

# Discussion Paper

## A Global Overview of Tropical Marine, Coastal and Small Island Ecosystems and the World Heritage List

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## **Introduction**

### **An Overview of the World Heritage Convention<sup>1</sup>**

The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (the World Heritage Convention) was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1972. To date, more than 150 countries have adhered to the Convention, making it one of the most universal international legal instruments for the protection of the cultural and natural heritage. UNESCO provides the Convention's Secretariat.

### **What the Convention contains**

The Convention defines the kind of natural or cultural sites which can be considered for inscription on the World Heritage List, and sets out the duties of State Parties in identifying potential sites and their role in protecting and preserving them. By signing the Convention, each country pledges to conserve not only the World Heritage sites situated on its territory, but also to protect its national heritage. The Convention further describes the function of the World Heritage Committee, how its members are elected and their terms of office, and specifies the professional advisory bodies to which it can turn for advice in selecting the sites to be listed. The Convention explains how the World Heritage Fund is to be used and managed and under what conditions international financial assistance may be provided.

### **How the Convention works**

The application for a site to be inscribed on the World Heritage List must come from the country itself. UNESCO makes no recommendations for listing. The application has to include a plan detailing how the site is managed and protected in national legislation. The World Heritage Committee meets once a year and examines the applications on the basis of technical evaluations. These independent evaluations of proposed cultural and natural sites are provided by two advisory bodies, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) respectively. A third advisory body, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, (ICCROM) provides expert advice on restoring monuments and organises training courses. Once a site is selected, its name and location are placed on the World Heritage List.

### **The criteria for selection**

To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must satisfy cultural and natural selection criteria. These criteria are explained in the Operational Guidelines which, besides the text of the Convention, is the main document on World Heritage. The criteria have been revised regularly by the Committee to match the evolution of the World Heritage concept itself.

For a property to be included on the World Heritage List as natural heritage, the World Heritage Committee must find that it meets one or more of the following :

(i) be outstanding examples representing major stages of the earth's history, including the record of life, significant ongoing geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features; or

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<sup>1</sup> Source - <http://www.unesco.org/whc/nwhc/pages/home/pages/index.htm>

- (ii) be outstanding examples representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals; or
- (iii) contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance; or
- (iv) 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.

The protection, management and integrity of the site are also important considerations. Mixed sites have both outstanding natural and cultural values. Since 1992 significant interactions between people and the natural environment have been recognised as cultural landscapes.

### **Protecting endangered sites**

World Heritage conservation is a continuous process. Listing a site does little good if it subsequently falls into a state of disrepair or if a development project risks destroying the qualities that made the site suitable for World Heritage status in the first place. The credibility of World Heritage stems from countries' regular reporting on the condition of sites, on measures taken to preserve them, and on their efforts to raise public awareness of cultural and natural heritage. If a country is not fulfilling its obligations under the Convention, it risks having its sites deleted from the World Heritage List. In practice, countries take their responsibility very seriously, and the World Heritage Committee will be alerted - by individuals, governments, non-governmental organisations, or other groups - to possible dangers to a site. If the alert is justified, and the problem serious enough, the site will be placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. This list is designed to call the world's attention to natural or human-made conditions which threaten the characteristics for which the site was originally inscribed on the World Heritage List. Endangered sites on this list are entitled to particular attention and emergency action. In urgent cases, such as outbreak of war, the Committee will make the listing itself without having received a formal request.

### **Background to this report**

A Global Strategy for a balanced and representative World Heritage List was adopted by the World Heritage Committee in 1994. Its aim is to ensure that the List reflects the world's cultural and natural diversity of outstanding universal value. Conferences and studies aimed at developing and implementing the Global Strategy have been held or are planned in Africa, the Pacific region, the Arab region, the Andean region, the Caribbean, central Asia and south-east Asia, and various thematic studies have also been carried out.

The IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), under the leadership of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is directing efforts to review the coverage coastal marine and small island ecosystems by the WHC using innovative multi-site based cluster and trans-border approaches to prepare World Heritage area nominations. In support of this work UNEP-WCMC has conducted this assessment of currently listed sites, to assist the identification of potential tropical coastal, marine and small island ecosystems for nomination as World Heritage sites. The findings of this assessment will be reviewed by a panel of experts in a workshop to be held in September 2001. These experts will examine current World Heritage listings and determine gaps and constraints for the nomination of trans-border and cluster sites, as well as, expanding the listing to include more sites that represent the natural and biodiversity significance in the tropical region. Results from the workshop will be compiled in a report to states party to the World Heritage Convention and the World Heritage Committee.

This effort will lead to a scientifically-based consensus for potential World Heritage sites in the tropical realm with emphasis on cluster, trans-border, and multi-site based approaches for further nomination consideration. A pilot project that will prepare a strategy for executing a cluster and trans-border nomination will be developed. In collaboration with the UNESCO, IUCN, the donor community, and states party to the Convention, country participation will be sought to execute nomination of a multi-site nomination to the World Heritage Committee.

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## **Tropical Marine, Coastal And Small Island Ecosystems In World Heritage Sites**

### **Working definition of tropical, coastal and small island ecosystems**

In preparing this document a working definition of 'tropical marine and coastal' was used which defined:

- (i) marine components as those areas from deep ocean to areas immediately below high water level;
- (ii) coastal components as those areas of land and brackish and fresh water immediately adjacent or in close proximity to the sea;
- (iii) tropical areas to include sub-tropical areas approximately within latitudes 30° N and 30° S.

This broad working definition was adopted in the interest of completeness. It includes some World Heritage Sites which have minimal marine or coastal components, or sites for which the marine and coastal components were not the major considerations for nomination. However it has the advantage of not excluding some sites which would have occurred with a more rigorous definition. For example the Everglades National Park would have been excluded under a strict geographical definition of 'tropical' whereas it clearly in the spirit of the Global Strategy it should be included. The expert panel at the September workshop can decide whether this definition, and the sites which have been included under it, are appropriate.

### **Present coverage under the convention**

There are presently 139 sites listed under natural criteria, and 23 under mixed natural and cultural criteria. Of these 50 have a marine component and 33 contain a tropical marine, coastal or small island component. Details of these 33 sites are listed in Table 1. Six are also recognised under the Ramsar Convention<sup>2</sup> and nine are Biosphere Reserves<sup>3</sup>. No new marine sites have been nominated since 1999, when four were added to the list, bringing the total number of designations in the 1990s to 16. Eleven sites were designated in the 1980s and two in the 1970s. The oldest World Heritage Site to contain a tropical marine, coastal or small island component is the Galápagos Islands which was designated in 1978.

The most frequent natural criteria for selection has been N (iv), which has been used in 23 (79%) of the World Heritage Sites in Table 1. Other criteria have been used thus: N (i) 9 sites, 31%, N (iii) 17 sites, 59% and N (ii) 19 sites (66%).

The marine or coastal component of one World Heritage Sites in Table 1, the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park in the USA, is not clear. The principal reasons for the designation of this site are geological, and although it lies within the tropics, adjacent to the sea, it may be that the marine and coastal components are incidental. However in the absence of further information and for the sake of completeness it has been included in this report.

Map 1 displays the distribution of the tropical marine, coastal and small island ecosystems sites currently on the World Heritage list. Large areas of ocean have few or no World Heritage Sites. There are no sites in the Red Sea and Gulf of Arabia, or on the western coast of South America. There is only

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ramsar.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/mab/>

one site in western Africa (Banc d'Arguin National Park) and one site in eastern Africa (the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park). By comparison with the Caribbean and South East Asia/Australia, the Indian and Pacific Oceans are poorly covered.

## **Future coverage under the Convention**

Table 2 lists the details of sites which are either (i) included in a State Party indicative list, or (ii) which have been nominated but not inscribed. There are eight sites in eight countries and their distribution (Map 2) goes some way to addressing the gaps in existing coverage with two in west Africa, one in the Red Sea and a further site in the Pacific Ocean. However there are none on the western coast of South America or the eastern coast of Africa. Of the sites in Map 2 one site has been withdrawn from consideration for nomination and a further four have been deferred for more than a decade, so it is unlikely that the distribution of existing tropical marine, coastal and small island sites will be changed significantly by the addition of any sites in Table 2.

## **Sites in danger**

If serious and justifiable concern exists then a site can be listed by the World Heritage Committee on the List of World Heritage in Danger, in accordance with Article 11 (4) of the Convention which states<sup>4</sup>:

The Committee shall establish, keep up to date and publish, whenever circumstances shall so require, under the title of "List of World Heritage in Danger", a list of the property appearing in the World Heritage List for the conservation of which major operations are necessary and for which assistance has been requested under this Convention. This list shall contain an estimate of the cost of such operations. The list may include only such property forming part of the cultural and natural heritage as is threatened by serious and 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; destruction caused by changes in the use or ownership of the land; major alterations due to unknown causes; abandonment for any reason whatsoever; the outbreak or the threat of an armed conflict; calamities and cataclysms; serious fires, earthquakes, landslides; volcanic eruptions; changes in water level, floods and tidal waves. The Committee may at any time, in case of urgent need, make a new entry in the List of World Heritage in Danger and publicise such entry immediately.

Two of the 29 existing World Heritage Sites containing tropical marine, coastal or small island components have been placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. They are the Río Plátano

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