

**Open-ended Working Group
in relation to Decision 45 COM 11**

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Keynote speech by Ms. Haifaa ABDULHALIM

Advancing the Natural World Heritage Nomination Process in the Arab Region

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor and a grave responsibility to address you today regarding the advancement of the Natural World Heritage Nomination Process in the Arab Region. Our collaborative effort is centered around the urgent need to better safeguard and showcase the unique natural heritage that our region possesses.

I would like to start with some compelling numbers that underscore the status of natural World Heritage in Arab Region.

From 2010 to 2023, the Arab region had some progress in nominating properties for World Heritage status. Out of 31 properties nominated, 25 have been successfully inscribed or approved. This represents about 80.65% of the total nominated properties. However, it's important to note that out of these inscriptions, only one is a natural site and two are mixed sites, reflecting a predominant focus on cultural heritage. Additionally, decisions concerning 16 properties, which accounts for 51.61% of all nominations, have diverged from the initial recommendations of the Advisory Bodies.

Turning our attention to the future potentials, the tentative list for the Arab region includes 211 sites across 19 countries, with 55 of these being natural or mixed sites across 15 countries. This represents approximately 25% of our potential sites for World Heritage status. Many of these sites have been on the tentative list for almost two decades, urging us to re-evaluate their status and readiness for nomination. Moreover, there's a growing interest in several countries to enhance the representation of natural sites, yet significant steps are still required to achieve their inscription.

These figures are not just statistics; they are a testament to call for action. They urge us to reflect on our strategies, to broaden our focus and to intensify our efforts in preserving not only the cultural but also the invaluable natural heritage of the Arab region.

The historical focus on the cultural landmarks of our region has overshadowed the equally deserving natural landscapes such as our deserts, oases, mountains, and marine ecosystems. These sites not only possess aesthetic value but also serve as essential habitats that support biodiversity and sustain local communities.

During my previous capacity a 12-year as TABEA Programme Manager, I had the privilege of working on a World Heritage program focused on natural heritage in the Arab region. Throughout this experience, I encountered numerous challenges that pose obstacles to our progress. These challenges include the intricate nomination process, the limited local expertise in preparing dossiers that meet World Heritage rigorous requirements and criteria, and the crucial need for scientific based knowledge.

Through the TABEA programme, a partnership between IUCN and the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage in Bahrain we have made significant strides in overcoming some these obstacles. This initiative has played a vital role in successfully inscribing three sites on the World Heritage list, demonstrating what can be achieved through shared endeavors and unwavering determination. It is important to note that the journey to inscription for some of these sites spanned decades, underscoring the persistence and commitment required in such undertakings.

Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done. The experiences in the Arab region have revealed recurring challenges that are not exclusive to us but are nonetheless crucial for our ongoing success. We must address the lack of local capacity to construct compelling cases for Outstanding Universal Value, the imperative for more accessible scientific research, and the underutilization of our natural conservation agencies in the World Heritage processes in whole.

In order to move forward, I would propose thinking of several strategic moves:

- **We need to Revisiting the Basics:** Before tackling the complication of application of the concept of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), it is imperative to solidify our understanding of the fundamental concepts. Comprehending these values is essential, as they underpin the rationale for a site's inclusion on the World Heritage List as well effective management and conservstio measures.
- **Streamline and Simplify the Nomination Process:** By making the process more accessible and less overwhelming. The nomination process should be simplified while retaining its rigor to become more accessible to those less fortunate countries.

- **It important to building Regional Expertise:** Establishing long-term, immersive training programs focused on the conservation of natural heritage and the preparation of World Heritage nominations is critical. Partnerships with both international and regional conservation organizations will help us leverage their knowledge to build local capacity and develop sustainable expertise. This includes embodied knowledge that would be much easier to comprehend for experts from the regional context, such as local knowledge.
- **Underestimate the Value of Natural Heritage:** A significant problem is the frequent undervaluation of the distinctiveness of our natural landscapes. Deserts, for example, are often dismissed as less rich or unique biodiversity and sparse. However, these ecosystems are actually rich in biodiversity and host a variety of species uniquely adapted to thrive under severe conditions. These resilient species and the ecosystems they populate are crucial for studying biodiversity and resilience in extreme environments
- **Foster Regional Cooperation and Knowledge Sharing:** It is imperative to establish or empower the regional platform for exchanging experiences, addressing challenges, and sharing best practices. This collaborative effort is especially crucial for transboundary natural sites.
- **Diversifying Funding Sources:** We must explore beyond conventional funding mechanisms. Engaging in innovative funding initiatives, such as partnering with private sector entities and international donors, offers opportunities to obtain the necessary resources for research, nomination preparation, and conservation.
- **Community Involvement and Benefit Sharing:** Engaging local communities in both the nomination process and the long-term management of World Heritage sites is essential for ensuring their protection and sustainability. Implementing benefit-sharing mechanisms that support local economies not only builds strong community support but also fosters enduring conservation efforts. Several cases from the region stand as testimony to the success of these approaches, demonstrating their effectiveness in promoting sustainable heritage management.

Additional Strategic Measures:

- **Enhancing Scientific Research and Accessibility:** Forge partnerships with academic institutions and conservation organizations to bridge gaps in necessary scientific research and resource availability.

- **Integrating Agencies responsible for Natural Heritage in the Nomination Process:** From the outset, it is crucial to involve agencies responsible for natural heritage to ensure their expertise and data are effectively integrated into nomination dossiers.
- **Capacity Building for Understanding the Basics:** Host specialized workshops and training sessions focused on identifying values and attributes fundamental to articulating OUV and conducting comparative analysis.
- **Developing New valuing Approaches through Thematic Studies:** To transform conventional views and foster new ways of valuing natural heritage, it is crucial to prioritize thematic studies that explore diverse aspects of natural environments. By incorporating interdisciplinary approaches and engaging experts, especially those from the ground, from environmental sciences, economics, cultural studies, and more, these studies can challenge traditional perceptions and introduce innovative valuation methods. This broader and more inclusive perspective will not only deepen our understanding but also enhance the appreciation and conservation efforts for our natural heritage.
- **Addressing Transboundary Sites and Regional Coordination:** Many potential World Heritage sites cross borders and require enhanced regional coordination. Effective support through international and regional platforms can streamline the nomination process and foster stronger collaborations.

Ladies and gentlemen, the journey towards recognizing and conserving our natural heritage is full with challenges, but it is also full with enormous potential. By leveraging our collective expertise, embracing innovative approaches, and fostering a spirit of collaboration, we can ensure that the natural treasures of the Arab region are celebrated and safeguarded for future generations.

Thank you for your attention, and I eagerly anticipate transforming these insights into tangible actions.