



WWF

REPORT

2019



OUR NATURAL WORLD AT RISK

HOW POLITICIZATION IS LIMITING THE EFFECTIVENESS
OF THE WORLD HERITAGE CONVENTION

A REPORT FOR WWF BY

Dalberg

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The report was written by Dalberg Advisors, and the team comprised of Wijnand de Wit, Macarena Machimbarrena, Emily Tench and Nathan Bigaud.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention is a unique mechanism for identifying and protecting the world's most precious natural and cultural heritage. It was set up to conserve the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of World Heritage sites. It represents a visionary idea that some places are so valuable that their protection transcends national boundaries and is the duty of the entire international community. Beyond this OUV, the Convention also ensures that the environmental, social and economic benefits that World Heritage sites

provide to people globally are not degraded.

The World Heritage Committee makes executive decisions on the implementation of the Convention and is supported by the World Heritage Centre, the World Heritage Fund and technical Advisory Bodies. The Committee comprises of representatives from 21 States Parties who meet annually. The General Assembly of States Parties elect which States Parties sit on the Committee, and then each State Party is free to choose the individual(s) who represents them on it. The Committee decides which properties are of OUV and should be inscribed as World Heritage sites. It also makes decisions about how to preserve sites, by monitoring their conservation status and proposing preservation interventions, including additions to the List of World Heritage in Danger

Through making evidence-based decisions regarding natural and mixed sites, the Committee aims to preserve global OUV by decreasing these sites' exposure to threats and improving their management. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), acting as the technical Advisory Body for natural sites and the natural component of mixed sites, evaluates property nomination dossiers submitted by States Parties and make recommendations regarding inscription of properties. For sites that are already inscribed, and for which a significant threat has been identified, the IUCN and the World Heritage Centre draft State of Conservation (SOC) reports. These include draft decisions regarding preservation actions, whether a site should be inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger, or whether a site should be delisted from the World Heritage List. At their annual meetings, the Committee decides whether to follow these expert recommendations or make amendments to them.

While the IUCN ensures that the Committee has the latest scientific basis for its decision-making, Committee decisions do not always follow their advice. In practice, politico-economic factors, such as membership on the Committee or a State Party's diplomatic capacity, can influence the Committee's decision-making contrary to the recommendations of the IUCN. Some States Parties politicize the process, by embracing diplomatic or bureaucratic strategies to amend Advisory Bodies' recommendations, in order to pursue their national interests.

Politicization can be observed in the process of nominations, conservation requirements, and inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger. In these cases, the Committee regularly amends the technical recommendations put forward by the IUCN regarding natural and mixed sites. In some cases, these amendments might be based on technical inaccuracies. However, in many cases, these amendments are driven by political trade-offs made by Committee members outside the formal sessions of the Committee. Since 2014, for example, 46 per cent of Committee decisions regarding the nomination of natural and mixed World Heritage sites have gone against the advice of the Advisory Bodies. Additionally, over the last five years, the Committee has prevented fourteen inscriptions and considerations for the List of World Heritage in Danger across eleven sites. Eight sites went on to be inscribed or considered in the future regardless given continued or increasing threats.

Politicization limits the effectiveness of the Convention and undermines its long-term credibility by allowing States Parties' vested economic and political interests to outweigh conservation priorities. The inscription of sites that the IUCN advises not to inscribe, due to poor design or weak protection and management strategies, can result in failures to mitigate future threats. Similarly, the softening of technical conservation recommendations reduces the accountability imposed on States Parties and can contribute to increased threat exposure. The delays in inscribing sites onto the List of World Heritage in Danger reduces the perceived urgency for States Parties to act to conserve sites and puts them at increased risk. As a result of politicization, the overall effectiveness of protection and management of natural and mixed sites is decreasing, with only 48 per cent of sites' activities classified as effective or highly effective in 2017. Similarly, since 2014, natural and mixed sites have been exposed to heightened levels of threats, especially those originating from harmful industrial activities and unsustainable tourism. Natural and mixed World Heritage sites inscribed for their biodiversity values are the most threatened, with around 37 per cent of these sites categorized as critical or of high concern. These trends pose reputational and funding risks for the Convention, which could further reduce its ability to protect the planet's heritage.

Change is needed to ensure that the World Heritage Convention effectively conserves global OUV. Whilst this report shows that politicization is evident in the decision-making behavior of the Committee regarding natural and mixed sites, similar studies have highlighted that politicization also affects cultural sites. Widespread politicization reflects the presence of broader misaligned incentives among all States Parties signatories to the Convention. Making critical changes to how the World Heritage Convention is implemented would provide incentives for States Parties and the Committee to reprioritize conservation of OUV.

Shifting the Convention's emphasis to evidence-based decision-making, while providing incentives for compliance, would encourage States Parties and civil society to re-engage with its mandate. For stakeholders to renew their commitment to the Convention, it will be essential to reposition it as a credible, necessary, and effective conservation tool. Proposed strategic priorities involve:

- Reprioritizing evidence-based decision-making
- Highlighting the environmental, social and economic benefits that World Heritage sites provide
- Backing Committee decisions with access to conservation resources
- Increasingly engaging civil society organizations

Tactical changes in the governance and processes of the Convention's implementation could incentivize behavior that is better aligned with its mandate.

Making changes to governance structures can help ensure that the Committee's decision-making remains evidence-based. Similarly, amending the processes through which different entities implementing the Convention interact and operate can give room for increased transparency and accountability, which in turn incentivizes greater compliance. Proposed changes include:

- States Parties agreeing on a Code of Conduct
- States Parties voting for individuals proposed by States Parties to sit on the Committee rather than States Parties themselves
- The Committee providing justification for changes to recommended decisions, and these justifications and amendments being tracked and made publicly available
- The Committee giving civil society organizations the same degree of opportunity to provide evidence on the state of conservation of sites as States Parties
- The Committee implementing a certification standard to label each World Heritage site with its corresponding protection and management indicators

THE POTENTIAL

THE ROLE OF THE
WORLD HERITAGE
CONVENTION IN
PRESERVING THE
VALUE OF OUR
NATURAL HERITAGE



THE ROLE OF THE WORLD HERITAGE CONVENTION IN PRESERVING THE VALUE OF OUR NATURAL HERITAGE

World Heritage sites are areas of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV)*. This means that they possess significance “which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity.”¹ The World Heritage List, therefore, represents many of the world’s most valuable cultural and natural assets. This report will primarily focus on the role of the World Heritage Convention in preserving the OUV of natural and mixed World Heritage sites. As of June 2019, there are 209 natural World Heritage sites, and 38 mixed* World Heritage sites (see Figure 1).²

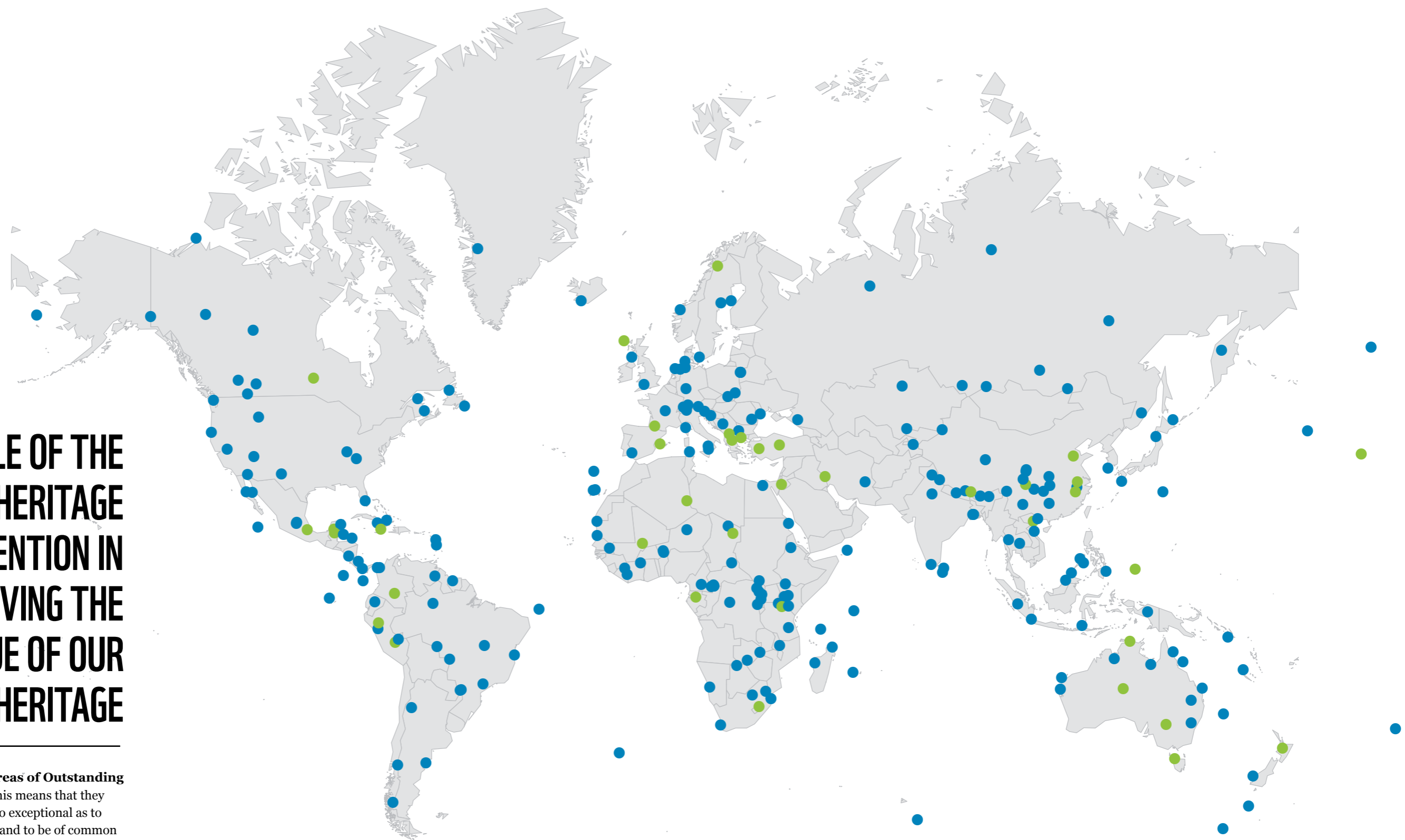


Figure 1: Map of natural and mixed World Heritage sites as of June 2019³

- KEY**
- Mixed Sites
 - Natural Sites

Natural and mixed World Heritage sites bring economic, environmental and socio-cultural value to local communities, their countries, and the global community. These sites generate natural, cultural and social capital that promote sustainable development and can reduce poverty.⁴ They do this by supporting livelihoods, bolstering the tourism industry, attracting investment, and maintaining ecosystem services. For example, Tikal National Park and the surrounding area of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala generates an annual income of around US\$47 million and provides employment to 7,000 people.⁵ Natural and mixed sites also create environmental value by providing important soil stabilization, flood prevention, and carbon sequestration services.⁶ It is estimated that World Heritage forest sites contain around 10.5 billion metric tons of carbon, with the average World Heritage forest site containing around 18 per cent more carbon than an average forest site.⁷ This is a vital contribution to global climate regulation. The Sundarbans in Bangladesh contain mangrove ecosystems, which provide vital ecological stability by delivering protection against erosion, providing buffer zones, and reducing flooding, thereby contributing to coastal protection.⁸

However, these sites face many threats which put their OUV, as well as their community benefits, at risk. For instance, although industrial activities can be drivers of economic development, when conducted in a poorly managed manner and in or around World Heritage sites, they can have substantial long-term negative impacts on sites' value.⁹ Similarly, unsustainable tourism and human interference can also result in their degradation.^{10,11} Thus, threats arise due to the tension between human needs and the fragility of our global heritage.

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention is a unique mechanism for identifying and protecting the world's most valuable heritage sites from these threats. The Convention represents a visionary idea that some places are so valuable that their protection transcends national boundaries and is the duty of the entire international community. It is a very powerful tool for identifying and protecting OUV and has historically been pivotal in protecting sites from threats (see *Case Study 1*). To date, 193 States Parties have ratified the Convention, making it the most ratified international treaty for conservation in the world.¹²

The World Heritage Committee makes executive decisions on the implementation of the Convention, and is supported by the World Heritage Centre, the World Heritage Fund and technical Advisory Bodies*. States Parties ratify the Convention and therefore commit to propose sites for inscription on the World Heritage List and to preserve the OUV of sites on their territories. The General Assembly of States Parties elects which States Parties sit on the World Heritage Committee, which has ultimate executive decision-making power over the implementation of the Convention (see *Figure 2*). The Committee decides which sites to inscribe on the World Heritage List and how to preserve their OUV. It can also recommend amendments to the Operational Guidelines of the Convention to ensure that the guidelines remain fit for purpose.¹³ To make inscription and preservation decisions, the Committee consults with Advisory Bodies¹⁴ and is supported by the World Heritage Centre. The World Heritage Centre acts as the Secretariat to the Committee. It supports States Parties to prepare site nominations for inscription on the World Heritage List and coordinates the reporting on the state of conservation of sites by gathering information from States Parties and civil society organizations. The Advisory Bodies evaluate and synthesize this information on nominations and conservation into recommendations to the Committee. Although civil society organizations do not have the same standing as the World Heritage Centre and the

Advisory Bodies, their participation is vital for the implementation of the Convention.¹⁵ They provide important information on potential sites for nomination, the conservation status of existing sites, and appropriate protective measures. In parallel, the World Heritage Fund gathers financial contributions from States Parties and other voluntary contributions, and allocates these to support the identification and conservation of World Heritage sites. Given the Fund's relatively small budget of \$4 million, States Parties still cover most of the costs associated with the conservation of their sites.¹⁶

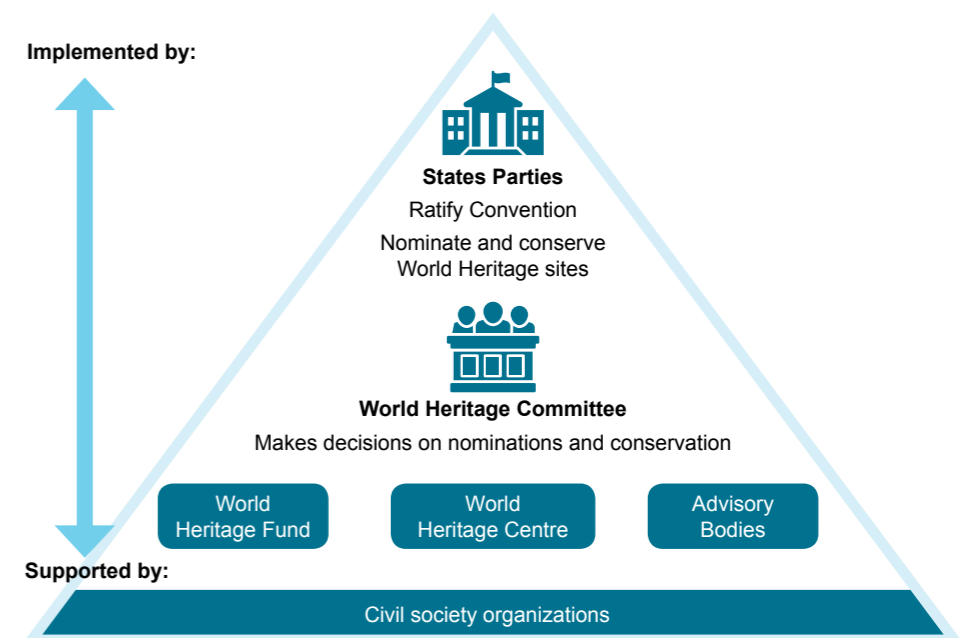
The World Heritage Committee meets every year to make decisions regarding site inclusion on the World Heritage List and how to preserve sites' OUV. The Committee consists of representatives from 21 States Parties, with sixteen seats allocated according to region,¹⁷ and five seats not restricted by region.¹⁸ Each State Party is free to choose who represents them on the Committee, although representatives should be qualified in the field of heritage conservation.¹⁹ According to the Convention, a Committee member's mandate is for six years, but to increase equitable representation on the Committee, States Parties voluntarily reduce their term of office from six to four years.^{20,21} States Parties that do not have a seat on the Committee can also attend Committee meetings as observers with no voting rights and are sometimes invited to speak during plenary sessions.²² Similarly, civil society organizations that are active in the fields covered by the Convention may request to attend Committee sessions as observers.

The Committee's mandate includes deciding which sites possess OUV based on a set of criteria, and should be inscribed on the World Heritage List. For a natural or mixed site's inclusion on the World Heritage List, it must meet at least one of ten selection criteria regarding OUV, as well as the UNESCO integrity, and protection and management standards.²³ The integrity standard verifies that the physical state of a property and its surrounding conditions are adequate to contain and express its value. The protection and management standards aim to sustain the properties' value and integrity over time. This requires adequate legislative, regulatory and contractual measures, adequately delineated property boundaries including a buffer zone, and

21 STATES PARTIES SIT ON THE WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE AND DECIDE WHICH SITES POSSESS OUV AND HOW BEST TO PRESERVE SITES' OUV

193 STATES PARTIES HAVE RATIFIED THE CONVENTION, MAKING IT A VERY POWERFUL TOOL FOR IDENTIFYING AND PROTECTING OUV

Figure 2: Implementation of the World Heritage Convention



effective management systems. These standards are vital to ensure that natural properties added to the World Heritage List are not only the most valuable in the world but also have the capacity to conserve this value over time for future generations.

Following site inscription, the Committee decides how to preserve sites' OUV through monitoring their conservation status and making preservation interventions. When a site is inscribed on the World Heritage List, the Committee adopts a Statement of OUV*, which is used as a benchmark for assessing each site's state of conservation.²⁴ The Committee systematically monitors each site's state of conservation through periodic reports which States Parties should submit to the World Heritage Centre every six years. Additionally, throughout these reporting periods, the World Heritage Centre encourages States Parties to inform them of developments that could threaten the OUV of their sites.²⁵ Similarly, civil society organizations are encouraged to submit information about the conservation state of World Heritage sites. If the World Heritage Committee gains awareness of emerging threats to a site, it commissions an official State of Conservation (SOC) report. The Advisory Bodies and the World Heritage Centre work together to draft SOC reports. These reports include draft decisions* which recommend what actions the Committee and States Parties should take to protect a site's value. This reactive monitoring mechanism* ensures awareness of emerging threats and enables swift responses to mitigate them.

For sites that have their value compromised, the Committee can make decisions which include technical recommendations to States Parties about how to preserve the threatened OUV. The Committee often recommends that States Parties follow the Advisory Bodies' technical recommendations from the SOC reports. These recommendations detail the necessary actions to restore the site's OUV. The Committee may also encourage a State Party to seek financial assistance from the World Heritage Fund for work connected with the restoration of the property.

When a site's OUV is severely threatened, the World Heritage Committee can also decide to inscribe it on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Inscription on this list is intended to increase international awareness of the threats and to encourage counteractive measures. For instance, it is meant to facilitate access to financial assistance and technical support for the development of an emergency conservation plan. In extreme circumstances, where OUV is irreparably affected, the Committee can decide to delist* the site from the World Heritage List altogether.

Through making these decisions, the Committee aims to decrease natural and mixed sites' exposure to threats and improve their management, thus fulfilling the mandate of the Convention. For example, the Committee's decisions regarding Mount Kenya National Park/Forest Reserve resulted in the State Party developing an action plan to mitigate the threats the site faced. This led to improvements in its management plan and resulted in a drastic decrease in illegal logging and marijuana cultivation (see *Case Study 1*).

CASE STUDY 1: MOUNT KENYA NATIONAL PARK / FOREST RESERVE

Country: Kenya
Inscribed: 1997

Mount Kenya National Park/Forest Reserve consists of Mount Kenya, the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and Ngare Ndare Forest Reserve. The site's afro-alpine flora provides an outstanding example of ecological processes, and it is home to the largest resident population of Grevy's Zebra in the world.



Mount Kenya is also regarded as a holy mountain by the local communities living next to it.²⁶

When the site was first proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List, the IUCN evaluation found that there were serious threats to the site. These included illegal logging and marijuana cultivation, particularly affecting the Forest Reserve. As a result, the nomination of the site was referred back to the State Party to outline the actions that they would take to mitigate these threats. The State Party responded with an action plan which included the provision of additional vehicles, increased patrols, community awareness projects, training of forest guards and a review of the policy affecting the adjacent forest reserve.²⁷ Based on these changes, the Committee inscribed the site in 1997 in line with IUCN's recommendations.

Social, environmental and economic implications of inscription

Within 5 years of inscription on the World Heritage List, there were drastic decreases in threats posed by illegal logging and marijuana cultivation. Camphorwood and cedar logging declined by 94% and 73% respectively in the 5 years following inscription, and there was an 81% decrease in the number of marijuana fields.²⁸

Inscription on the World Heritage List also led to improvements in site management. World Heritage site status formally united Mt Kenya Forest Reserve and Mt Kenya National Park. Prior to inscription, the division of responsibilities between the different organizations managing these areas frequently led to conflicts about the right conservation approaches. Since inscription, both management organizations have worked together closely under overarching management planning frameworks, which has strengthened the conservation status of the site and contributed to threat mitigation.^{29,30}

World Heritage status has also reduced the pressure placed on valuable resources of the site, including its water and energy sources. Inscription on the World Heritage List enabled the establishment of community management initiatives, which have led to improved land use through contract farming, the usage of alternative energy sources, the resolution of water use conflicts, and improved community water resource management.³¹

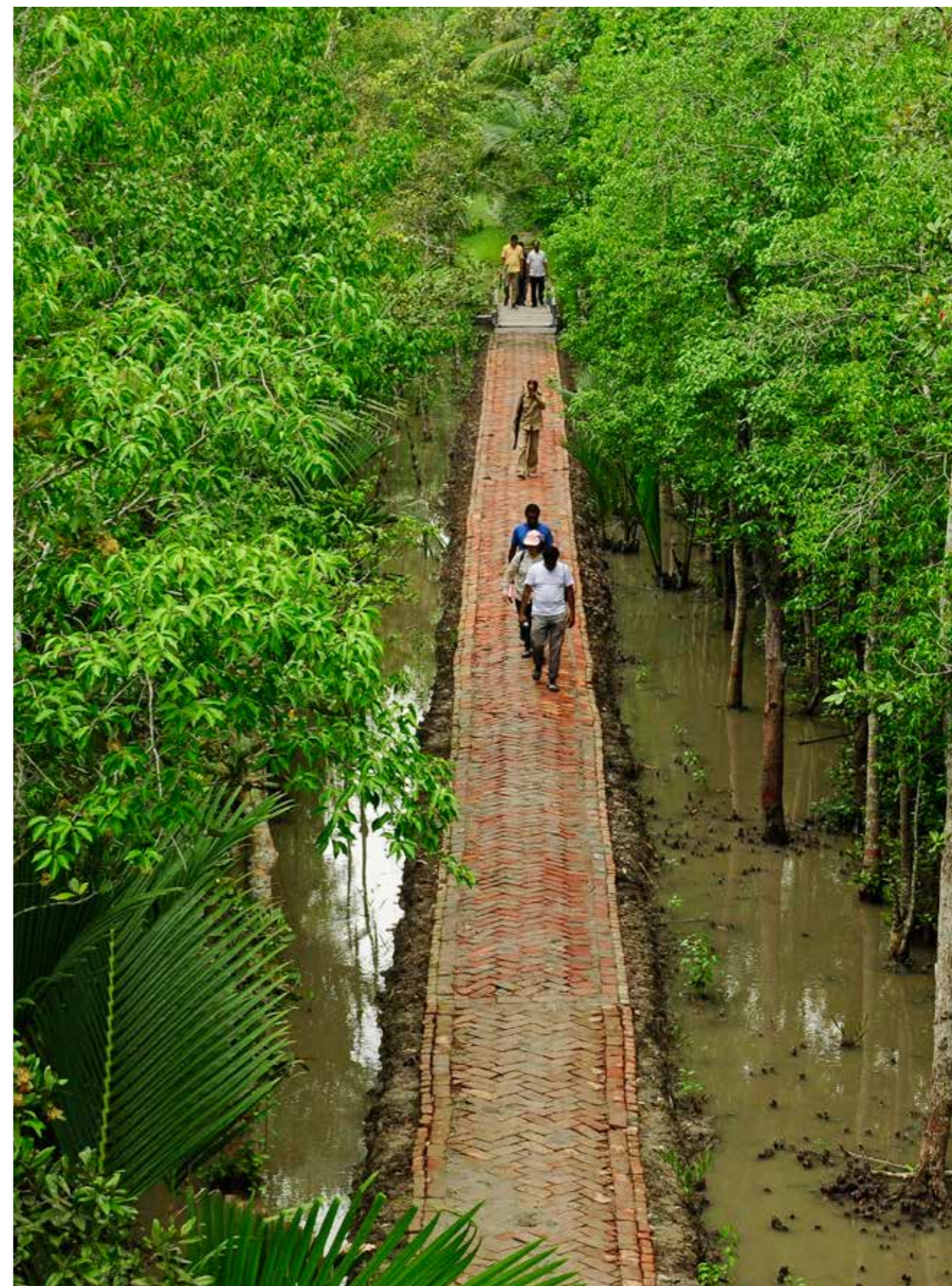


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Before making decisions about nominations and preservation interventions, the Committee members review draft decisions authored by Advisory Bodies. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)* supports the Committee by evaluating natural nomination dossiers, as well as the natural component of mixed sites, and recommending one of four options in draft decisions: to not inscribe, to defer, to refer or to inscribe a property on the World Heritage List.* IUCN also helps the Committee preserve the OUV of existing sites by working with the World Heritage Centre to draft SOC reports.* These reports include technical recommendations, as well as recommendations on the inscription, consideration or delisting of sites from the List of World Heritage in Danger.* The IUCN's draft decisions regarding nominations and required conservation actions are normally published publicly six weeks before the annual Committee meeting, although this process is often delayed.^{32,33} Publishing the draft decisions in advance gives the Committee members sufficient time to understand each decision and to propose amendments.* Committee members submit their amendments in advance to allow other Committee members to assimilate the content, although the Committee also accepts last minute submissions regarding proposed amendments to draft decisions. These proposed amendments are presented publicly at the plenary session of the annual Committee meeting but are not systematically shared publicly in advance of this.³⁴

At the annual Committee plenary session, the Committee makes its final decisions* regarding nominations and required conservation action. The Committee can decide to accept the IUCN's draft decision or accept an amended decision following discussion. The Committee discusses all nominations and proposed amendments to nominations individually. The Committee does not discuss all SOC reports but must discuss all reports regarding inscriptions and removals from the List of World Heritage in Danger, as well as any reports with proposed amendments to the draft decisions.³⁵ If a SOC report is not discussed at the plenary session, the draft decisions are automatically adopted. No amendment can be made to a recommended decision without it being discussed at the Committee.

Regarding issues discussed during plenary sessions, the Committee ultimately reaches its decisions through consensus, which is often built in side-events. According to the Rules of Procedure, all Committee decisions require a two-thirds majority of Committee members present and voting.³⁶ However, in practice, explicit voting is very rare. The Committee generally makes decisions by consensus following both informal meetings during Committee side-events and formal discussions at the plenary session.^{37,38} The final decisions are made during the plenary session.



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THE CHALLENGE

POLITICIZATION OF
THE WORLD HERITAGE
COMMITTEE IS
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THE CONVENTION



POLITICIZATION OF THE WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE IS PREVENTING EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONVENTION

For the World Heritage Committee to effectively oversee the implementation of the Convention, it should rely on the evidence provided by the Advisory Bodies and the World Heritage Centre. Formerly, the Committee has followed expert advice, and the World Heritage Convention has served as an effective conservation tool. For instance, from 1979 to 1991, States Parties regularly requested inscription of sites onto the List of World Heritage in Danger because inscription enabled access to financial aid.³⁹ This allowed States Parties to resolve issues by adopting improved management mechanisms and mitigating threats. A case in point is the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in the United Republic of Tanzania, which was listed as in danger in 1984 because of the rapid deterioration of its OUV. By 1989, thanks to continuous monitoring and technical cooperation projects, the situation improved, and the site was removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger.⁴⁰

However, of late, the World Heritage Committee has let vested interests outweigh the conservation priorities of the Convention. Politicization is observed when political factors determine the Committee's final decisions on a site. Instead of adhering to evidence-based decision-making, the Committee has been influenced by political-economic factors, such as Committee membership or a State Party's diplomatic capacity (see Focus Box 1). Politicization is also reflected in the nature of the Committee member themselves. Instead of appointing heritage experts to represent them on the Committee, States Parties regularly appoint state ambassadors and politicians.⁴¹

Focus Box 1: Key political factors influencing the World Heritage Committee's decision-making



Membership on the Committee: Membership on the Committee has a positive and significant impact on the likelihood of having a site inscribed on the World Heritage List⁴²



Diplomatic capacity: The size of a State Party's delegation to the World Heritage Committee meeting is inversely associated with an inscription to the List of World Heritage in Danger⁴³



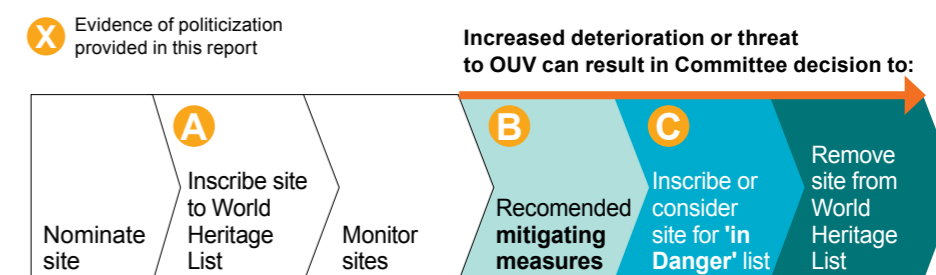
Alliance to voting blocs: Close economic and political ties between countries has a positive impact on the likelihood for allied countries express supportive statements about amendments to Advisory Bodies' recommendations⁴⁴

3 POLITICIZATION OF THE COMMITTEE IS VISIBLE AT THREE DECISION STAGES: NOMINATION, CONSERVATION RECOMMENDATIONS, AND INSCRIPTION ON THE LIST OF WORLD HERITAGE IN DANGER

The Committee's final decisions are being swayed by informal, diplomatic and bureaucratic strategies adopted by States Parties' when their objectives for a site are not compatible with the recommendations of conservation experts. For instance, the Committee used the lack of an invitation by the Ethiopian State Party for a reactive monitoring mission to justify repeated delays in inscribing Lake Turkana National Parks to the List of World Heritage in Danger (see Case Study 5). This politicization means that the technical discussions occur infrequently at the Committee plenary sessions. For example, the fact that a site was the only nomination from a given region in a given year has been used recurrently by the Committee as a reason for inscribing sites against the advice of the Advisory Bodies.⁴⁵

Politicization of the World Heritage Committee regarding natural and mixed sites is particularly visible at three distinct stages of decision-making: nomination, conservation recommendations, and inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger list (see Figure 3). At all these stages, the Committee has regularly upgraded* and downgraded* the technical recommendations put forward by the Advisory Bodies. In some cases, these amendments might be based on technical inaccuracies. However, in many cases, these amendments are driven by political trade-offs made by Committee members outside the formal sessions of the Committee.^{46,47} Evidence of politicization is shown below through a detailed analysis of draft and adopted decisions over the 2014-2018 period.

Figure 3: Key steps of the World Heritage process analyzed in this report

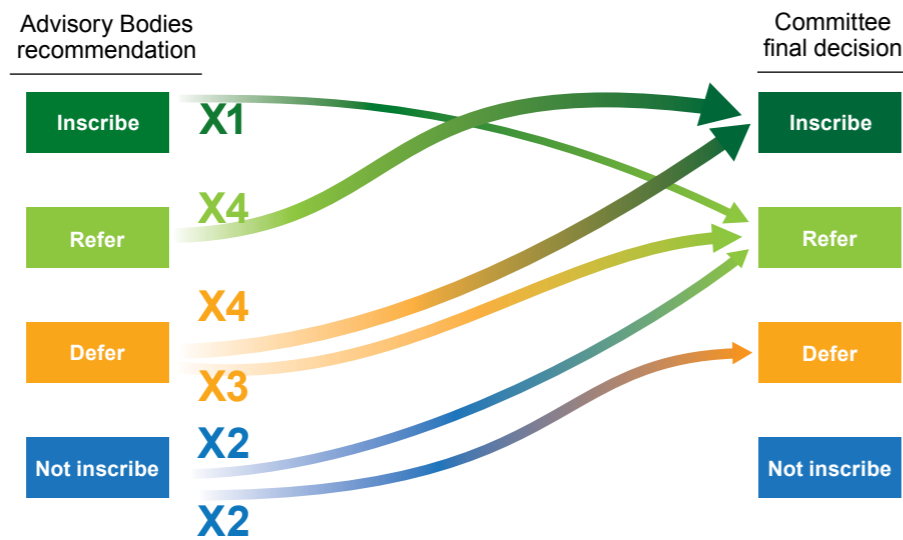


A) NOMINATIONS

At times, States Parties lobby for the inscription of their sites on the World Heritage List despite sub-standard nomination dossiers or conservation capabilities. Some States Parties lobby for the inscription of their sites on the World Heritage List in the hope that it may bring tourism revenues since inscription is seen as an international label to market properties as tourist destinations.⁴⁸ Often, however, the proposed nomination dossiers for which States Parties advocate are not optimized for conservation purposes. This means that some nominations are crafted to allow for industrial activities instead of having value-based boundary design and management plans. For instance, the boundary design of Ennedi Massif is determined by the oil exploration and exploitation rights that the government of Chad granted in the area (see Case Study 2).⁴⁹ It is worth noting that poor compliance with integrity, management and protection standards are not systematically the result of poor design but may reflect the lack of economic resources and capabilities from the least developed States Parties.

Since 2014, 46 per cent of the Committee's nominations decisions did not align with the evidence provided by the Advisory Bodies. The majority of these decisions were upgrades with respect to what the Advisory Bodies had recommended. This means that out of 24 sites inscribed over the 2014-2018 time period, eight sites were inscribed while the Advisory Bodies recommended deferral or referral of their nominations (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Breakdown of the changes the Committee made to the Advisory Bodies' recommendations regarding nominations of sites to the World Heritage List (2014-2018)⁵⁰



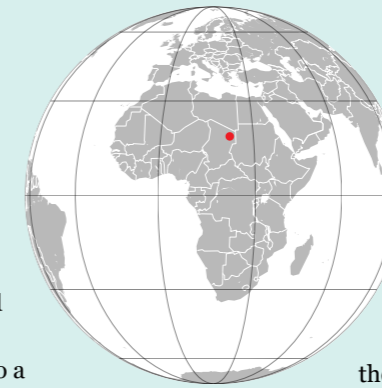
In particular, the Committee has disregarded the need for World Heritage sites to meet the protection, management and integrity standards as defined by the Convention. For instance, a comparison of sites inscribed against the advice of the Advisory Bodies (upgraded sites) and those inscribed following expert advice (not upgraded sites) shows there is a significant gap in conservation standards (Figure 5). For instance, while 88 per cent of not upgraded sites met the criterion of proper site management, only 25 per cent of upgraded sites did. As shown on page 22, this gap is broad for all crucial conservation requirements such as appropriate management of the site, the existence of an adequate buffer zone or sufficient legal protection.

By overlooking the UNESCO integrity, management and protection nomination standards, the Committee limits the effectiveness of the World Heritage Convention as a conservation tool. For instance, in 2016 when the Committee upgraded the IUCN's recommendation from deferral to inscription of the Western Tien-Shan to the World Heritage List, the design of the property did not effectively protect the site's biodiversity.⁵¹ The fragmentation of the property into multiple unconnected geographical areas did not provide appropriate levels of protection for the endangered snow leopard that requires a large interconnected territory for survival.⁵² By inscribing sites prematurely in this way, the Committee does not contribute to increasing the protection of the OUV of the site. Moreover, sites attaining World Heritage status without adequate protection and management may even lead to quicker degradation of their value. In some cases, the increased visibility of a nominated site may increase pressure from tourism,⁵³ requiring adequate processes to maintain the site. While nomination may increase pressure on the site, it does not necessarily entail additional support to its conservation effort, as only 20% of the World Heritage Fund is directed to activities taking place after inscription.⁵⁴

46%
SINCE 2014, 46 PER CENT OF THE COMMITTEE'S NOMINATIONS DECISIONS DID NOT ALIGN WITH THE RECOMMENDATIONS PROVIDED BY THE ADVISORY BODIES

CASE STUDY 2: ENNEDI MASSIF

Country: Chad
Inscribed: 2016
Draft decision 40COM: Defer
Adopted decision 40COM: Inscribe



Ennedi Massif is located in the eastern part of the Sahara, in a mountainous area featuring a rapid climatic transition in the space of a few kilometres, which gives rise to a unique ecosystem. An island of biodiversity in the Sahara, the site is home to a range of subtropical, Sahelian and relict species. For instance, Guelta Archei is home to a small population of relict crocodiles and, in the Maya gorge, 44 per cent of trees are relict species.⁵⁵

In 2016, the IUCN recommended the deferral of site nomination, largely because last minute changes in the site boundaries excluded areas of significant OUV and impacted the integrity and effective management of the property. The changes were motivated by the fact that oil exploration and exploitation rights had been granted

in the area.⁵⁶ Additionally, the IUCN also concluded that the management of the property was inadequate for inscription.

Disregarding the draft decision and analysis presented by the IUCN, the Committee decided to inscribe the site in 2016. Committee members disputed the IUCN analysis by stating how they considered that the changes in the boundaries would not affect the OUV.

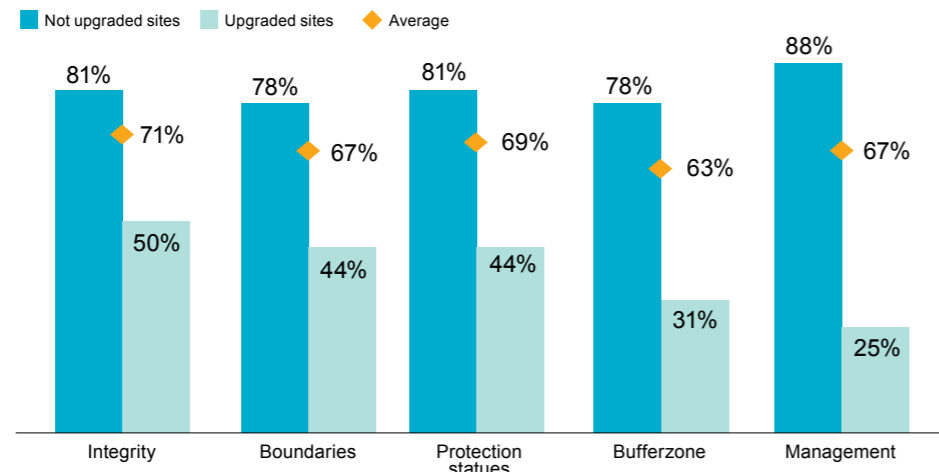
Additionally, five Committee members also expressed willingness to inscribe the site because it was the only dossier from Africa that year.⁵⁷

As of 2018, the State Party had yet to propose amendments to the site's boundaries to guarantee that all important areas were included.⁵⁸ Additionally, oil operations in the vicinity of the property continue to pose high potential threats to the value of the site. The management system and effectiveness remain of significant concern and are insufficient to protect the biodiversity values of the site.⁵⁹



25%
ONLY 25% OF
UPGRADED
SITES FULFILL
THE ADEQUATE
MANAGEMENT
CRITERION

Figure 5: Percentage of inscribed sites fulfilling conservation criteria, comparing Not upgraded sites and Upgraded sites (n=24, 2014-2018) ⁵⁰



B) MONITORING OF THREATS AND RECOMMENDED MITIGATING MEASURES IN SOC REPORTS

Politicization is also visible in the process through which the Committee monitors threats and provides technical advice to mitigate them. Once a site is inscribed on the World Heritage List, the Committee may commission a SOC report if it becomes aware of an emerging threat. In this case, States Parties may lobby to weaken the conservation actions requested by the Committee in the SOC report. This can be done to limit the accountability of the State Party to either the Committee or to civil society organizations following the Committee’s decision. It may also be a way to delay or avoid eventual inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger, or to limit publicity around industrial activities in the vicinity of the site that risk causing environmental damage.⁶⁰

Frequently over the past five years, the Committee has diluted draft conservation decisions put forward by the Advisory Bodies. For instance, following lobbying from the Bulgarian delegation, instead of upholding the standards of protection recommended by the IUCN, the 2018 Committee decided to make requirements of a strategic environmental assessment (SEA)* for Pirin National Park’s new management plan conditional on the verdict of the Bulgarian Supreme Administrative Court (see Case Study 3).

When weakening the technical advice offered in SOC reports, the Committee delays responses to threats and deteriorates the effectiveness of the Convention as a conservation tool. For instance, following pressure from the Russian delegation in 2010, the Committee removed the request for the State Party to rescind changes in Lake Baikal’s management plan that permitted the disposal of wastewaters into the lake. Not amending the draft decision would have put pressure on the State Party to backtrack on its management plan. This could have helped keep the Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill closed, thus avoiding the three years of environmental degradation that ensued from the management plan change (see Case Study 6).

CASE STUDY 3: PIRIN NATIONAL PARK

Country: Bulgaria
Inscribed: 1983
Draft decisions 42COM: New management plan should be guided by SEA
Adopted decisions 42COM: New management plan should be guided by SEA, if the Bulgarian Supreme Administrative Court concurs

Pirin National Park is a World Heritage site that spreads over the Pirin Mountains in southwest Bulgaria. The site comprises diverse limestone landscapes with caves, waterfalls and glacial lakes, as well as a natural coniferous forest. Pirin is a good example of the continuing evolution of flora, with over 1,315 species of vascular plants. The fauna includes 45 mammal species, such as the brown bear, wolf, and pine marten.⁶¹

World Heritage Committee decision-making regarding the new management plan and changes to the current plan has been politicized. In 2014, the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water proposed a new draft management plan that included the extension of the zone where ski facilities could be built to an area 12.5 times larger than currently allowed, including within the site’s buffer zone as well as the World Heritage property itself.⁶² In 2016, the Committee amended the draft decision, diluting a firm requirement for the State Party to carry out a strategic environmental assessment (SEA) to guide and inform the new management plan.⁶³ Instead, it added a weak reference to the “procedures for SEA and Appropriate Assessment (AA)*.”⁶⁴ In 2017, the ministry concluded that the new plan did not require a full SEA, despite the significant changes compared to the current plan. The move disregarded the decisions made by the 38th Committee decision, as well as the Bulgarian Environmental Protection Act and the Biodiversity Conservation Act. In 2017, the ministry’s decision not

to carry out a SEA was disputed in court by a network of conservation organizations.⁶⁵ Subsequently, in 2018, following lobbying from the Bulgarian delegation (whose attendants/components included the deputy prime minister of Bulgaria), the Committee amended the draft decision so that the requirements of a SEA for the new management plan was dependent on the ruling by the Supreme Administrative Court of Bulgaria.⁶⁶ Before this, the draft decision reiterated that the new management plan should be based on a SEA and had no reference to or conditionality on the decision of the Supreme Administrative Court.⁶⁷

The changes made by the Committee to the draft decision in 2018, indicate how politicization precludes the World Heritage Committee from imposing standards for securing the protection of World Heritage sites. If the court case had been lost, the Committee’s decision would not have helped preserve the OUV of Pirin National Park. Although the Supreme Court ruling at a first instance reinforced the requirement to carry out a SEA,^{68,69} the Committee placed the site at undue risk through its softening of technical recommendations. Beyond the expansion of the ski zone, which would have required the felling of about 3,000 hectares of forest, the new plan also allowed increased logging in 60 per cent of the national park. Together, this would compound existing deterioration to the park’s ecosystem services due to deforestation and soil erosion, which have already caused depreciation of the value of the park. For instance, recent landslides and floods have caused severe damage to buildings, infrastructure and agricultural areas in the nearby town of Bansko.⁷⁰



14
OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS, THE COMMITTEE HAS PREVENTED FOURTEEN INSCRIPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE LIST OF WORLD HERITAGE IN DANGER

C) INSCRIPTIONS TO THE LIST OF WORLD HERITAGE IN DANGER

Decisions regarding the List of World Heritage in Danger have also been politicized, with States Parties advocating strongly to ensure that their sites remain off given the negative connotations associated with inscription. The in danger status was intended to support authorities in dealing with the conservation of a site under threat, but over time, it has become a status that governments want to avoid. Inscription on the list is seen as bad publicity by many governments, as it may hurt the local tourism industry or project an unflattering image of the country.

Since 2014, the Committee has downgraded seven per cent of draft decisions regarding consideration or inscription of sites onto the List of World Heritage in Danger. Downgraded sites are sites that should have been considered for, or added to, the list according to the Advisory Bodies, but where the Committee amended the draft decision to avoid inscription or consideration. The detailed breakdown is shown in Figure 6 below. Although here the focus is on additions to the List of World Heritage in Danger, there are also cases where sites were removed from the list against the advice of Advisory Bodies, for instance with Simien National Park in Ethiopia.⁷¹

Over the last five years, the Committee has prevented fourteen inscriptions and considerations for the List of World Heritage in Danger across eleven sites. Eight sites went on to be inscribed or considered in the future regardless given continued or increasing threats. For instance, in 2016, Poland gave assurances that the threats posed to Bialowieza Forest would be mitigated, so the Committee amended the draft decision, which had requested a reactive monitoring mission and suggested that the site be considered for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger. However, given continued threats to the OUV of the site, in 2017, the Committee was obliged to consider the site for inscription nonetheless (see Case Study 4).

Figure 6: Breakdown of the changes the Committee made to the Advisory Bodies' recommendations regarding site inscription or consideration for the List of World Heritage in Danger (2014-2018)⁵⁰



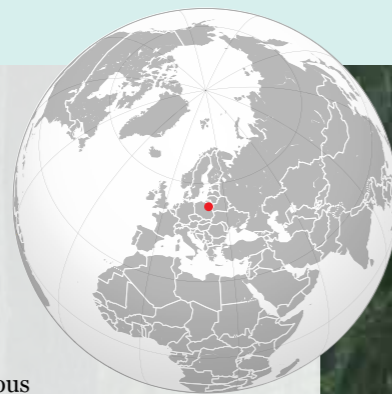
X3
THE COMMITTEE DELAYS SITE INSCRIPTION TO THE LIST OF WORLD HERITAGE IN DANGER, WITH THE AVERAGE SITE UNDER CONSIDERATION FOR THE LIST BEING CONSIDERED ALMOST THREE TIMES

In addition to amendments to draft decisions, politicization regarding the List of World Heritage in Danger is reflected in the evolving terminology used by the Committee to prevent and delay inscription. For instance, in 2004, the Committee introduced the option for site “consideration” for the List of World Heritage in Danger list (rather than just inscription, retention and removal). This option is now used as a delaying tactic to prevent the inscription of sites on to the list. Although in theory, consideration should result in either inscription or a clear assessment that the dangers have decreased, many sites are proposed for consideration multiple times without resulting in inscription. For instance, Dja Faunal Reserve in Cameroon has been considered for inscription five times since 2011 but has never been inscribed.⁷² Similarly, of 357 recent cases of consideration, these related to only 125 sites, suggesting that the average site under consideration is considered almost three times.⁷³ In addition to the use of consideration as a delaying tactic, the Committee has also started using new phraseology to prevent inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger. For instance, in 2018, following reports that The Ahwar of Southern Iraq faced increasing threats from water infrastructure and inadequate legal protection, the Committee decided that “this situation could represent a potential danger to the OUV of the property, in accordance with Paragraph 180 of the Operational Guidelines.” Paragraph 180 of the Operational Guidelines relates to the criteria for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger. First appearing in one decision in 2016, this language was found in five decisions by 2018. By removing explicit references to the List of World Heritage in Danger, the Committee weakens its statements regarding the threats facing sites, which can delay or even prevent inscription on the list.⁷⁴

By downgrading decisions regarding the List of World Heritage in Danger, and changing the terminology around it to prevent inscription, the Committee delays responses to key threats, putting the OUV of sites at risk. A case in point is the construction of the GIBE III dam in Ethiopia and its influence on Lake Turkana. The IUCN first recommended that Lake Turkana National Parks be inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2012, six years before the Committee finally decided to do so. During this period, dam construction was finalized and caused heavy damage to the ecosystem (see Case Study 5). The dynamics of the Bialowieza forest case are similar: delayed consideration for the List of World Heritage in Danger, and active lobbying for a downgrade allowed for intensive logging activities, which disrupted the ecological and natural processes of the site (see Case Study 4).

CASE STUDY 4: BIALOWIEZA FOREST

Countries: Poland, Belarus
Inscribed: 1972
Draft decision 40COM:
Consideration for List of World Heritage in Danger
Adopted decision 40COM: No mention of List of World Heritage in Danger



Bialowieza Forest is the last lowland deciduous and mixed old-growth forest in Europe. It is home to rare mammals such as the wolf, the lynx, and the otter, as well as Europe's largest bison population. In addition to its World Heritage site status, it is also designated as a Natura 2000 site and is protected by the EU Birds and Habitats Directives.⁷⁵

In 2016, the Advisory Bodies recommended that Bialowieza be considered for the List of World Heritage in Danger, but the Committee amended the decision to remove its consideration for the list.⁷⁶ The draft decision had raised specific concerns over a new forestry management plan that authorized a threefold increase in wood extraction and allowed active logging interventions in two-thirds of the forest districts.⁷⁷

The main justification for the amendments was not based on scientific evidence and proved to be weak. While suggesting the amendment, the Kazakh delegation argued that the State Party needed time to incorporate the recommendations of the Advisory Mission that took place in 2016.⁷⁸ One recommendation from the mission was to carry out a SEA of the management plans. The delegation also reiterated that Poland had a strong track record of implementing Committee decisions. Although by the subsequent Committee meeting the Polish State Party had submitted a SEA to the World Heritage Centre, the validity and legitimacy of its claims were questioned by the Advisory Bodies as well as by third parties. For instance, the IUCN debunked claims by the State Party that logging activities were limited to sanitary cuttings for the protection of natural habitat.⁷⁹ Similarly, the European Commission issued Poland with an infringement decision that indicated that increased logging was likely to cause irreparable biodiversity loss. Thus, in 2017, and in line with the Advisory Bodies' recommendations, the Committee eventually decided to consider the site for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger.⁸⁰

The delay in the Committee adopting recommendations proposed by the Advisory Bodies in 2016 contributed to the decline in OUV of the site. In 2018, the Reactive monitoring mission of Bialowieza Forest concluded that the widespread logging activities in the Polish side of the property had disrupted the ecological and natural processes in the property, resulting in negative impacts on the OUV. The mission noted that "it is clear that the logging activities and related wood removal in the partial protection zone II are contrary to the protection regime foreseen and documented in the 2014 nomination."⁸¹





THE RISKS

POLITICIZATION OF THE COMMITTEE'S DECISION-MAKING IS A RISK TO PRESERVING THE VALUE OF OUR HERITAGE

POLITICIZATION OF THE COMMITTEE'S DECISION-MAKING IS A RISK TO PRESERVING THE VALUE OF OUR HERITAGE

Politicization of the World Heritage Committee means that the conservation mandate of the Convention has been deprioritized over the economic and political interests of States Parties. Politicization of the Committee leads to the prioritization of these interests over the technical advice put forward by Advisory Bodies. This is reflected in the inscription of sites on the World Heritage List that do not meet the requisite integrity, protection and management standards. Thus, sites are inscribed without being optimized for conservation purposes and when suffering from poor design, or weak protection and management strategies. Similarly, political interests outweighing conservation interests is also visible in the softening of the language in SOC reports regarding required conservation measures, and in the evolving terminology used when referring to the List of World Heritage in Danger.

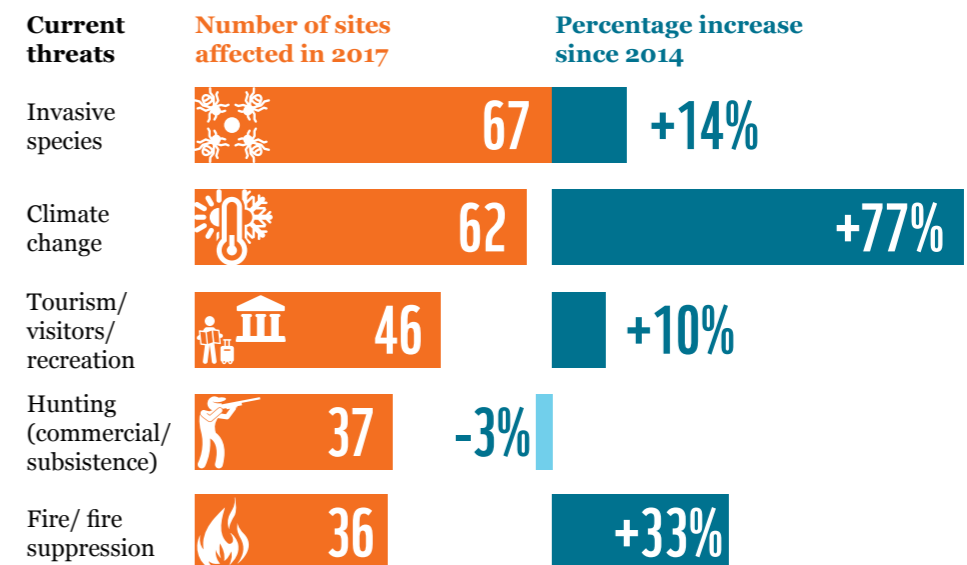
In the short term, this politicization is resulting in ineffective protection and management of natural and mixed World Heritage sites, as well as their increased exposure to threats. The inscription of substandard World Heritage sites results in failures to mitigate threats and effectively conserve the OUV of sites. Furthermore, the Committee's inscription of new sites to the World Heritage List against expert advice has resulted in so many new inscriptions that the Advisory Bodies and World Heritage Centre are overstretched and less able to support States Parties in protecting sites from emerging threats.⁸² Similarly, reduced accountability on States Parties and dampened awareness of conservation needs, which arise as a result of the Committee diluting the decisions on the SOC reports, also contribute to poor management and increased threat exposure.

For instance, the overall effectiveness of protection and management of natural and mixed sites has decreased since 2014. In 2017, the IUCN only rated 48 per cent of sites' activities as effective or highly effective, compared to 54 per cent in 2014.⁸³ Although many factors might have contributed to this decrease, it is at least partly attributed to increases in Committee politicization. From the 13 new natural and mixed sites inscribed on the World Heritage List between 2015 and 2017, the IUCN only assessed one site as having highly effective protection and management in 2017.⁸⁴ The Committee has contributed to this decrease in protection effectiveness through inscribing sites which do not meet the requisite management and protection standards and by downplaying conservation crises.

Additionally, natural and mixed World Heritage sites are now exposed to more threats than in 2014, especially from industrial activities and unsustainable tourism. Despite recent no-go commitments from a range of industries⁸⁵ and the positive industry response to WWF's 2016 Protecting People Through Nature report⁸⁶, World Heritage sites' exposure to current* and potential* threats continues to rise (see Figures 7 and 8). The potential threat posed by roads and railroads has increased by a staggering 83 per cent since 2014, while the threat from dams and water management systems has increased by 31 per cent.⁸⁷ The increase in threats from industrial activities partially reflects the deprioritization of conservation by States Parties and the Committee, since they are allowing these activities to take place within or near World Heritage sites.⁸⁸ For instance, the Ethiopian government

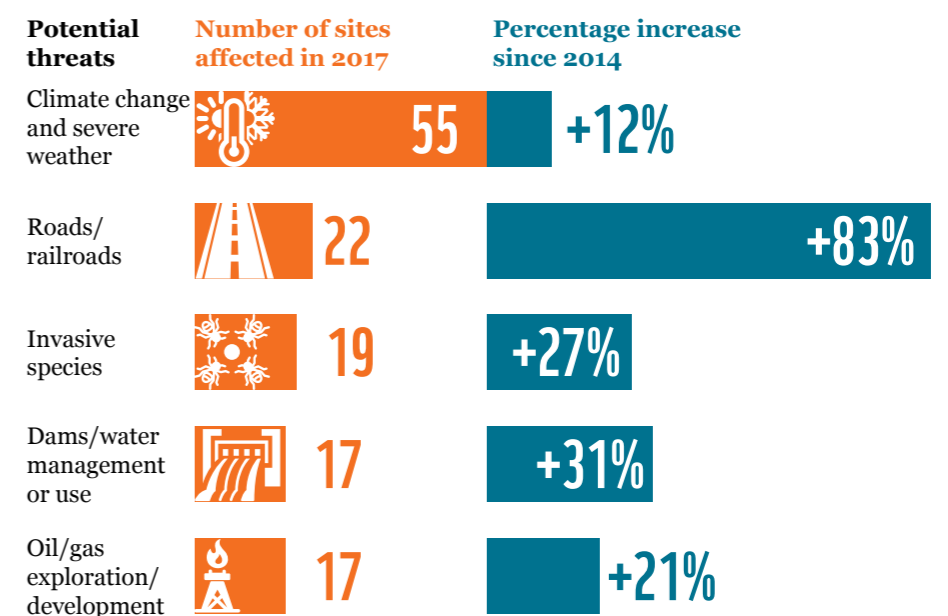
sanctioned the construction of a series of major hydropower dams and irrigated agricultural schemes, which has drastically increased threats facing Lake Turkana National Parks (see Case Study 5).

Figure 7: Top 5 current threats facing natural and mixed World Heritage sites (2017 vs 2014)^{83,89}



83% EXPOSURE TO THREATS IS RISING, WITH THE POTENTIAL THREATS POSED BY ROADS AND RAILROADS INCREASING BY 83 PER CENT SINCE 2014

Figure 8: Top 5 potential threats facing natural and mixed World Heritage sites (2017 vs 2014)^{83,89}



-6%
PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT OF SITES DECREASED BY 6 PER CENT BETWEEN 2014 AND 2017

CASE STUDY 5: LAKE TURKANA NATIONAL PARKS

Countries: Kenya, Ethiopia
Inscribed: 1997

Lake Turkana National Parks World Heritage property consists of Sibiloi National Park, Central Island National Park and South Island National Park, located within the Omo-Turkana Basin. As the largest permanent desert lake, the site is an outstanding laboratory for the study of plant and animal communities. Its shores are also home to the oldest known fossil remains of *Homo habilis*.⁹⁰

However, Lake Turkana and its nearby inhabitants now face an environmental catastrophe that could have been avoided. Developers have built a series of major hydropower dams and irrigated agricultural schemes on Ethiopia's Omo River, which accounts for 90 per cent of the lake's inflow. The World Heritage Committee first discussed the issue in 2011 when the site was considered for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger.⁹¹ At that stage, preparatory construction work for GIBE III, Africa's tallest dam, had started but funding had not been secured for all the infrastructure projects surrounding it.^{92,93} Against the advice of the IUCN, the Committee delayed the inscription of the site on the List of World Heritage in Danger until 2018.⁹⁴

Swift action by the World Heritage Committee could have called attention to these threats earlier, avoiding the negative impacts that are currently unfolding for people and the ecosystem upon which they depend.

Social, environmental and economic implications of increased threat exposure

Since 2015, the GIBE III dam's regulation of river flow has ended the annual flood pulse of the river, which was vital for people dependent on flood-retreat cultivation. This has increased food insecurity in the Lower Omo



region. Many people are now entirely dependent on rain-fed cultivation for crop production, which increases their vulnerability to droughts affecting southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya.⁹⁵

Furthermore, the dam's construction has led to declining lake levels, with the filling of the Gibe III reservoir reducing the water level of Lake Turkana by about 1.5 metres between January 2015 and January 2017.⁹⁶ It is expected that water extraction for irrigation will cause further declines in lake levels. This negatively impacts the estimated 300,000 people who directly depend on the lake's water for fishing, drinking water and livestock watering and grazing.⁹⁷

As a result, there have been sizeable reductions in areas available for fishing and fish breeding. For example, local fishers have experienced reduced fish catch in Ferguson's Gulf.⁹⁸ Recent studies project that the changes in water levels will reduce the productivity of Lake Turkana's fisheries by more than two-thirds.⁹⁹ If the lake levels decline further, this is likely to result in some areas drying up completely, with devastating effects on livelihoods for surrounding communities. Reduced water availability is also expected to threaten the livelihoods of herders in Kenya.¹⁰⁰ The declining lake levels have had broader impacts on food security in the region.

The construction of the dam has enabled the Ethiopian government to expand commercial farming in the area. This has required the resettling of communities out of the South Omo zone in order to clear land for farming, particularly for sugar plantations. According to researchers, residents have been forcibly evicted from their land, losing both their homes and their traditional way of life.¹⁰¹ The resettlement drive has also increased conflict in the region between indigenous groups and the Ethiopian government,¹⁰² as well as cross-border conflicts over increasingly scarce resources.¹⁰³



37%
OF SITES
INSCRIBED UNDER
BIODIVERSITY
VALUES HAVE
THEIR OUV
CLASSIFIED AS
'CRITICAL' OR 'OF
HIGH CONCERN'

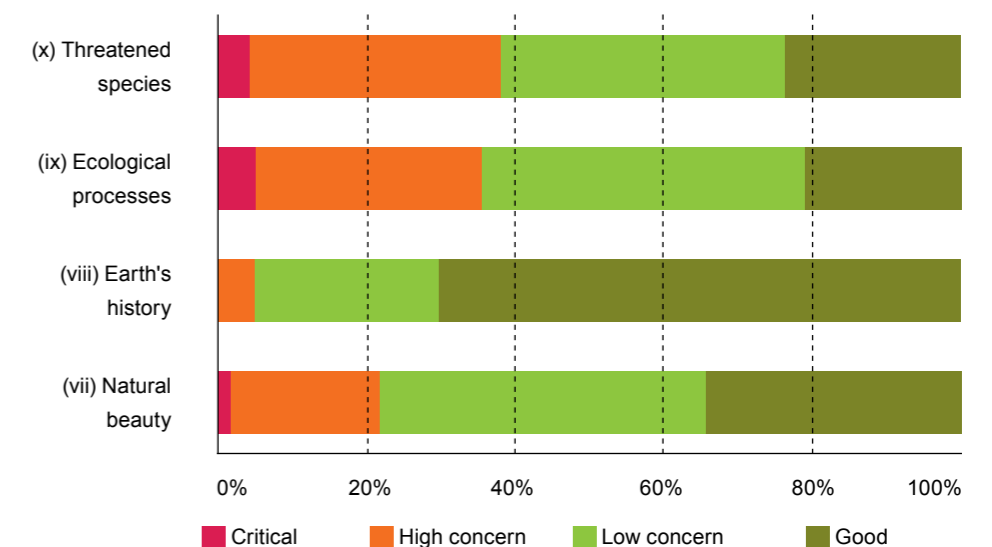
The combination of increasing threats and ineffective protection and management presents a risk to the OUV of natural and mixed sites.

Without adequate protective measures to mitigate increasing threats, they are already resulting in major disturbances to properties, some of which may be long-term or even permanent. Natural and mixed World Heritage sites inscribed under biodiversity values (threatened species and ecological processes) are the most threatened, with around 37 per cent of these sites categorized as critical or of high concern (see Figure 9).

Prioritizing short-term interests puts at risk the long-term environmental, social and economic benefits of sites. Without a strong response from the Committee to incentivize States Parties to improve their management strategies and mitigate threats, sites are less able to support local communities and ecosystems. The negative impacts of manmade threats are particularly acute with at least 11 million people currently dependent on sites that are threatened by harmful industrial activities.¹⁰⁴ These people depend on World Heritage sites for their homes, subsistence living, jobs, or ecosystem services including climate regulation and flood prevention. Without adequate site protection, these communities are exposed to economic, environmental and social risks. For instance, the re-opening of the Baikal Paper and Pulp Mill on the shores of Lake Baikal had devastating ecological effects on rare lake species and exposed the 13,600 people living in a nearby town to dangerous air pollutants (see Case Study 6).

Politicization of the Committee places the long-term credibility and effectiveness of the World Heritage Convention at risk. Politicization of the Committee decreases its ability to implement the Convention's mandate: to protect places containing the world's cultural and natural heritage from risks that threaten to destroy their value. This has a negative impact not only on the Committee's reputation but on the credibility of the Convention itself. In the past decade, the Committee has come under criticism from a range of stakeholders regarding how politicization of the decision-making process impacts its effectiveness as a conservation tool.¹⁰⁵ Losing the trust of States Parties and civil society organizations poses reputational and funding risks for the Convention, which could reduce its ability to protect the planet's biodiversity and natural heritage.

Figure 9: State of World Heritage values associated with different criteria of all 241 natural World Heritage sites in 2017⁸³



CASE STUDY 6: LAKE BAIKAL



Country: Russia
Inscribed: 1996

Lake Baikal, located in Siberia, is the deepest freshwater lake on the planet. It is home to more than 3,000 species of plant and animals, about 80 per cent of which are unique to its ecosystem. It also has unique features such as a freshwater sponge reef and freshwater hydrothermal vent fauna.¹⁰⁶

In the 2010 Committee meeting, politicization of the decision-making process enabled the re-opening of the Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill on the shores of Lake Baikal. The mill was initially closed in 2008, after 50 years of operations and 10 years of the World Heritage Committee expressing concern about it operating without a closed water cycle. However, in 2010, the State Party altered its internal management plan, which resulted in the reopening of the mill and the continued discharge of toxic wastewater.¹⁰⁷ At the 2010 Committee meeting, the IUCN proposed a draft decision recommending that the Committee “strongly urge” the State Party to rescind the management plan changes, which permitted the disposal of wastewater into Lake Baikal.¹⁰⁸ However, following reassurance from the State Party, which was also a member of the Committee at the time, the Committee amended the draft decision.¹⁰⁹ The Committee removed the reference to the need to rescind the changes to the management plan. Instead, it added a section “taking note” of the positive programs being implemented to address the issue of wastewater treatment.¹¹⁰

Social, environmental and economic implications

Although the mill was subsequently closed in 2013, the temporary reopening had serious environmental and social implications for the region, with the environmental damage amounting to around US\$1 billion.¹¹¹ The mill’s operations, including bleaching of pulp with chlorine, created several toxic by-products that adversely impacted the ecological balance between native Baikal plankton and other algae. The mill’s recent operations have also led to decreased biodiversity among the plankton populations.¹¹² Additionally, the reopening further increased the exposure of the endemic Baikal seal to high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls and dioxins, placing the health of the species at risk.

Even today, the region is still recovering from the negative impact of the mill. Sludge ponds with toxic by-products near the shores pose risks to the ecological balance of the World Heritage site and local residents.¹¹³ Similarly, two waste dumping grounds risk contaminating the groundwater in the area and the nearby Big Osinovka river.¹¹⁴

The mill also had direct negative effects on population of Baikalsk, which is around 13,600 people,¹¹⁵ who were exposed to considerable air pollution, including the toxic gas methanethiol.¹¹⁶ In some places, the levels of toxic gases were up to 10 times greater than safety limits. An increasing frequency of respiratory problems, especially amongst children, was attributed to the operations of the mill.¹¹⁷ Investigations have also shown negative impacts of these gases on human health issues including female reproductive health and carbohydrate metabolism.¹¹⁸



THE SOLUTION

A PATH TOWARD AN
EFFECTIVE WORLD
HERITAGE CONVENTION



A PATH TOWARD AN EFFECTIVE WORLD HERITAGE CONVENTION

Politicization is a barrier to the effectiveness of the Convention and is largely the result of its implementing structures, where States Parties have both executive and judiciary powers. States Parties, through representation on the Committee, both set the standards for inscription and conservation, and hold each other to account for enforcement of the Convention. With this conflation of executive and judiciary power, political trading is inevitable, especially with economic interests at stake. Decreasing politicization would entail separating the executive power of States Parties to the Convention from the judiciary powers of the Committee. However, this is not a feasible approach given that States Parties are unlikely to delegate fully to another decision-making entity.

With a degree of politicization unavoidable, the way forward is to mitigate the risk of politicization impacting the Committee's decisions and the Convention's effectiveness. Whilst this report shows that politicization is evident in the decision-making behavior of the Committee regarding natural and mixed sites, other studies have highlighted that politicization also affects cultural sites.^{119,120,121,122,123} Widespread politicization reflects the presence of broader misaligned incentives among all States Parties signatories to the Convention. Changes to the implementation of the World Heritage Convention are necessary to provide States Parties and the Committee with incentives to reprioritize the conservation of sites with OUV over national interests.

Strategic changes to the framing of the World Heritage Convention are required to emphasize its value and encourage States Parties and civil society organizations to re-engage with its mandate. It will be essential to reposition the Convention as a credible, necessary, and effective conservation tool in order to renew commitment to the Convention.

- 1. Reprioritize evidence-based decision-making.** Ensuring Committee decisions are based on evidence regarding how to preserve OUV, rather than the interests of States Parties, is essential to rebuild trust in the Convention. Doing so would bring back the balance between nomination and conservation activities. This, in turn, would help leverage additional conservation resources and promote increased engagement from civil society organizations and States Parties, both of which would further facilitate effective implementation of the Convention.
- 2. Highlight the environmental, social and economic benefits that World Heritage sites provide.** In the past, conservation efforts have been most effective in sites where grassroots groups and civil society organizations advocated for preservation based on the benefits that sites provide to local communities, and the implications of damaging them. Therefore, beyond valuing their OUV, carrying out a valuation of World Heritage sites on these same metrics can give States Parties the political mandate for conservation by making conservation politically sellable at the national level. Similarly, this systematic valuation technique can also give civil society organizations a way to hold States Parties accountable to their conservation commitments.

3. Back Committee decisions with access to conservation resources.

Reframing the List of World Heritage in Danger, and other conservation decisions made by the World Heritage Committee, as constructive mechanisms to improve conservation efforts, rather than judgment, will incentivize State Party engagement with the process. Beyond strategic rebranding of these mechanisms, this entails facilitating States Parties' access to resources following Committee decisions. This could include enabling access to a platform that enhances capacity building, knowledge transfer, and technical expertise, and facilitates access to financial resources.

- 4. Engage civil society organizations.** Increased engagement and buy-in from civil society organizations is a fundamental requirement for the Convention to remain credible and effective given the tendency for politicization inherent in the Convention's implementation. This is because these organizations play a critical role in promoting the other three strategic priorities proposed. For instance, their input in the Committee's decision-making process is essential to hold States Parties accountable and ensure decision-making remains evidence-based rather than being swayed by special interests. Civil society organizations will also help the Convention highlight the broader benefits sites provide local communities. Similarly, by enhancing the credibility of the Convention, increased buy-in from civil society organizations would help to build partnerships to support conservation and leverage the conservation resources required to implement Committee decisions.

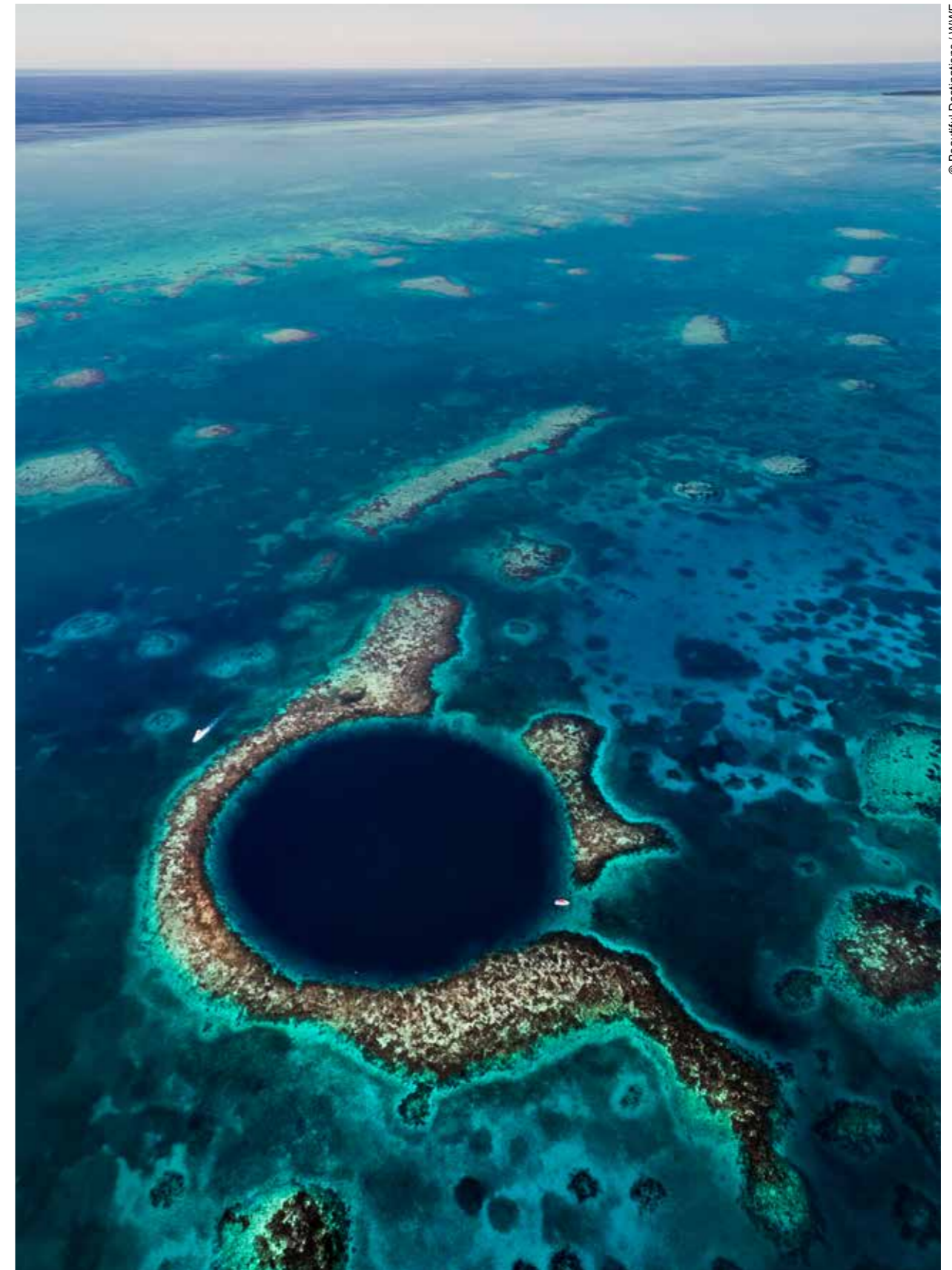
Tactical changes regarding the governance structures and processes guiding the implementation of the Convention are also needed to promote behaviors that better align with the Committee's and States Parties' mandates.

Although fully decoupling the executive power of States Parties from the judiciary powers of the Committee will not be feasible, making changes to the governance structures can help ensure decision-making by the Committee remains evidence-based. Similarly, amending the processes regarding how different entities implementing the Convention interact and operate can give room for increased transparency and accountability, which in turn incentivizes greater compliance.

- 1. Code of Conduct:** States Parties should agree on a set of guiding principles to govern their own decision-making, as well as that of the Committee members. This should include the principles previously highlighted in WWF's Protecting People Through Nature report.¹²⁴ This code should also include other principles such as commitments to follow integrity and ethical values, to ensure the eligibility of decision-makers, to ensure accountability of States Parties, and to abide by the Operational Guidelines.
- 2. Ensure the eligibility of Committee members:** Instead of electing States Parties to the Committee, then allowing each State Party to appoint an individual of its choosing, individual Committee members nominated by States Parties should be voted on to the Committee. This would help ensure the eligibility of decision-makers based on their technical expertise and a balance between natural and cultural heritage experts on the Committee. This would also increase the transparency surrounding nominees and bolster the accountability on States Parties regarding who they vote on to the Committee.
- 3. Justify and track amendments to draft decisions:** The World Heritage Committee should commission the development of a database that systematically tracks when the Committee makes an amendment to a draft decision and how it was justified (i.e. what new information prompted the change). This could build

on existing online resources such as the Advisory Bodies recommendations, the Committee's final decisions and the Summary Records* which show what happened at the meeting. The database should be made publicly available to increase transparency and accountability within the decision-making process.

4. **Enable accountability through civil society.** The Committee should give civil society organizations the same degree of opportunity to provide evidence on the state of conservation of sites as States Parties. Deadlines should be set and enforced for Committee members to propose amendments to draft decisions. The Committee should make these proposed changes and their justification systematically and publicly available for civil society to access. This will allow civil society to prepare, gather and submit relevant information about the proposed changes.
5. **Certification for protection and management:** The Committee should enable the labeling of each World Heritage site with its corresponding protection and management indicators. This would increase States Parties' accountability for maintaining OUV. These metrics could be included as part of the World Heritage label associated with each site, including on the UNESCO website and on State of Conservation reports. For natural and mixed sites, such a certification could build on similar ongoing efforts such as the IUCN Green List¹²⁵ or the World Heritage Outlook conservation reports.¹²⁶



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ANNEX

GLOSSARY (*)

Adopted/Final decision: is the final decision taken by the Committee at formal plenary session during the annual Committee meeting.

Advisory Bodies: refers to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, and/or the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property who provide the Committee with technical advice

Amendment: is a change to a draft decision proposed or made by the Committee. The Committee discusses all amendments at the plenary session during the annual Committee meeting.

Appropriate assessment (AA): is a tool recommended by the World Heritage Committee for States Parties and the Committee to evaluate the impact of a proposed plan or project on World Heritage sites. It is also relevant for EU-protected sites (Natura 2000 sites)

Civil society organizations: are organizations or groups which are separate from governments and businesses. Amongst others, this includes groups of indigenous peoples, community groups, not-for-profit organizations and academics.

Consideration (List of World Heritage in Danger): is a type of decision the Committee can make regarding sites inscribed on the World Heritage List. Following evaluation of site conservation through a SOC report, the Committee decides that the site's OUV might be threatened by serious and specific danger and so considers the site for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

Current threat: refers to an activity or occurrence that has an immediate apparent impact affecting a site's value.

Deferral: is a type of decision the Committee can make regarding a nominated site. Following evaluation of site nomination, the Committee decides to defer the nomination for a more in-depth assessment or study, or a substantial revision by the State Party, which can be resubmitted to the following Committee meeting for re-evaluation.

Delisting (World Heritage List): is a type of decision the Committee can make regarding an inscribed site on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Following evaluation of site conservation, the Committee decides that a site's OUV is irretrievably lost and delists the site from the World Heritage List.

Delisting (List of World Heritage in Danger): is a type of decision the Committee can make regarding an inscribed site on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Following evaluation of site conservation through SOC report, the Committee decides that a site's OUV is no longer threatened by serious and specific danger and so delists the site from the List of World Heritage in Danger.

Downgrade: is a decision amendment in which the Committee pushes a given site further away from nomination or inscription than was advised by the Advisory Bodies (e.g., a draft decision recommends inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger, and the Committee's adopted decision is not inscription on the list).

Draft decision: is the decision prepared by Advisory Bodies, which serves as a recommendation to the Committee about what actions should be taken regarding nominations and conservation.

Inscription (World Heritage List): is a type of decision the Committee can make regarding a nominated site. Following evaluation of site nomination, the Committee decides that the site possesses OUV and meets the UNESCO integrity, protection, and management standards and so inscribes the site on the World Heritage List.

Inscription (List of World Heritage in Danger): is a type of decision the Committee can make regarding an inscribed site. Following evaluation of site conservation through a SOC report, the Committee decides that the site's OUV is threatened by serious and specific danger and inscribes it on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN): is an organization which acts as the Advisory Body to the Committee on natural sites and the natural component of mixed sites.

Mixed World Heritage sites: are World Heritage sites that possess both natural and cultural OUV.

Outstanding Universal Value (OUV): is value which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity.

Potential threat: refers to a planned activity or evolving trend that could have a future impact on the value of a site if they materialize.

Reactive monitoring mechanism: is the reporting by the World Heritage Centre, other sectors of UNESCO and the Advisory Bodies to the World Heritage Committee on the state of conservation of specific World Heritage properties that are under threat. It is used in the procedures for the inclusion of properties in the List of World Heritage in Danger and for the removal of properties from the World Heritage List.

Referral: is a type of decision the Committee can make regarding a nominated site. It means the Committee decides to refer back to the State Party for additional information which can be resubmitted to the following Committee meeting for examination.

Serial site: is any property which consists of two or more unconnected geographical areas.

State of Conservation report (SOC report): is a report drafted by Advisory Bodies for World Heritage sites facing significant threats. The reports include draft decisions regarding required preservation actions, whether a site should be inscribed on the World Heritage List in Danger or whether a site should be delisted from the World Heritage List.

Statement of OUV: is a summary of the values under which a site was inscribed. It is used as a benchmark for assessing each site's state of conservation.

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA): is a tool often recommended by the World Heritage Committee to assess the environmental, social and economic impacts of new policies, plans, programs and strategies related to World Heritage sites.

Summary records: are the online documents which highlight what occurred at each Committee meeting.

Upgrade: is a decision amendment in which the Committee brings a given site closer to nomination or inscription than was advised by the Advisory Bodies (e.g. a draft decision regarding a given site nomination recommends referral, and the Committee's final decision is inscription on the World Heritage List).

ACRONYM LIST

AA: Appropriate assessment

IUCN: International Union for Conservation of Nature

OUV: Outstanding Universal Value

SEA: Strategic Environmental Assessment

SOC report: State of Conservation report

ENDNOTES

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- These amendments must be approved by States Parties at the General Assembly of States Parties, held every two years.
- The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the Advisory Body for natural sites and the natural component of mixed sites. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) are the Advisory Bodies for cultural sites and the cultural component of mixed sites.
- Recent Committee decisions have recognized the important contribution of civil society. Decision 41COM 7.40 'encourages States Parties and civil society organizations to continue exploring possibilities how civil society can further contribute to enhanced conservation of heritage on the site and national level and provide relevant input to the heritage related debate at the global level' (2017) (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/6940>)
- WHC. "Funding" (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/funding/>)
- Regional breakdown: 2 seats for Western Europe and Northern America, 2 seats for Eastern Europe, 2 seats for Latin America and the Caribbean, 3 seats for Asia and Pacific, 4 seats for Africa, 2 seats for the Arab States, and an additional seat shall be allocated for Latin America and Asia on a rotational basis.
- UNESCO. "The General Assembly of States Parties to the World Heritage Convention: Rules of Procedure." (2014) (<http://whc.unesco.org/document/134868>)
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- The General Assembly (Resolution 13 GA 9, paragraph 6) invites the States Parties to the World Heritage Convention to voluntarily reduce their term of office from six to four years.
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- See note 22.
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14

Over the last five years, the Committee has prevented fourteen inscriptions and considerations for the List of World Heritage in Danger

46%

46% of World Heritage Committee's nomination decisions regarding natural and mixed sites have gone against the advice of the IUCN since 2014



48%

The protection and management of World Heritage sites is declining, with only 48% of sites classified as effective or highly effective in 2017

83%

Exposure to threats is rising, with the potential threats posed by roads and railroads increasing by 83% since 2014

37%

37% of sites inscribed under biodiversity values have their OUV classified as 'critical' or 'of high concern'

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