



WORLD HERITAGE AT 50: POLICY AND PRACTICE – KEY ACHIEVEMENTS AND MAJOR CHALLENGES

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Introduction

The 1972 World Heritage Convention is the most universal legal instrument in heritage conservation with 194 States Parties, more than 1000 natural and cultural heritage sites protected for their Outstanding Universal Value and a well-established system of monitoring and reporting. It is therefore a great pleasure for me to celebrate the achievements of this unique Convention with stakeholders.

At the same time a number of challenges in terms of policy and practice have to be discussed and addressed and I will share with you my reflections of 30 years working within the World Heritage system. This is also unique and brings to you a specific lens through the viewpoint from the UNESCO Secretariat but also as researcher on the UNESCO and World Heritage history of the past decades.

Global Strategy and analysis of the List

The most visible part of the World Heritage system is the World Heritage List: it may well be that it is the key to the global success, the awareness about this instrument and at the same time one of its key challenges. It made millions of people aware of the value of their own heritage, it made communities stronger in safeguarding places, it brought (mass) tourism to World Heritage site, it involved politicians, local and national administrations and established as global network of monitoring and – perhaps most importantly – established a discussion forum for policies among experts in both natural and cultural heritage fields – another unique feature. They focused on

World Heritage conservation, that is the protection and safeguarding of specific properties nominated by States.

The List is today the reflection of the proposals by Nation States over the past 45 years, starting from the first inscriptions, the first 12 sites included on the World Heritage List in 1978.

The situation analysis of the List (as of 2022) is quite revealing for Europe (47% of the List) and the rest of the world, especially Africa (8,5%) and ARB (7,5%). The discussions on Eurocentrism have not begun yesterday, but decades ago. As a matter of fact, questions of balance, especially between natural and cultural heritage came up early on. *“The creators of the World Heritage Convention envisaged a highly selected list of sites that could meet the demanding threshold of outstanding universal value”*¹. It was unfortunate from today’s perspective that listing started without the requirement of national Tentative Lists despite the clear provisions of the Convention for national inventories.

Tab. 1 Overview of the World Heritage List by Region (as of 2021)

| Sites per region | States with properties |
|--|------------------------|
| Latin America and the Caribbean 146 (12,65%) | 28 |
| Europe and North America 545 (47,23%) | 50 |
| Asia Pacific 277 (24%) | 36 |
| Arab States 88 (7,63%) | 18 |
| Africa 98 (8,49%) | 25 |

So, what happened in the 1970s and 1980s? European States ratified early, had legal protection in place, as well as the capacity to prepare nomination files with required documentation and based on research. There was also a growing and broader awareness of Convention and its beneficial provisions, increasingly also mounting interests by tourism- and other economic sectors in World Heritage places. The countries appreciated the global recognition and decision making and five European States did not stop nominations despite policies which were put into place. This concerns especially paragraph 59 of the Operational Guidelines which reads *“To promote the establishment of a representative, balanced and credible World Heritage List, States Parties are requested to consider whether their heritage is already well represented on the List and if so, to slow down their rate of submission of further nominations...”*².

In the following table you can see the situation analysis for 5 European States that have a total of 240 properties! They also show an early ratification, a high number of sites on their Tentative Lists and a relatively high number of mandates in the World Heritage Committee.

¹ Cameron Ch., Rössler M., *Many Voices, One Vision: The Early Years of the World Heritage Convention*, Farnham: Ashgate/Routledge 2013, p.48.

² UNESCO, *The Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, 2021, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/>

Tab. 2 Situation analysis with regard to the 5 European States with the highest number of sites (2021)

| State | Ratification | Sites (TL sites) | Committee Membership Mandates |
|----------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| France | 1975 | 49 (34) | 5 |
| Germany | 1976 | 51 (8) 1 Delisted | 4 |
| Italy | 1978 | 58 (31) | 5 |
| Spain | 1982 | 49 (31) | 3 |
| United Kingdom | 1984 | 33 (9) 1 Delisted | 1 |

It is clear that a number of provisions were not implemented (early) enough, including the obligation for (updating) Tentative Lists, prepare comparative analysis at early stages, collaboration including transnational/transboundary sites, and the application of other policies such as the Global Strategy of 1994 in view of the diversity of topics, themes and types of sites and especially the Harmonisation of Tentative Lists within (sub)regions).



Fig. 1 Chinese cartoon on the submission of nominations to the Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, © CHCC/Yunpei Gu 2021

Over the years, there was a major focus by States Parties towards more nominations and less on conservation activities. Nominations were processed often from a purely national (and sometimes local) perspective, and less from a global perspective with sound comparative analysis, full involvement of communities and integration of new and emerging policies adopted by the World Heritage Committee.

As the document presented to the World Heritage Committee in 2021 on the analysis of the Global Strategy illustrated: it was misunderstood for a free ticket to new nominations from already well-represented countries and regions and less as an instrument to collaborate with the Global South towards the inclusion of underrepresented types of sites or to overcome the imbalance of regions and subregions of the world. It is clear that there will never be an 'equal' geographical distribution of sites in terms of the terrestrial surface (or marine areas under national jurisdiction), as the basis of the Convention is the identification of Outstanding Universal Value. However, little efforts were made to support the Global South with research and focused projects and assistance towards comparative studies and management planning. This led to numerous debates in the World Heritage Committee and to a discourse on postcolonialism and heritage³. Odiava and Webber concluded: "*The World heritage convention is an instrument that is mostly used for the celebratory recognition of diversity and heritage. To most governments it is seen as an instrument of recognition, rather than as a conservation and management tools and in this regard, it can clearly be seen as a success of the Convention itself*"⁴. There are a number of publications which review the inscription process at the World Heritage Committee itself, for example Bertacchini, analysed politization and lobbying over a number of years and conclude that "*deliberations over the inscription of sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List has reached a level of politicization similar to that of other UN fora*"⁵.

Conservation – the core of the Convention

The key of the Convention is protection - as already indicated in the title of this legal instrument, conservation and management of the sites of Outstanding Universal Value. The question is whether the provisions both in the Convention and Operational Guidelines were implemented properly over time. The answer is complex and some elements can be found when you ask these following questions:

³ Von Schorlemer S., *UNESCO-Weltkulturerbe und postkoloniale Diskurse. Eine völkerrechtliche Betrachtung*, Baden Baden 2022.

⁴ Odiava I., Ndoro W., *World Heritage and development: is UNESCO a barrier or facilitator and do African opinions matter?*, [in:] *Cultural Heritage Management in Africa, The Heritage of the Colonized*, G. Okello Abungu, W. Ndoro (eds), 2022, pp. 173 -188.

⁵ Bertacchini E., Liuzza C., Meskell L., Saccone D., *The politicization of UNESCO World Heritage decision making The politicization of UNESCO World Heritage decision making. Public Choice*, 2016, pp. 95–129, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-016-0332-9>

- Do we have best practice management at all World Heritage sites?
- Is there continued research carried out and monitoring to observe trends towards an analysis of key threats, including their documentation over time?
- Is paragraph 172 of the Operational Guidelines taken seriously by all States Parties. In essence are reports by States sent to UNESCO World Heritage Centre prior to any major projects or works at a World Heritage property?

The answer to all three questions is no. While there are some best practice examples among a few World Heritage properties, most sites have issues with effective management, and forward-looking monitoring which takes into account climate change and other trends observed. Most importantly, there are very few States Parties which take paragraph 172 seriously and inform the World Heritage Centre in advance of projects envisaged. This would avoid serious issues which need to be brought forward to the World Heritage Committee for decisions.

There are, however, a number of positive trends. In Europe, a broad cooperation among site managers, local and national authorities evolved including through associations and the European Network of World Heritage Associations (www.worldheritageeurope.com). Poland was instrumental in setting up a site manager's meeting at the World heritage Committee session, which became a tradition over time. For some site managers it was the first time, they saw the Committee in action discussing the properties for which they were responsible. This enabled a better understanding of processes within the framework of the World Heritage Convention and allowed many managers to better focus state of conservation and other reports.

Discussions evolved also on critical or sometimes sensitive topics, such as the management of religious heritage and memory sites, as well as complex sites for example cities, large scale cultural landscapes or industrial sites and their re-use.

Within World Heritage conservation, one of the key tools of the Convention is List of World Heritage in Danger as an alert system for the international community on sites facing serious threats. Europe was among the regions which had a number of sites placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger despite the fact that the region has resources and means to address threats. We can see two groups of key threats: Conflicts and wars on the one hand (especially in South Eastern Europe affecting natural and cultural properties in the countries emerging from former Yugoslavia, and as of 2023 also The Historic Centre of Odesa in Ukraine) and on the other hand, ill-advised urban projects.

The latter led to the fact that the only 2 cultural sites ever delisted are located in Europe: Dresden Elbe Valley (removed in 2009) and Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City (removed in 2021). The analysis of these cases is very revealing and useful for managers of World Heritage cities⁶.

⁶ Ringbeck B., Rössler M., *Between international obligations and local politics: the case of the Dresden Elbe Valley under the 1972 World Heritage Convention*, [in:] *Denkmalschutz and Stadtentwicklung. Informationen zur Raumentwicklung*, 3/4, 2011, pp. 205-211.

This leads to the next question: is there a lack of understanding of the provisions of the Convention and of adequate follow-up of state of conservation reports and decisions including in Europe?

Furthermore, how is it possible that tourism management at World Heritage sites in Europe has major flaws, despite all data evidence, research, tools and means available? This is quite a critical issue as it often disconnects local communities from their own heritage, and can turn against the very idea of World Heritage!

It is true that World Heritage sites have become more complex over time: from single monuments to large-scale cultural landscapes, the Loire Valley is a telling example, from the listing of Chambord Castle to a 86,000 ha cultural landscape of “The Loire Valley between Sully-sur-Loire and Chalonnes” with diverse ownership, rural and urban communities, where also decision-making within a site is multifaceted. We also saw the evolution from small sites to large-scale transnational, even trans-continental properties, which are indeed difficult to manage and monitor, as they cover different administrative bodies.

World Heritage conservation practice has also evolved from brief oral information to the Committee to 255 reports presented to the 44th session of the World Heritage Committee in 2021! An excellent database lists the key threats, and the database also includes all reports ever presented to the World Heritage Committee with proposed decisions and final decisions taken.

It is clear that the two monitoring systems of the World Heritage Convention, namely reactive monitoring and Periodic Reporting is an effective tool developed over time. While the discussions on the inclusion of sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger sometimes lead to politicized debates, the overall benefits of effective monitoring and reporting are recognized by all actions in the system, States Parties, site managers, advisory bodies, UNESCO Secretariat and the decision-making bodies (World Heritage Committee and its Bureau and the General Assembly of States Parties).

In 2022, the last part of the 3rd cycle of Periodic Reporting was launched – this is for the European Region. Reviewing the results of the previous cycles, we need to ask whether there was sound follow-up. You would expect that all sites in Europe and North America would have management plans, clearly defined boundaries and bufferzones and adopted Statements of outstanding universal value! Unfortunately, this is not the case and would need to carefully reviewed after the completion of the cycle. Where are the bottlenecks and why some sites could not follow-up as required.

Overall, Periodic Reporting was a very positive exercise, especially for the creation of effective networks among focal points and site managers, with a better understanding of the complexity of processes and procedures including provisions for effective management and conservation.

Policy and Practice

The evolution of the Convention greatly influenced policies globally, even new legal instruments! This is the case for example of the *European Landscape Convention*⁷ after the adoption of cultural landscape categories in 1992 or the *UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*⁸, which emerged from discussions in the World Heritage Committee. In the following I focus on a few selected policies which are much relevant today, when we celebrate the 50th anniversary and look forward to working on the protection of heritage for the next decades.



Fig. 2 Historic Centre of Warsaw, © Narodowy Instytut Dziedzictwa

Among the policies, the one which moved to the forefront because of increasing destruction of heritage and due to numerous conflicts and wars is **reconstruction**. This was based on experiences in Europe after World War II, but also after the war in South Eastern Europe in former Yugoslavia, especially with the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the Old City of Dubrovnik (Croatia). In 2018, the Warsaw Recommendation was developed through an international conference organized by the Polish authorities and UNESCO. The resulting document was welcomed by the World Heritage Committee and became a widely shared document, successfully used and now translated in different languages for the many conflict, war and crisis situations we unfortunately have today!

⁷ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/landscape/the-european-landscape-convention>

⁸ <https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-638-98.pdf>

This topic is closely linked to another one, the **intentional destruction of cultural heritage**, which exists also for natural heritage. The debates following the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001⁹ led to a new legal instrument: the *UNESCO Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage*¹⁰, adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in 2003! The debates further evolved and led to a number of UN resolutions, such as Resolution 2347 of the UN Security Council which recognized that the defense of cultural heritage is imperative for security. These decisions also further influenced debates on reconstruction, authenticity and safeguarding of heritage as well as legal deliberations and case law, which had started with the Strugar case at ICTY concerning the destruction of the World heritage site of Dubrovnik in 1992 and the Al Mahdi case at ICC following the destruction of the Mausoleums at the World Heritage property of Timbuktu in 2012.



Fig. 3 Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley (Afghanistan), © UNESCO/ Junaid Sorosh-Wali

⁹ Rössler M., *World Heritage and reconstruction: An overview and Lessons Learn from the Bamiyan Valley*, [in:] *The Future of the Bamiyan Buddha Statues. Heritage reconstruction in Theory and Practice*, M. Nagaoka (ed), UNESCO Springer, Cham 2020, pp. 99-111, <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783030513153>

¹⁰ <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/unesco-declaration-concerning-intentional-destruction-cultural-heritage>

A different example for emerging policies were **cities** and urban ensembles: after huge debates on state of conservation reports especially in Europe (including a few success stories), the Vienna Memorandum was adopted in 2005 by the World Heritage Committee and led to another legal instrument, the 2011 *UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*¹¹. This Recommendation is now applied for all urban contexts beyond World Heritage and celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2021. It is monitored by UNESCO's Executive Board to ensure application by all 193 Member states of the organisation.

Already as early as 2005 the Committee discussed a policy on **climate change** which was adopted in 2007. The impacts of Climate Change on World Heritage properties are critical, with increasing temperatures, sea level rise, melting of ice cover, intensity and frequency of extreme events (fires, floods, droughts), changes in human land-use and agricultural heritage seriously affect European heritage and heritage worldwide. The debates around World Heritage influenced other discussions, including through the ICOMOS and IUCN (Outlook) work in this regard. It was deeply disappointing that the updated policy presented to and endorsed by the World Heritage Committee in July 2021, was not adopted at the General Assembly of States Parties in November 2021. It can be considered as a lost opportunities and a delay of at least 2 years in a global crisis. On the other hand, States Parties and site managers can already advance on the ground to better prepare for increasing climate change impacts to the precious World Heritage sites.



Fig. 4 Quadisha Valley (Lebanon), © Charbel Tawk UNESCO monitoring mission

¹¹ Rössler M., Hosagrahar J., *Le programme des villes du patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO*, [in:] *Mémoires urbaines. Coopérer pour protéger. Cahiers de l'Institut Paris Région*, numéro 180, Paris 2022, pp. 94-99, https://www.institutparisregion.fr/fileadmin/NewEtudes/000pack3/Etude_2813/C180_web.pdf

Closely related to this is the World Heritage and **Sustainable Development Policy**, which was adopted in 2015 in parallel and aligned with the 2030 Agenda of the UN. On 19 November 2015 the 20th General Assembly of the States Parties to the World Heritage Convention adopted this Policy on the integration of a sustainable development perspective into the processes of the World Heritage Convention. The overall goal of the policy is to assist States Parties, practitioners, institutions, communities and networks, through appropriate guidance, to harness the potential of World Heritage properties and heritage in general, to contribute to sustainable development and therefore increase the effectiveness and relevance of the Convention whilst respecting and protecting the Outstanding Universal value of World Heritage properties. Its adoption represents a significant shift in the implementation of the Convention and an important step in its history. To operationalize the *Policy for the integration of a sustainable development perspective into the processes of the World Heritage Convention*, a workshop elaborated an action plan, as an aspirational set of activities for the implementation of the policy, aiming to engage all the stakeholders of the Convention, at international, regional, and local levels. We are looking forward now to hear further from best practice from World Heritage sites with innovation and youth engagement¹²!



Fig. 5 Ennedi Massif: Natural and Cultural Landscape, ©Guy Debonnet / IUCN

¹² Larsen, P. B., Logan W. (eds.), *World Heritage and Sustainable Development: New Directions in World Heritage Management*, Abingdon/New York 2018.

Europe with its unique network of institutions and universities can especially contribute to research in the heritage field. Much needed research, including on another topic such as post-covid tourism development at World Heritage sites or examples of climate change adaptation and risk assessments. The newly enhanced collaboration with IPBES and ICCP is indeed valuable to address the biodiversity, pollution and climate crisis including at World Heritage sites. Also, new projects such as the World Heritage Leadership programme, a partnership between ICCROM, IUCN, and the Norwegian Ministry collaboration with the World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS, aim to improve conservation and management practices for culture and nature through the World Heritage Convention, also as contribution made to sustainable development by World Heritage sites.

Key for all activities are communities and youth, this is enshrined in the Convention, as an intergenerational pact to preserve sites of Outstanding Universal Value for the generations to come. This intergenerational equity is the basis for sustainable development and thus, the Convention was a forerunner prior to the coining of the term.

Conclusions and Way Forward

Looking back at the past 50 years since the establishment of the World Heritage Convention in 1972 we can conclude that it faced a number of challenges:

- Convention obligations and implementation weaknesses, such as the lack of understanding of the List of World Heritage in Danger
- Intervention issues on threats, including timelines, planning, personnel, and processes
- Lack of funding (the World Heritage Fund) and transfer of resources to those in need
- Many management plans and system often on paper and are not implemented
- Tourism management questionable for a number of sites in the face of mass tourism
- There is an inadequate understanding of local communities and indigenous peoples and their involvement in World Heritage including benefit sharing
- Balancing the World Heritage List and diversity of the planet (Global Strategy) remains an issue
- Limited capacity at UNESCO, at the advisory bodies ICOMOS, ICCROM, IUCN and in States Parties of the global South
- Global change & climate change: Europe's critical role in using resources and not contribution enough to address the issues

This Convention has undoubtedly developed many success stories over time:

- More than 1000 cultural and natural sites are protected by a global treaty
- There are clear beneficial provisions of the Convention over 50 years
- Legal protection of heritage places reinforced
- There is a functioning operative system of 194 States Parties, the World Heritage Committee and the General Assembly, with a well-established Secretariat at UNESCO and 3 advisory bodies
- Conservation standards have been enhanced with major conservation successes at some sites
- Increasing alerts by NGOs, civil society and individuals demonstrate the involvement of communities in heritage
- Effective monitoring, reporting and global observation system with a well-established database
- Improved interpretation of heritage (visitor centres, digital presentations, virtual tours)
- Associations of site managers illustrate an active network
- New types of sites have been identified over time, such as Cultural Landscapes, technology, modern heritage and enriched the diversity of the List
- A high number of policies were developed globally, documented in a specific database and (sometimes) implemented in States Parties
- Transboundary, transnational and international cooperation (through serial sites, capacity building) was enhanced
- International solidarity, including in times of conflicts and war, is evident

In conclusion, we can celebrate the 50th anniversary, the world is yours, go ahead with reinforced, well reflected and sound implementation, dear World Heritage Convention!

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