World Heritage sites (WHS)

DEFINITION

A global list of internationally recognised sites of outstanding universal value to humanity.

DESCRIPTION

World Heritage sites are places on earth that are of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) to humanity and therefore, have been inscribed on the World Heritage List to be protected for future generations. Places as diverse and unique as the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, Galapagos Islands in Ecuador and the Grand Canyon in the USA are examples of places inscribed on the World Heritage List. The World Heritage Convention [1], which has been ratified by 191 countries, was adopted by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) General Conference in 1972, and came into force in 1975, for the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the world cultural and natural heritage. Under this international legal instrument, sites are nominated for inclusion on the World Heritage List [2], either for their natural or cultural values, or a mixture of the two. The secretariat to the World Heritage Convention is the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, whilst three organisations: International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) act as its Advisory Bodies. The Advisory Body on natural heritage is IUCN.

The World Heritage Convention defines 'natural heritage' as:

- Natural features consisting of physical and biological formations or groups of such formations, which are of Outstanding Universal Value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view;
- Geological and physiographical formations and precisely delineated areas which constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of Outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of science or conservation;
- Natural sites or precisely delineated natural areas of Outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty.

The 1972 UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, generally known as the World Heritage Convention and the 191 States Parties.

YEAR OF CREATION

1975

COVERAGE

Global system of 1,007 terrestrial and marine sites; 779 cultural, 197 natural and 31 mixed properties (recognised for both cultural and natural values) in 161 countries (Year: 2014). [2] New nominations are examined and approved to be inscribed on the List every year at the World Heritage Committee meeting.

CRITERIA

The criteria for a site to be included on the World Heritage List are determined by its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). OUV is achieved when a site both i) contains necessary attributes which will contribute to meeting at least one at least one out of the ten inscription criteria, and ii) meets conditions of integrity (and a condition of authenticity in relation to cultural sites). The condition of integrity is a measure of the wholeness and intactness of the site's heritage and its attributes that is established when an adequate and long term protection and management system are in place to ensure its safeguarding. Six inscription criteria relate to cultural heritage (i-vi) and four relate to natural heritage (vii-x). These are given below: [4]

i. Represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;
ii. Exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;
iii. Bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;
iv. Be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
v. Be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;
vi. Be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance;
vii. Contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;
viii. Be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;
ix. Be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;
x. Contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

Criteria ix and x are considered to be the key criteria related to biodiversity values.

MANAGEMENT

The identification and nomination of World Heritage sites is the responsibility of the States Parties. The protection and conservation of World Heritage sites (WHS) also falls under the duty of States Parties of the convention who, when nominating a site, must demonstrate appropriate policy, legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures are in place or proposed to protect the site. In addition to deciding on listing of World Heritage sites, the intergovernmental World Heritage Committee, the main body in charge of the implementation of the Convention carries out regular monitoring of listed World Heritage sites through a range of different processes, and also may provide international assistance under the World Heritage Fund. The World Heritage Convention sets out a detailed set of requirements that all States Parties must comply with, as well as operational guidelines outlining the process of inscription, monitoring and reporting of World Heritage Sites.

The Committee is also responsible for managing the 'List of World Heritage in Danger' [5] - a list of World Heritage properties threatened by serious or specific dangers, such as the threat of disappearance caused by accelerated deterioration, large-scale public or private projects or rapid urban or tourist development projects. The Committee may inscribe a site onto the List of World Heritage in Danger when it considers that focused attention on addressing pressing conservation matters is required. As an Advisory Body to the Committee, each year IUCN prepares State of Conservation reports for the World Heritage sites on the Danger List. On the basis of these reports, the Committee can take site-specific decisions and can request governments to take adequate conservation action.

From a business perspective, it is incumbent on the proponent of projects within, or near World Heritage sites to demonstrate that the site's OUV will not be negatively affected by the project. The processes of the Committee are specified in the 'Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention' [3], and extensive information is provided on the website of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. States are also requested to notify the Committee, through the Secretariat, of their intention to undertake or to authorize major restorations or new constructions which may affect the outstanding universal value of the property. Notice is requested to be given as soon as possible (for instance, before drafting basic documents for specific projects) and before making any decisions that would be difficult to reverse; so that the Committee may assist in seeking appropriate solutions to ensure that the outstanding universal value of the property is fully preserved.

BUSINESS RELEVANCE

Legal and compliance – Legal recognition and protection by national government is required for these sites. World Heritage sites also have direct recognition in international law that states that activities must not negatively affect sites' Outstanding Universal Value. As such, the World Heritage Committee has frequently set precedents to indicate that mining and hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation within World Heritage sites are considered to be incompatible with World Heritage status. [6] World Heritage sites have a high profile both in terms of the attention they are given through the World Heritage Convention by the international community, and through the monitoring processes operated by UNESCO, IUCN and the cultural advisory bodies to the Convention. These sites also attract considerable attention from the public locally and internationally and threats to them normally attract significant publicity.

Commitments to protect and conserve World Heritage sites have been made by a number of industry bodies, such as Shell, Total and the members of the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM) [7], who observe commitments to not mine or conduct extractive activities within World Heritage Sites. IPIECA, the global oil and gas industry association for environmental and social issues, also recognises

the World Heritage Convention as one of the five major conventions which serve as an international framework of reference for their engagement with biodiversity issues.[8] Despite these voluntary no-go commitments, in 2011 the World Heritage Committee decided to develop formal policy guidelines for the extractive industry in order to regulate the activities of extractive companies within World Heritage sites.[9] A 2013 study by UNEP-WCMC identified that 13 World Heritage sites had a mining or an oil/gas project within their boundaries or in close proximity (<1km).[10]

As protected areas under both national and international law, these areas are also referred to in the safeguard standards of a number of multilateral finance institutions, including the International Finance Corporation,[11] the European Investment Bank,[12] the Asian Development Bank,[13] the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development,[14] and the Inter-American Development Bank.[15] Such standards often require that no project activities are acceptable within these areas unless they do not adversely impact the area and are compatible with the conservation aims of the protected area. In cases where projects are eligible for funding, additional requirements often apply, including consultation with and informed consent by stakeholders and managers, as well as the implementation of additional programs to enhance the conservation aims of the protected area. These standards refer to those that have been designated as well as areas officially proposed for protection. In addition, World Heritage sites are specifically referred to in a number of certification schemes including the Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels[16] and the Responsible Jewellery Council[17] that declare these sites as no-go areas. The wider list of standards and certification schemes that refer to protected areas also apply to these sites (see information on Protected areas for more information).

Biodiversity importance – World Heritage sites that are listed under criteria ix and x (see above) are expressly designated for their biodiversity values, and thus can be expected to have high levels of biodiversity, and be identified as global conservation priorities. World Heritage sites identified under other criteria (including the six cultural criteria) though not identified as being of OUV for biodiversity, may nevertheless be areas of high biodiversity, with significance at regional, national and/or local levels. UNEP-WCMC carries out a comparative analysis of all new nominations under biodiversity criteria to inform IUCN's recommendations to UNESCO. The criteria contain aspects of both irreplaceability and vulnerability of species and habitats and sites inscribed for the conservation of biodiversity are strictly monitored to ensure continued integrity of these Outstanding Universal Values. As site-scale areas of biodiversity importance, World Heritage sites are therefore of high relevance for business in terms of avoiding risk from biodiversity loss and identifying opportunity associated with biodiversity conservation.

Socio-cultural values – WHS can be of significant global, national and local socio-cultural importance, based on the cultural inscription criteria i-vi. Many of these sites are therefore significant for local livelihoods and traditional practices and rights of the local people, along with those that hold global cultural value. Sites inscribed under these OUVs are strictly monitored to ensure continued integrity and authenticity of these values. Furthermore, World Heritage sites are important for the tourism industry. The number of tourists within a country has been found to increase with the number of World Heritage sites found within the country, indicating the importance of these sites as international tourist attractions.[18]

REFERENCES & WEBSITE

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The Golden Mountains of Altai World Heritage Site, Russia. Aibolit/Shutterstock.com

Category:

Protected areas

Related pages

World Heritage Convention (WHC) (Terms)

Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) (Terms)

Natural heritage (Terms)

Tools

Protected Planet is a tool for visualizing information on protected areas at the site level, country level, regional level and global level. This includes information on the IUCN category where known. Protected Planet brings together spatial data, descriptive information and images from the World Database on Protected Areas, Wikipedia TM and Panaramio TM.

The Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool (IBAT) provides a visualisation and GIS download tool for World Heritage Sites.

Links

UNESCO World Heritage Centre

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