A World Heritage Perspective on Culture and Nature— Beyond a Shared Platform

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CONCEIVED WITH THE FUNDAMENTAL NOTION that heritage is both cultural and natural, the World Heritage Convention provides a well-defined and compelling framework to examine the interlinkages between culture and nature. The interest of researchers and practitioners alike is reinforced by the fact that the World Heritage Convention is one of the most comprehensively documented legal instruments on heritage ever adopted.[1] The World Heritage List, comprising 1,073 properties to date, illustrates a remarkable journey in the evolution of heritage as defined in the context of one intergovernmental agreement. In the course of this journey one can explore how the connections between culture and nature have been perceived over time in the implementation of the convention.

Although all World Heritage properties reflect heritage in its many diverse forms, the World Heritage system shines a brighter light on some aspects of that heritage than it does on others, focusing on those that are understood to possess "Outstanding Universal Value." The tension between the two "realities" is often a source of criticism, and has at times prevented the convention from harnessing its full potential to govern heritage.

As described by Larsen and Wijesuriya in their article elsewhere in this issue of *The George Wright Forum* (originally published in 2015 in issue 75 of *World Heritage*[2] devoted to the theme "Culture–Nature Links"), the limitations of the World Heritage system to address the interconnected values of culture and nature are well understood and largely explained by the history and the evolution of the 1972 convention. After all, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage was crafted almost half a century ago as a global intergovernmental treaty intended to identify, protect, conserve, present, and transmit to future generations the irreplaceable cultural and natural heritage having Outstanding Universal Value as part of the world heritage of humankind as a whole. The 1972 convention text ratified by 193 states parties remains unchanged today, but its interpretation continues to be much debated (Cameron and Rössler 2013).

Nevertheless, over time new aspirations and the evolving practice of heritage conservation have shaped the interpretation of the convention and its implementation. To reflect new concepts, knowledge, and experience, the World Heritage Committee has revised the

Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention almost 30 times since the adoption of the convention. Key concepts such as monitoring procedures (e.g., reactive monitoring and periodic reporting) as well as management provisions and new types of heritage (e.g., cultural landscapes) were included in the *Operational Guidelines,* documenting the advances of scientific discussions and hands-on experience on the ground. Many of these changes, such as the merging of the cultural and natural criteria for nominating properties to the World Heritage List, which emerged from a series of talks on linking nature and culture (von Droste et al. 1999), have reconstructed the convention's architecture. With the inclusion of cultural landscape categories in 1992, the convention became the first international legal instrument on the protection of this form of heritage that recognizes the interaction between people and their environment. Others followed, such as the European Landscape Convention (Florence 2000). The World Heritage Convention therefore can set international standards on heritage conservation, which focuses attention.

When revising the *Operational Guidelines* in 2015, the committee decided to include (in paragraphs 40 and 123) further references to local communities and indigenous peoples. This was done in particular to encourage states parties to involve them in the conservation and management of World Heritage properties, to prepare nominations with the widest possible participation of stakeholders, and to demonstrate the free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous peoples. These changes strengthen opportunities to influence governance and management of World Heritage properties from the outset, and to accommodate local aspirations and values, which may bring more diverse notions of heritage into the management of World Heritage.

Although some policy decisions were long overdue, over the years various case studies from diverse regions of the world (e.g., de Merode et al. 2004) have been documented that demonstrate how the intrinsic relationship between nature, culture, and people is part of the very character of many World Heritage sites, and how this relationship influences how these places are interpreted, used, and managed. For example, the Laponian Area World Heritage site in Sweden, inscribed as a "mixed" property, is a case where the national authorities and the traditional owners, the Sami, negotiated for years to agree on the site's co-management (Green 2009). The process led also to the recognition of the Sami's traditional knowledge of their fragile Arctic homeland, which is critical to safeguarding the World Heritage site in the face of climate change (UNESCO 2008). The case reveals that even in places where local and "universal" values are aligned, real-life conservation is a complex and ongoing endeavor.

The amendments that were approved by the committee in 2015 represent a step forward, following a series of earlier efforts to bridge World Heritage policy and heritage realities on the ground.[3] This evolution culminated in the adoption of the "Policy on the Integration of a Sustainable Development Perspective into the Processes of the World Heritage Convention" by the 20th General Assembly of the states parties in November 2015 (Resolution 20 GA 13). In contrast to the ongoing reflection concerning processes for mixed nominations (Decision 41 COM 9B), which focuses on procedural and process matters, the policy proposes a more fundamental shift in the implementation of the convention due to its holistic character.

The policy encourages states parties to (1) recognize and promote the inherent potential of World Heritage properties to contribute to sustainable development across all its dimensions, including environmental sustainability, inclusive social and economic development, as well as peace and security—which are interdependent and mutually reinforcing; and (2) work to harness the collective benefits for society, also by ensuring that the conservation and management strategies are aligned with broader sustainable development objectives. In so doing, the policy inevitably sets new expectations for heritage conservation and management. It emphasizes a holistic and integrated approach, thereby serving as a tool to better appreciate the interlinkages between nature and culture with a view to balancing conservation and development needs, while maintaining the Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage properties.

The adoption of the sustainable development policy represents a major opportunity for states parties and practitioners to use World Heritage as a platform to develop and test new approaches that demonstrate the relevance of heritage for sustainable development, thereby contributing towards the im-

Figure 1. Pilgrims at the Leshan Giant Buddha at the mixed World Heritage property of Mount Emei Scenic Area, including Leshan Giant Buddha Scenic Area, China. (ICCROM)

plementation of the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.[4] Following the adoption of the policy in 2015, the integration of a sustainable development perspective into the processes of the convention has been moving forward. During its last two sessions, the committee closely examined progress on implementation of the policy.[5] The progress reports prepared by the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) secretariat to the committee provide an insightful account of the activities that relate to implementation of the policy, particularly as regards capacity-building, dissemination, and mainstreaming.

At its last session in July 2017, the committee also examined general issues on the state of conservation of World Heritage properties,[6] presenting a global and analytical overview. The document included a sub-section on integrated approaches for the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, reflecting the growing interest by states parties and practitioners to apply such approaches for effective management of World Heritage properties. Mindful of the potential positive impact of integrated approaches, the committee noted these efforts with

Figure 2. The Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras World Heritage site is an outstanding example of an evolved, living cultural landscape that can be traced as far back as two millennia in the Philippines. (Jamie Robertson)

appreciation and encouraged their continuation and further elaboration, in accordance with the World Heritage sustainable development policy (Decision 41 COM 7).
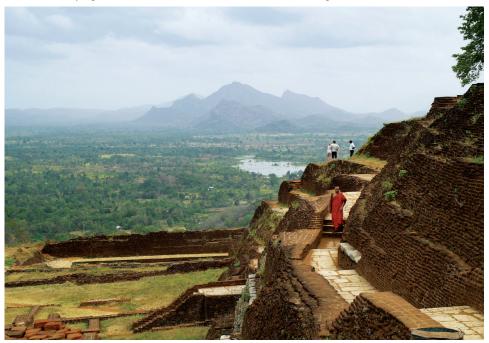
Another major step toward integrating a sustainable development perspective was the committee's decision in 2017 to approve a revised questionnaire format for the third cycle of periodic reporting, which mainstreams the theme into the reporting obligations of states parties and their World Heritage properties (Decision 41 COM 10A). The revised format now includes questions relating to the implementation of the sustainable development policy, which provides a tool for awareness-raising, and calls for a global review of progress made and activities to be undertaken. In addition, by establishing clear links between the implementation of the convention and of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, the revised format provides an opportunity for data-gathering for the agenda.

Notwithstanding this progress, the implementation of the sustainable development policy will be a long-term endeavor, one that will require translating its principles into operational procedures and practical guidance, as well as introducing major changes in the daily management of sites. The convention's governing bodies (mainly the World Heritage Committee and General Assembly of States Parties) have also expressed the expectation that this will eventually involve introducing further changes to the *Operational Guidelines*.[7]

These developments demonstrate that integrated approaches to cultural and natural heritage are making headway into the statutory and operational work of the convention, including nomination, monitoring, and reporting processes. This opens up new opportunities

to acknowledge the work that many practitioners and managers at World Heritage properties have been carrying out—in some cases for decades—and to mainstream these approaches to other heritage sites through appropriate guidance and capacity development. Although the ongoing debate on the policy and processes of the convention is crucial, the most tangible achievements in cherishing and safeguarding heritage in all its manifestations continue to be made on the ground at heritage sites in all regions. As management requirements become more complex and funds increasingly scarce, further progress will require strengthened partnerships across and beyond the heritage community.

Despite pressing global challenges, such as climate change, encouraging progress continues to be made and new opportunities are emerging. UNESCO is committed to supporting countries and sites in their efforts to fulfill the UN 2030 Agenda, which integrated, for the first time, the role of culture across many of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), by ensuring that culture is integrated into sustainable development strategies at the national and local levels.[8] This work was spearheaded by the preparation of a UNESCO global report on culture for sustainable urban development, *Culture: Urban Future,* launched in October 2016 at the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III, Quito, Ecuador). Applying an integrated approach in its review of UNESCO's conventions that cover various aspects of culture and creativity—ranging from tangible and intangible

Figure 3. The ruins of the Ancient City of Sigiriya World Heritage site in Sri Lanka lie on the steep slopes and at the summit of a granite peak standing some 180 m high—the "Lion's Rock," which dominates the jungle from all sides. (Our Place—The World Heritage Collection)

heritage, to the diversity of cultural expressions and creative industries, to the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural goods—the report features 111 inspiring case studies from around the world.

The new capacity-building efforts carried out through the World Heritage leadership program—led by ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) and IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and implemented in partnership with ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre—support novel interdisciplinary skills in heritage management, and aim to develop guidance for integrated and holistic management approaches that applies equally to natural, cultural, and mixed World Heritage properties. Since 2010, UNESCO and the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity have collaborated in a joint program on the links between biological and cultural diversity, bringing out synergies among the culture-and biodiversity-related conventions. The World Heritage Centre's long-standing partnership with the UNDP (UN Development Program) Global Environment Facility's small grants program. which supports engagement of local communities in stewardship of World Heritage through community-based conservation and livelihood activities (COMPACT)[9] in turn serves as an operational example of methods of participatory planning and benefits-sharing, adaptable across all types of properties.

The Nature–Culture Journey of the 2016 IUCN World Conservation Congress in Hawai'i concluded with a call for commitments titled *Mālama Honua—To Care for Our Island Earth.* The statement acknowledged the important legacy of the World Heritage Convention in having explicitly recognized heritage as both natural and cultural, reminding us of the ways in which people interact with nature. Therefore the convention also became a major global platform, bringing people together from both culture and nature disciplines.

As was evident in the rich debate and dialogue that took place in Hawai'i, and as reflected in the articles featured in this thematic issue, the legacy of the 1972 World Heritage Convention continues to influence and set new standards for heritage conservation. One of its most important features, to integrate cultural and natural heritage into one instrument, presents both a challenge and a great opportunity: experts from different disciplines can work together, learn from each other, and pursue dialogue across cultural, geographical, and other divides. It can be a stepping stone for peace-building and ensuring a sustainable future for generations to come.

With the adoption of the World Heritage sustainable development policy, however, the cross-fertilization between the nature and culture sectors, although valuable in its own right, may no longer be sufficient for ensuring the effective conservation of World Heritage. In light of the challenges and opportunities of today's world, achieving this aim will require reaching out to societies in new and innovative ways.

Endnotes

1. The World Heritage Centre maintains an extensive database on all World Heritage properties on its website: http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/. The data include over 3,300 reports on the state of conservation of the properties that have been examined by the

World Heritage Committee since 1979; these are available online at http://whc.unesco. org/en/soc/.

2. This issue can be consulted in full at http://whc.unesco.org/en/review/75/.

3. These had included the adoption of the Budapest Declaration in 2002 that recognized the linkages between heritage protection and the well-being of people, the inclusion of the "communities" as the fifth strategic objective for implementation of the World Heritage Convention in 2007, and the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the convention in 2012 dedicated to the theme of "World Heritage and Sustainable Development: The Role of Local Communities."

4. United Nations (2015) UN General Assembly Resolution 70/1, "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," online at https:// sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld.

5. Document WHC/16/40.COM/5C (UNESCO, 2016) and Document WHC/17/41. COM/5C (UNESCO, 2017) present the progress reports prepared by the UNESCO Secretariat.

6. Document WHC/17/41.COM/7 (UNESCO, 2017)

7. Decision *39* COM 5D; Resolution 20 GA 13.

8. See also the article by Potts in this issue of *The George Wright Forum* on the potential of integrated nature–culture approaches to help achieve the SDGs.

9. The COMPACT methodology has been documented in World Heritage Paper no. 40, *Engaging Local Communities in Stewardship of World Heritage,* available online at http:// whc.unesco.org/en/series/40/. See also Brown and Hay-Edie 2013 for a compilation of case studies from the COMPACT initiative.

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