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# ICOMOS

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20 December 2023

H. E. Ms Mahlet Hailu Guadey  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to  
France, Permanent Delegate  
Permanent Delegation of Ethiopia to UNESCO  
35, avenue Charles Floquet  
75007 Paris

## **World Heritage List 2024**

### **Melka Kunture and Balchit Archaeological and Paleontological Site (Ethiopia) – Interim Report and additional information request**

Dear Ambassador,

Further to the above nomination to the World Heritage List, we are writing with information on progress with the ICOMOS and IUCN evaluations. The ICOMOS/IUCN joint technical evaluation mission to “Melka Kunture and Balchit Archaeological and Paleontological Site” was undertaken by Mr. Dan Tormey (IUCN) and Mr. Edward Matenga (ICOMOS) in October 2023. The mission experts greatly appreciated the support and cooperation provided by your colleagues in the preparation and implementation of the technical evaluation mission, and the kind welcome of the State Party throughout the mission. Please convey our sincere thanks to all of the officials, scientists and contributors that assisted the technical evaluation mission.

On 18 October 2023, an additional information letter was sent by ICOMOS to request further information regarding description, inventory of sites, serial nomination, boundaries of the nominated property, ownership and community involvement, legal protection, and definition of the term “Melka Kunture”. Please convey our thanks to all the officials and experts for the additional information you provided on 20 November 2023 and for their continued cooperation in this process.

At the end of November 2023, the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel evaluated the cultural and mixed properties nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List in 2024 and the IUCN World Heritage Panel evaluated the natural and mixed properties nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List in 2024. The additional information provided by the State Party, together with mission and desk review reports were carefully examined by the Panel members. This process will conclude in March/April 2024. During the meeting, the two Panels have identified areas where further information is considered to be needed.

We thank you and your Delegation for your availability and your participation in the meeting held on 24 November 2023 with some representatives of the ICOMOS Panel. The exchanges during this meeting were of great help for the third part of the ICOMOS Panel meeting. During this last part of the meeting, the Panel has identified areas where it considers that further information is needed.

Therefore, we would be pleased if the State Party could consider the following points, related only to the cultural values and attributes of the nominated property:

### **Nomination strategy**

ICOMOS notes that the State Party nominated the property of Melka Kunture and Balchit Archaeological and Paleontological Site using the category of a cultural landscape, and presented it as a series of component parts that comprise clusters of archaeological and paleontological sites. ICOMOS acknowledges that the six nominated component parts preserve fragments of paleo-landscapes with both natural and cultural features, associated with different erosion-sedimentation phases identified within the Melka Kunture geological formation. Each nominated component part contributes to the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. However, it is difficult for ICOMOS to consider the surviving scattered fragments included within the nominated component parts as representative of what seemingly used to be a cultural landscape, as, for the World Heritage Convention, this category is defined as the combined works of man and nature.

ICOMOS considers that not all of the nominated individual component parts preserve significant distinguishing features that testify in a tangible and discernible form to *“the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal”* (Paragraph 47, *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*). Therefore, ICOMOS considers that the application of this category to the nominated serial property does not appear justified. A serial approach of archaeological and paleontological sites in which the combination of component parts reflects the evolution of human species within the changing environment at high altitudes and the geological history of the area seems to ICOMOS a more viable nomination strategy that allows to justify the proposed Outstanding Universal Value.

### **Buffer zones**

Together with the nomination dossier, the State Party provided ICOMOS with a map (Map 1\_ Melka Kunture layout) showing areas of the six component parts of the nominated property (totalling 55.51284 ha) and their buffer zones (totalling 9637.88 ha). ICOMOS appreciates the clarifications provided in November 2023 regarding the rationale for delineating the boundaries of the nominated component parts and the buffer zones. It has been acknowledged that these boundaries were defined to protect and preserve the sites, while also considering the needs and interests of the local communities living around them. It is further understood that the proposed buffer zones that cover vast territory around the nominated component parts enclose areas that are considered to have significant potential for future research and are to serve as protection against encroachment of development on the nominated component parts.

All the received documents have been carefully studied, and ICOMOS would be further interested in better understanding what is enclosed within the areas of the buffer zones. To that effect, ICOMOS would like to request the State Party to provide detailed maps showing the location of thus far identified archaeological/paleontological sites/clusters within the area of the proposed buffer zones, and indicate which areas are considered the most promising from the point of view of future research. It would also be appreciated if maps, showing areas where pressures from development and threats of encroachment are the greatest and are expected to impact negatively on the nominated property, would also be provided by the State Party.

ICOMOS seeks this information, having acknowledged that protecting the areas enclosed within the proposed buffer zones is of utmost importance, since the State Party plans to continue with the research and, in the future, may propose to add new component parts to the nominated serial property. At the same time, ICOMOS would like to clarify these aspects to better understand whether the buffer zones of such considerable size as currently proposed are essential for the protection of the nominated property or whether they could be reduced to make the buffer zones more manageable.

### **Sub-sites within the buffer zones**

The ICOMOS mission expert who visited the nominated property in October 2023 indicated that some of the sub-sites of the archaeological and paleontological clusters that form part of the selected component parts of the nominated property are currently located outside the boundaries of these component parts, in the buffer zones. This refers, in particular, to the sub-sites of component part 1 (i.e., Garba I, III and XII) and component part 4 (Kella). ICOMOS has carefully studied the matter and would appreciate if the State Party could consider modifying the current boundaries of the relevant component parts to include the said sub-sites within the boundaries of the nominated property and provide the revised maps with figures for the areas of the revised boundaries.

### **Protection**

ICOMOS acknowledges that the nominated property is safeguarded by the Protection Law of the Oromia National Regional State No. 159/2013, and designated as a protected area. Could the State Party confirm that the proposed buffer zones are also legally protected through the same law?

The nomination dossier further reveals that due to limitations of resources within the established management framework, it is difficult to enforce the regulations to protect the sites and the buffer zones, even more so considering that the nominated area is largely unfenced. Accordingly, ICOMOS would be grateful to receive further clarification regarding strategies or practical mechanisms that are being employed or will be employed to protect the nominated property and its wider setting enclosed within buffer zones, which is considered of high future research value. Could the State Party provide information on the plan of action and any procedures that will be put in place to operationalise the regulation about the protection and conservation of the nominated property and the buffer zones?

### **Factors affecting the nominated property**

Could the State Party clarify what measures are being considered to mitigate the impact of erosion caused by seasonal floods on the affected nominated component parts? In addition, could the State Party clarify how the threats identified in the SWOT analysis in the management plan will be addressed, especially in regard to sand and gravel mining?

### **Management**

ICOMOS understands that the responsibilities related to the management and conservation of the nominated property would be shared between the national and regional level authorities, i.e. the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, and the Oromia National Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau. However, as the State Party explained in the nomination dossier, there is currently no directive establishing procedures and responsibilities, which results in a lack of cooperation and coordination between the stakeholders. Furthermore, at the local level, limited capacity has been indicated by the State Party as the key challenge to effective protection, conservation and management of the nominated property. Would it be possible for the State Party to envisage and provide a timeframe for establishing the relevant directives that would operationalise the described co-management structure? What practical measures or mechanisms will be put in place to ensure effective protection and management of the nominated property, given the limited human resources?

### **Research**

ICOMOS further acknowledges that the State Party plans to continue with research within the nominated property and the buffer zones. In this regard, ICOMOS would be interested to learn if a research strategy is developed for the nominated property. And if not, would the State Party consider developing it as an integral part of the management plan for the nominated property?

### **Ownership/involvement of communities**

ICOMOS takes note of the land ownership situation within the nominated property and the buffer zones, as clarified in the additional information provided in November 2023 by the State Party. It is understood that

The IUCN World Heritage Panel has carefully considered the nomination and notes that the geological attributes of the nominated property are of national significance, and that they may be important for the understanding of the nominated property's cultural values, whilst also noting that fossil remains related to human evolution are generally considered in relation to the application of the criteria of the Convention related to cultural heritage, and thus would be considered further by ICOMOS as appropriate. The IUCN Panel thus considers that there are fundamental difficulties with respect to the ability of the nomination to demonstrate global significance under criterion (viii), and based on expert reviews there does not appear to be any evidence suggesting global significance under this criterion. As the IUCN Panel considers the position regarding this nomination clear, it has no further specific written questions where additional information is required from the State Party at this point in time in relation to the application of criterion (viii). IUCN will contribute with continued dialogue with the State Party, in coordination with ICOMOS in the evaluation procedure.

We would be grateful if you could provide **ICOMOS, IUCN** and the **World Heritage Centre** with the above-requested information by **28 February 2024 at the latest**, the deadline set out in paragraph 148 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* concerning additional information on nominations to be received. Please note that any information submitted after this statutory deadline will not be considered by ICOMOS and IUCN in its evaluation for the World Heritage Committee. It should be noted, however, that while ICOMOS and IUCN will carefully consider any additional information submitted within the statutory deadline, it will not be possible to properly evaluate a completely revised nomination or a large amount of new information submitted at the last minute. ICOMOS and IUCN would therefore be grateful if the State Party could keep its response concise and respond only to the above requests.

Yours sincerely,

Gwenaëlle Bourdin  
Director  
ICOMOS World Heritage Evaluation Unit

Tim Badman  
Head, Heritage and Culture  
Centre for Society and Governance, IUCN

Copy to      The Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage  
Oromia National Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau, Addis Ababa  
UNESCO World Heritage Centre