



Statement of the 5th World Heritage Site Managers' Forum to the World Heritage Committee at its extended 45th session 12 September 2023 | Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Forum sessions: Online (19 June, 4 and 13 July 2023) | Riyadh (11-15 July 2023)

Preamble

The 5th edition of the World Heritage Site Managers' Forum is organised by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, ICCROM, and IUCN, and in partnership with ICOMOS. This event brought together 105 professionals involved in the management of 92 World Heritage properties located in 65 countries¹.

The participants of the Forum thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for graciously hosting and facilitating the Forum in collaboration with UNESCO, as well as for its generous financial support provided to the in-person component of 40 World Heritage site managers.

Managing World Heritage for the next 50 years

The World Heritage Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which has recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, has served to bring together communities and peoples protecting cultural and natural heritage of universal importance, celebrating our shared diversity, as well as sharing World Heritage messages for humanity.

Whereas confronted with the multiple challenges of our time from climate change and biodiversity loss to uncontrolled urbanisation, armed conflicts, and over tourism, World Heritage Site managers believe that World Heritage has now more than ever an essential role to play as a vector for peace, sustainability, dialogue and stability, as well as upholding the principles of human rights.

Whereas united by shared values, responsibility, and pride, World Heritage site managers are determined to work together to ensure inclusion and access, develop and share innovative strategies and experience to conserve, protect, and present World Heritage sites to ensure their transmission to future generations.

The central role of World Heritage site managers will be crucial in the protection and management of World Heritage properties in the 50 years to come.

Achievements

Over the past half-century, inclusion on the World Heritage List has proved to bring a substantial improvement within States Parties in the protection of heritage, with a better coordination in territorial planning that has strengthened their management systems, enabling the effective implementation of management plans through increased connectivity and collaboration between various stakeholders.

Some site managers have been able to secure additional financial resources and receive assistance in implementing cultural exchange and educational programmes, conducting research and documentation. World Heritage site managers continuously endeavour to incorporate traditional knowledge and involve local residents and communities in decision-making processes for conservation and management strategies. A significant achievement of the *Convention* has been the successful conservation and restoration efforts to safeguard cultural and natural heritage in a sustainable manner. Several World Heritage site managers have also made strides in promoting sustainable tourism practices by managing visitor numbers, implementing eco-friendly initiatives, and raising awareness about responsible tourism, aiming at minimising the impact on the environment, local residents and communities. Significant research and documentation have contributed

to a deeper understanding of the World Heritage property which has created the base for best practice transfer that goes beyond World Heritage. Several States Parties and site managers have initiated multi-level cooperation, notably at transboundary properties.

Current challenges

However, participants would like to emphasise that many of the challenges that have been addressed to the Committee from previous editions of the Forums are persisting and affecting many World Heritage properties and necessitate action at the Committee level to address impending consequences.

Climate change impacts are becoming increasingly alarming at a global level, with World Heritage sites bearing the blunt of disasters and extreme events. Despite earnest efforts of States Parties to implement measures and enact policies for climate mitigation and adaptation, localised measures alone will not suffice; careful consideration is needed to ensure that developments for climate action do not pose a negative impact on World Heritage; and a coordinated global effort is essential to yield substantial outcomes.

Armed conflicts threaten communities and remains a worrying concern. As these become increasingly complex it is vital to build effective synergies with other Conventions such the 1954 Hague Convention and its two Protocols. World Heritage site managers need more capacities for emergency responses and recovery measures.

Unplanned development and encroachment incompatible with the conservation of OUV continues to threaten the integrity and cohesiveness of World Heritage sites, directly impacting their values and the associated local communities' way of life.

Digital technology has become a pivotal component in the conservation and management of World Heritage properties, offering innovative solutions for not only monitoring but also data analysis and predictive modelling. While some countries have embraced cutting-edge technologies, many lack access to such digital resources. This disparity in technological capabilities is resulting in unequal levels of preparedness and response to threats.

Overtourism poses a rising concern for numerous World Heritage sites, resulting in overcrowding, environmental harm, and degradation. To ensure the integrity and enduring sustainability of our World Heritage properties, it is imperative that we collectively address the challenges brought about by overtourism.

Reduced political will and financial support to protect cultural and natural heritage multiplied with limitations in establishing the appropriate authority of site managers within the management systems' governance, has increased the vulnerability of World Heritage sites to respond effectively to the compounded negative impacts posed by current challenges.

Plea to the World Heritage Committee

We, the participants of the 5th World Heritage Site Managers' Forum continue to underscore the importance of the *World Heritage Convention* and the benefits of inscription come together with our shared responsibilities to maintain the OUV of our World Heritage properties, we appeal for further commitment from their States Parties in supporting policies and programmes that aid in the conservation and management of the sites.

We advocate for States Parties to recognise and strengthen the crucial role of World Heritage site managers as an integral part of the decision-making process at national and World Heritage Committee level, taking advantage of our experience and knowledge for policy evaluation and legal framework updates for the protection and management of cultural and natural heritage in the years to come.

We acknowledge that each World Heritage site is facing unique conservation and management challenges stemming from its specific context and global factors beyond its control.

We must continue dialogue and cooperation between and at every level. Therefore, to address the current challenges, we need a sustained network for regular meetings and exchanges of information and best

practices. We believe that dialogues between site managers will not only strengthen the preservation and conservation efforts of our invaluable World Heritage sites but also serve as a powerful catalyst for fostering peace, where human rights are respected in all working aspects of the *World Heritage Convention*, including in nomination processes, conservation and management efforts, and decisions of the World Heritage Committee.

We need continuous capacity building mechanisms that allow for enhanced communication, diverse tools, and adequate resources that help us work with the wide variety of actors in the management and conservation of World Heritage sites.

We advocate for the leveraging of digital technologies and platforms for sharing experiences. The use of digital technologies to share new tools and resources to site managers and actors would allow open access to information and regular updates from different sites. Ensuring the comprehensive safeguarding and conservation of World Heritage sites necessitates the bridging of technological disparities and the promotion of access to advanced monitoring instruments.

We advocate for the World Heritage Committee to address the issue of overtourism at World Heritage sites, taking immediate decision to promote sustainable tourism practices towards, including visitor management, capacity training and eco-friendly initiatives.

We call upon the World Heritage Committee to recognise the wealth of local knowledge and solutions that site managers bring for the protection of World Heritage properties and support with adequate financial resources and legislation effective site management for the next 50 years.

¹ Participants attending online and/or in-person components: Albania, Antigua and Barbuda, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Benin, Brazil, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Ethiopia, France, the Gambia, Germany, Iceland, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Libya, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malawi, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritius, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Qatar, Romania, Russian Federation, Saint Lucia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Seychelles, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Syrian Arab Republic, Tanzania (United Republic of), Tunisia, Türkiye, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Zimbabwe