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H. E. Ms Thi Hong Van LE
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17 December 2021

IUCN Evaluation of Ha Long Bay – Cat Ba Archipelago [extension of “Ha Long Bay” inscribed in 1994 and extended in 2000 under criteria (vii)(viii) and renomination under criteria (ix)(x)] – Nominated for inclusion on the World Heritage List

Dear Ambassador,

Further to the above nomination to the World Heritage List, I am writing with information on progress with the IUCN evaluation. As noted in previous correspondence, IUCN seeks to develop and maintain a dialogue with States Parties during the evaluation process of all nominations.

The IUCN World Heritage technical evaluation mission to the extension nomination of Ha Long Bay – Cat Ba Archipelago was undertaken by Dr Ulrika Aberg in the period of 29 October to 5 November 2021. The evaluator greatly appreciated the excellent support, organisation and co-operation provided by your authorities in the preparation and implementation of the mission, and the kind welcome throughout the mission. Please convey our sincere thanks to all of the officials, scientists and contributors that assisted the mission.

Following the field evaluation missions, the IUCN World Heritage Panel is in the course of examining World Heritage nominations for natural and mixed properties, and cultural landscapes. This process will conclude in March/April 2022, following which the IUCN evaluation report will be issued to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. At its meetings held on 6, 10, 13 and 15 December 2021, the IUCN Panel examined in detail above-mentioned nomination, including reports of the field evaluator and desktop reviews of external reviewers, as well as other references regarding the nominated properties.

The Panel greatly appreciated the efforts that have been made in relation to this nomination, and will be discussing the nomination again at its second meeting, to be held in March 2022. The Panel wishes to clarify a number of points regarding this nomination, and points specific to the nominated component parts as set out below.

The Panel would firstly highly appreciate the following supplementary information, to address factual points that are not clear from the current dossier, requesting that replies are kept succinct:

- 1) Please provide detailed maps showing the boundaries of the nominated property and its proposed buffer zone in relation to (a) the boundaries of the existing World Heritage property, (b) the boundaries of Cat Ba National Park, (c) the boundaries of different zones defined within Cat Ba National Park, (d) the boundaries of the Cat Ba Marine Sanctuary, (e) the strictly protected areas overlapping with the existing World Heritage property, including their zonation, (f) the UNESCO Cat Ba Biosphere Reserve, including the Biosphere Reserve’s zonation, and (g) the boundaries of the “National Special Scenic Sites”;
- 2) In relation to these maps, please provide a brief explanation of the rationale for the boundaries proposed in the nomination, especially those defined on the Cat Ba Archipelago, including the following points: (a) why some areas of Cat Ba National Park have not been included in the nominated property, and (b) why other areas outside Cat Ba National Park have been included in the nominated property (please also confirm the protection status of these areas);
- 3) Please provide a clear and updated statement regarding (a) the protection status of the proposed World Heritage buffer zone as a whole, (b) the protection status of marine areas included in the nominated property and its buffer zone, and (c) the protection status of the coral reefs of Long Chau;
- 4) Please provide a complete list, with summary details of plans for any specific developments (such as hydroplane stations, wind and solar power systems on islets, golf courses, theme parks, the Amatina and Domino projects and Lach Huyen International Seaport) within the nominated property and/or its

buffer zone as well as in the wider surrounding area, including detailed maps of each development. If available, please provide Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) of (a) the Amatina and Domino projects, and (b) the Lach Huyen International Seaport, including brief summaries regarding the impacts on the proposed Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the nominated property and information on mitigation measures, if any, to minimize impacts on the marine environment from the construction of the port;

- 5) Please provide corrected and updated data (a) on species numbers, including data from monitoring under the recent USAID-funded project “Ha Long – Cat Ba Alliance”, and any other updated species monitoring data from the nominated property, and (b) updated mapping data on habitat areas (particularly mangroves, tidal flats, coral reefs, and caves), including an indication which of these habitat areas are open to tourists;
- 6) Please provide a set of tables showing (a) updated accurate data on the size of the human population on Cat Ba Island, including any known changes over the past 20 years, and within the nominated property and buffer zone, (b) numbers of existing and new floating villages and their populations in the nominated property and buffer zone, including any known changes over the past 20 years.
- 7) Details on relocations of people planned and/or implemented from existing or new villages in the nominated property, including numbers, providing (a) a justification for the relocations, (b) a confirmation that all communities concerned have been consulted and have given their free, prior and informed consent to the relocations and their relevant terms, and (c) details on any compensation schemes that have been implemented and how the new situation of any relocated communities compares to their situation(s) before their relocation.

The Panel highly appreciated that the nomination seeks to extend the existing World Heritage property and to re-nominate it to consider the nominated property’s potential merits under biodiversity criteria, further to previous advice given by IUCN. However, the Panel noted a number of serious concerns regarding the level of developments being proposed in the direct vicinity of the nominated property, the planned significant increase of tourism at the nominated property, and the impacts on the natural values these changes will likely entail. In addition, such pressures add negative impacts and threats to the state of conservation of the existing World Heritage property, which also require further attention. Therefore, the Panel would be grateful if the State Party would indicate their willingness to implement the following potential actions:

- a) Align the boundaries of the nominated property with the boundaries of Cat Ba National Park;
- b) Undertake a carrying capacity study for both Ha Long Bay and Cat Ba Archipelago, and if necessary introduce a limit or reduction of envisaged levels of tourism in line with the study;
- c) Reconsider (and potentially withdraw) Decision 2732 of Haiphong City People’s Committee and the revision of development plans in the property and its buffer zone to ensure sustainable levels of tourism as indicated by the above carrying capacity study, and in particular to consider the need to not proceed with projects, such as to build a hydroplane station in Cat Ba, constructions of wind and solar power systems on islets, construction of an 18-hole golf course and construction of a theme park on Cat Ba;

Finally, the World Heritage Panel noted the challenges that have been noted facing the existing property, including in terms of the particular challenges due to land and sea based pollution and poor water quality, as well as in terms of existing management challenges. The Panel would wish to hear from the State Party regarding how the extension will increase the effectiveness of the approach to these challenges, and in particular the joint approach from the two Peoples’ Committee’s necessary to ensure the effective conservation of the property. Please find in annex to this letter the most recent relevant decision of the World Heritage Committee for the existing inscribed property.

We would appreciate your response to the above points as soon as possible, in order to facilitate the evaluation process, but **no later than 28 February 2022**, as per paragraph 148 of the *Operational Guidelines*. Please note that any information submitted after this date will not be considered by IUCN in its evaluation for the World Heritage Committee. It should be noted, however, that while IUCN will carefully consider any supplementary information submitted, it cannot properly evaluate a completely revised nomination or large amounts of new information submitted at the last minute. So we request to keep your response concise and respond only to the above requests.

Supplementary information should also be submitted officially in two copies to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in order for it to be registered as part of the nomination. An electronic copy of all completed and submitted supplementary information to both the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Mr Alessandro Balsamo (a.balsamo@unesco.org) and IUCN Headquarters, Mr Clemens Kupper (clemens.kupper@iucn.org) would also be greatly appreciated.

Taking into account your response, IUCN will formulate its final recommendation to the World Heritage Committee, which will meet in Kazan, Russian Federation from 19 to 30 June 2022.

In the interest of ensuring full transparency and dialogue regarding the IUCN evaluation process, we are happy to respond to any questions you may wish to raise regarding IUCN's work on the World Heritage Convention, including the above points. We would be pleased to organise a meeting via conference call. Please do not hesitate to contact Mr Clemens Küpper, Evaluations & Operations Officer (clemens.kupper@iucn.org) if you have any questions regarding this request, or if you would wish to arrange a conference call to discuss this request.

Please allow me to reiterate our thanks for your support of the World Heritage Convention and for the conduct of IUCN's recent mission. We thank you for your cooperation in providing this very important information, which will facilitate the Panel in making its recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'T. Badman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Tim Badman
Director - World Heritage Programme

cc. Viet Nam National Commission for UNESCO, H.E. Mr MAI Phan Dung, Secretary-General
UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Mr Feng Jing and Mr Alessandro Balsamo
IUCN Asia Regional Office, Mr Dindo Campilan, Regional Director

ANNEX

Decision 44 COM 7B.98 of the World Heritage Committee

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Document WHC/21/44.COM/7B,
2. Recalling Decision **38 COM 7B.72**, adopted at its 38th session (Doha, 2014),
3. Commends the State Party for addressing many of the previously identified conservation issues and the 2018 IUCN Advisory mission, and welcomes the overall progress in reinforcing the management and conservation framework, educational activities and waste management;
4. Requests the State Party to continue implementing all the recommendations of the 2018 mission, taking into account the outcomes of the management effectiveness review, in particular:
 - a) The recommendations concerning visitor management, including conducting a carrying capacity study,
 - b) The submission of details on the measures implemented for wastewater and solid waste management, including results of the water quality assessment in and around the property, details of the existing industries, including coal and cement industries operating within the property, its buffer zone and within the biophysical catchment area;
5. Also requests the State Party to finalize and implement the revised Management Plan as an integrated management tool, with particular attention given to:
 - a) Ensuring the plan is based on a catchment-wide approach for the holistic protection of the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property,
 - b) Including tourism management measures based on the carrying capacity study to avoid overcrowding inside and in the vicinity of the property, and thus address impacts of increasing tourism pressures on the OUV of the property,
 - c) Providing a clear governance framework for development projects, especially for multi-sectoral developments that include infrastructure, maritime operations, urban activities and resource extraction,
 - d) Ensuring that any social measures having socio-economic impacts, such as relocation projects, are voluntary and in line with the 2015 Policy Document on the integration of a Sustainable Development perspective into the processes of the World Heritage Convention, and that they socio-cultural rights of local communities are preserved;
6. Encourages the State Party to seek advice from the World Heritage Tourism Programme and prepare a Sustainable Tourism and Development Strategy for the property, for review by the World Heritage Centre and IUCN;
7. Further requests the State Party to submit to the World Heritage Centre, for review by IUCN, a map with a clear indication of the current boundaries of the property and its buffer zone, including details on the use and management regime within the buffer zone, in line with paragraph 164 of *Operational Guidelines*;
8. Finally requests the State Party to submit to the World Heritage Centre, by **1 December 2022**, an updated report on the state of conservation of the property and the implementation of the above, for examination by the World Heritage Committee at its 46th session.