many of our network members work in particularly vulnerable contexts and could benefit from ALIPH's support mechanisms. During the discussion, we explored possibilities for future collaboration between ALIPH, WHW, and local NGOs within the WHW network.

**Action** >> *We agreed to draft concept papers for potential projects in India, Ukraine, Tunisia, and Albania and to share them with ALIPH's new program director.*

### **World Monuments Fund**

MT met with the Senior Regional Director for East Asia, Dr. Hung-hsi Chao. The discussion focused on WMF's work addressing climate-related threats to cultural heritage and potential collaborations between WMF and WHW's network members, particularly those in East Asia facing climate-related risks.

### **Ukrainian Delegation**

SD strengthened cooperation with Ukraine and reaffirmed its interest in providing further support, particularly for two projects:

- The protection and sustainable development of the Podesennya region, with the ultimate goal of a World Heritage nomination, and
- The restoration of the Holy Cross Church in Drohobych, Ukraine. This church was proposed for the World Heritage nomination of the wooden churches of western Ukraine but was not recommended by ICOMOS. It is in urgent need of restoration.

The Permanent Representative of Ukraine to UNESCO pledged his support for these projects.

**Action** >> *We will follow up on these projects with the Permanent Representative.*

### **The Japanese environmental NGO "Yakushima Environmental Culture Foundation"**

The NGO's Secretary-General approached us to establish contact. The national park on Yakushima Island is a World Natural Heritage site. Herbert Rasinger held a detailed discussion with him in Japanese.

**Action** >> *We will put Hideki Yoshikawa in touch with this NGO – they are essentially island neighbours.*

### **Prof. Dr. Lynn Meskell**

Lynn Meskell (University of Pennsylvania) is one of the most eloquent critics of the World Heritage Convention and has published extensively on the subject. She supports WHW and will give a lecture during a visit to Berlin on December 21.

### **Delegation of Zambia**

Following our statement on Mosi-oa-Tunya / Victoria Falls, SD was confronted by several members of the Zambian delegation. However, what began as a very delicate situation evolved into a positive relationship with the spokesperson, Mr Kagosi Mwamulowe — the executive director and natural heritage expert of the National Heritage Conservation Commission — which has laid the groundwork for dialogue. (Zambia and Zimbabwe rejected all arguments against the construction of hotels along the riverbanks, arguing that Mosi-oa-Tunya was not inscribed for its biodiversity or ecosystem, but for its geology (category vii), which caught IUCN by surprise.)

### **Georgia**

MT discussed with representatives of ICOMOS International and the Georgian delegation the increasingly difficult situation facing several World Heritage sites in Georgia, particularly the deteriorating governance and management issues.

### **Vienna**

HF supported network member Herbert Rasinger in his efforts to keep Vienna's Old Town on the List of World Heritage in Danger. He held talks with several delegations, distributed papers, and had in-depth discussions with members of the Austrian delegation. As a result, the vote was postponed, giving Austria the opportunity to secure the necessary majority on the Committee.

## Brief Exchanges

SD had brief and very friendly conversations with the delegations from Switzerland, Kazakhstan, Brazil, Mongolia, and France,

MT spoke with

- the president and vice president of ICOMOS Korea; (Cho, Doo Won)
- a representative from ICOMOS China;
- Hyunuk Park, a representative of the Gyeonggi Cultural Foundation, South Korea;
- Jayne Linaker and other representatives and students from the BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg World Heritage Studies Program;
- representatives of the German UNESCO Commission;
- representatives of the Institute for Heritage Studies, Berlin;
- Glenn Eskew (Georgia State University), Elif Kalaycioğlu (King's College London), Yujie Zhu (Australian National University), and others.
- Site Managers & custodians.

## Side Event

On July 25, WHW hosted a side event for the first time in its history. The topic was "World Heritage Maps: An Underrated Tool for the Presentation, Interpretation, and Management." The main partner was the Korean WHIPIC (International Center for the Interpretation and Presentation of World Heritage Sites), along with Huber Kartografie from Munich. Collaboration with WHIPIC during the preparation phase went very smoothly. ML contributed a significant portion of the technical information on our end with highly informative maps. The second presentation by WHIPIC representative Dr. Hwanong Lee was compelling and inspiring. Norbert Eckrich's (Huber Kartografie) presentation focused primarily on digital products. The Korean side is definitely interested in continuing to work on this topic. The errors and shortcomings pointed out by Martin and me suggest that there are systemic weaknesses here at UNESCO.

**Action** >> *A next step would be a systematic and comprehensive study on the topic, for which we should seek collaboration with a university.*

## 49<sup>th</sup> Session

It was announced that the 49<sup>th</sup> Session of the Committee will take place from 27 June – 7 July 2027 in Istanbul, Türkiye. Our members there will inform us as soon as the venue will be known.

## Conclusion

Overall, our numerous statements, the distribution of the WHW Reports and the invitation to the side event, the size of our delegation, the many discussions, and—last but not least—the central location of our table have led to a level of visibility and presence, as well as goodwill among the delegations, that we have never achieved before.

Although we were unable to achieve clear successes for the World Heritage sites and the conditions for NGOs were further restricted, the conditions are now favorable for working with the States Parties to bring about changes in the policies of the World Heritage Convention. To this end, we could distribute the Potsdam Papers again and discuss them at an international event. Since few changes are to be expected from the World Heritage Committee as a body, the focus of our work could shift to the General Assembly of Member States (next one to be held in November 2027), where there is a chance for different majorities.

## **Annex: Statements by WHW and Network Members**

### **Statement on Item 7 (Opening of the Item)**

For over twelve years, World Heritage Watch has submitted information about risks and threats facing World Heritage Sites, thereby making significant contributions to the decision-making processes of the World Heritage Committee towards the safeguarding of the properties.

While many properties we have addressed have been examined by the Committee, there are also cases which have never been on its agenda. To give only two examples: Concerning the cultural landscape of Upper Svaneti (Georgia) we have documented five times the continuing decline of its integrity and authenticity due to neglect and uncontrolled construction, and concerning the Acropolis of Athens, Greece, we have reported for six consecutive years massive interventions with widely applied reinforced concrete.

This raises a very serious question: What are the criteria and procedures applied by the Committee when it decides which properties will be on its agenda? As a matter of transparency and accountability, the Committee owes to the public a clear and comprehensible answer to this question in every single case. Ignoring evidence of grave threats over many years evokes bitter feelings among those who are trying to support the Committee but also raises questions about its consistency and credibility.

### **Statement on Item 7A.30**

#### **Kyiv: Saint Sophia Cathedral and Related Monastic Buildings; Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (Ukraine)**

The vicious Russian attack on the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra marks a new quality and teaches a clear lesson to the world: The war against Ukraine is one of barbarism against civilization. Every country that has supported Russia in the past must come to terms with this reality and choose where to stand.

UNESCO is now at a crossroads. It must stop paying lip services to the victimized country while carefully avoiding naming the perpetrator. There must be consequences in the way the organization deals with States Parties who brazenly violate the World Heritage Convention and indeed the basis of the UN system. Rules must be adopted to have their membership in UNESCO automatically suspended once the facts have been established. The presence of representatives of this country, the twisting of facts and the cheeky comments on an event supposed to protect World Heritage is a stain of disgrace on the World Heritage Convention that we cannot tolerate any further. They have no place among us.

### **WHW Statement on Item 7B.29 Butrint**

(anonymous)

Twenty-one years after Butrint was removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger, fundamental concerns remain unresolved. Fragmented governance, the weakened authority of the State Party, the disproportionate role of the Albanian American Development Foundation, increasing development pressures, and the continued failure to finalize the property's boundaries continue to undermine the effective protection of Butrint.

The proposed Visitor Center, in its current design and location, would cause irreversible harm to Butrint's Outstanding Universal Value. It should therefore be relocated outside Butrint National Park or abandoned.

The responsibility for safeguarding Albania's World Heritage rests with the State Party and cannot be transferred to private actors. Albania must now fully implement the recommendations of the Committee and ICOMOS without delay.

We request to set an early date of the forthcoming Reactive Monitoring mission and urge decisive action to ensure Butrint's integrity and authenticity.

#### **WHW Statement on 7B.36 Historical Monuments of Mtskheta** (Georgian Civil Society Organizations)

Chairperson, distinguished delegates,

The property's fragile state stems directly from decades-long management deficits. Decades after inscription, Mtskheta still lacks an operational Master Plan. This prolonged vacuum continues to fuel unhindered privatization, commercial development, and selective enforcement of the Moratorium.

Simultaneously, we sound an urgent alarm regarding the highway and bypass developments below Jvari Monastery. This project is far larger in scale than presented in official documentation, posing an irreversible threat to the sensitive landscape, buffer zone, and visual integrity of Jvari.

Crucially, these long-standing issues are now compounded by severe democratic backsliding and authoritarian decision-making. Heritage governance has been politicized: expert dialogue is dismissed, local community rights under Paragraph 111 are ignored, and independent civil society face unprecedented pressure.

This environment creates fertile ground for public and private actors seeking to exploit regulatory gaps and manipulate planning processes. Against this backdrop of democratic erosion, civil society's ability to monitor interventions, challenge harmful projects, and hold authorities accountable is severely weakened. What was already a critical governance failure has now become far harder to remedy from within.

We thus urge the Committee, the World Heritage Centre, and the Advisory Bodies to enforce strict adherence to Paragraph 172 of the Operational Guidelines and closely monitor the road project's true scale before irreversible damage is done to Mtskheta's Outstanding Universal Value.

#### **WHW Statement on Item 7B.86 Tauric Chersonese and its Chora** (Evelina Kravchenko)

Tauric Chersonesos is used by the occupying authorities as an ideological hub. The executor of all programs is the Russian Orthodox monastery, created by the occupying authorities on the site. The monastery has occupied all the premises of the site museum, destroyed the exposition, and stopped the museumification of the World Heritage site. For the needs of the monastery infrastructure, unacceptable archaeological research is being conducted on the territory of the ancient city of Chersonesos.

The museum-preserve, created by the occupiers on the basis of the National Preserve of the Tauric Chersonesos – which is the legitimate management authority of the inscribed property -, is actually a service for the needs of the Russian monastery and a cover for changing the intended purpose of the World Heritage site. The collections of funds that have not yet been taken to Russia, the archive and library of the Chersonesos preserve, are being prepared for transfer to the so-called museum and temple complex of New Chersonesos, the newly-built complex in the buffer zone of the archaeological site.

The inclusion of the WHS of the city of Tauric Chersonesos and its chora on the List of World Heritage in Danger remains the first necessary step towards influencing the occupying country to minimize losses to the site. We call upon all states parties of the Convention to use all diplomatic channels and political means available to enable a Reactive Monitoring Mission being conducted on the site.

#### **WHW Statement on Item 7B.62 Historical and Natural Region of Lake Ohrid**

(anonymous)

Today's Decision is a death knell for Lake Ohrid. The global network of World Heritage Watch are appalled that the Committee has once again failed to inscribe the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid Region on the List of World Heritage in Danger. For the second consecutive year, the State Party of Türkiye, followed by others, has challenged the conclusions of the Advisory Bodies and weakened the authority of independent expert evaluation.

The evidence is undeniable: Lake Ohrid remains under severe and growing pressure. Its Outstanding Universal Value is at risk, and cumulative impacts continue to drive this unique heritage site toward irreversible damage. The List of World Heritage in Danger exists precisely for moments like this — when the international community must act before it is too late.

On the Albanian side, the Drilon–Tushemisht Waterscape project, the five-storey Tushemisht development, and the proposed 27-floor Pogradec Marina demonstrate the alarming scale of the threat.

We commend the Advisory Bodies for their integrity and dedication. The Committee will continue to oversee a decline of the property until its authenticity and integrity will be fully lost. Today, regrettably, in plain sight politics prevailed over our duty to protect Lake Ohrid. Lake Ohrid deserves better.

#### **WHW Statement on Item 7B.83 Doñana National Park**

(WWF Spain)

Thank you, Mr Chair. I speak on behalf of World Heritage Watch and WWF Spain, which has worked for more than 60 years to conserve Doñana, one of the world's most important wetlands and a key site for biodiversity between Northern Europe and North Africa. WWF thanks UNESCO and its technical staff for the resolutions adopted over the last two decades. They have been essential tools for the protection of this World Heritage property. But Doñana is running out of time.

The deterioration of the aquifer, droughts, mining discharges and industrial agriculture are seriously undermining its ecological integrity. Too often, administrations present measures on paper, while implementation on the ground is delayed. Paper commitments will not save Doñana. We urge the Committee to require Spain to act without further delay: close illegal wells, prevent mining pollution in the Guadalquivir and Guadamar rivers, and restore Doñana's hydrological functionality. The future of Doñana, its people, its biodiversity cannot wait. Thank you.

#### **WHW Statement on Item 7B.86 El Piñacate and Gran Desierto de Altar**

(Center for Biological Diversity)

On behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity and supported by our global civil society network, we regret the weakening of the Committee's decision on El Piñacate and urges the Committee to maintain its clear opposition to the border wall along the property.

This wall fragments habitat, blocks wildlife movement, disrupts migration and threatens the survival of the Sonoran pronghorn and other species that depend on cross-border connectivity.

Three years after the Committee first requested action, ecological connectivity has still not been restored, the urgent Action Plan has not been completed, and the Reactive Monitoring mission has still not taken place.

Further delay is unacceptable. Most importantly, the United States must remove the sections of wall that block essential wildlife corridors and restore connectivity across this transboundary landscape.

If connectivity is not promptly restored, the Committee should follow through on its repeated warning and inscribe El Piñacate on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

#### **WHW Statement on 7B.87 Canaima National Park** (SOSOrinoco)

SOSOrinoco, supported by the global World Heritage Watch Network, must report that the situation on the ground has worsened. Despite the political changes that occurred in January 2026, the underlying drivers of environmental degradation remain largely unchanged.

Our remote sensing analysis, current to February 2026, has identified 148 mining polygons covering nearly 2,000 hectares inside the property. Between 2024 and 2025 alone, 300 more hectares were lost, including 72 hectares at the base of Chimantá tepui, in the heart of the park.

Dredges mobilize an estimated 7.5 million tons of sediment annually and release mercury that travels up to 100 kilometers downstream, threatening Pemón indigenous communities and the Guri reservoir.

We urge the Committee to insist on a firm date for the Reactive Monitoring mission, pending since 2021, or otherwise consider inscription of Canaima on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

#### **WHW Statement on 7B.93 Mosi-oa-Tunya / Victoria Falls** (Keep Victoria Falls Wild)

We are disappointed by the continued lack of progress by both the State Parties and the World Heritage Centre in addressing issues relating to tourism development pressures within and surrounding this Site, and note that the amended Decision again attempts to dilute these concerns.

There has been no progress on mitigation measures relating to the Mosi-oa-Tunya Resort development in Zambia. No progress on undisclosed riverside developments constructed within the Site's 'no new development zone' in Zimbabwe. And no progress on further proposed riverside tourism developments within this zone, agreed by the Zimbabwean Park Authority and yet again undisclosed.

The growing list of issues and concerns significantly includes ongoing delays to the finalization and submission of the SEA and new Joint Management Plan, as well as a long overdue clarification of the Site's boundary and management zones.

The State Parties have been repeatedly warned over the cumulative impact of tourism developments within and surrounding the property. Without action, the World Heritage Committee are in danger of assisting and facilitating further illegitimate tourism developments.

A moratorium on all tourism developments within the Site and its surrounding 500m Buffer Zone - pending the finalization and agreement by the Committee of the new Joint Integrated Management Plan - is urgently needed to prevent further tourism development within the Site.