



Ramsar Culture Working Group

**World Heritage Convention: Challenges and perspectives**  
Reflections by the Ramsar Convention

*[GWC, 20.02.2009]*

The Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, 1971) has not responded to the request for opinions on the future of the World Heritage Convention, requested by 21 October 2008. Thus, the reflections that follow are a contribution of the Convention to the Workshop organised in Paris on 25-27 February 2009, with the theme 'Future of the World Heritage Convention'. These have been based on work carried out by the Ramsar Culture Working Group and the Ramsar Secretariat.

**1. General considerations**

A theoretical approach to heritage is not perhaps required at this stage, as it might lead to endless debate and conflicts of position. In any case, the 'Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage' (World Heritage Convention) –after more than three decades of operation<sup>1</sup>– has established its own ideological and operational reality. As we are considering the future, however, there are certain general points that need clarification.

**1.1 Heritage and values**

The WHC has been broadening the concept of heritage to include tangible and intangible aspects, natural and cultural or mixed sites, cultural landscapes and routes. It perhaps needs now to consider more deeply and strategically its relationship to the recent UNESCO Conventions on Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

It has also introduced the concept of Outstanding Universal Values (OUV) to be applied to the properties included in the World Heritage List. It is not clear though according to which criteria OUV is defined. All values are subjective as they related to a particular society, group or individual. Thus, universal values should refer to the entire population of the Earth. There does not seem to be an appropriate mechanism to assess them. The World Heritage Committee attempts to play this role, but one wonders how feasible this is.

The difficulty increases with the dynamic nature of values. During each period, values evolve as societies change. Thus heritage elements that were considered of great significance during a certain lapse of time lose importance and are replaced by different ones. Perhaps the Pyramids in Egypt or the Acropolis of Athens maintain diachronic heritage values, but the same

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<sup>1</sup> The first 12 sites were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1978.

may not be true of natural sites affected by changes in their biodiversity. In addition, heritage values may rotate in and out of significance, following social and cultural currents.

## 1.2 Character of the Convention

It is values that determine the character of the World Heritage Convention. The concept of the OUV has attempted to clarify this character by implying that the concerns of the Convention should be heritage of global significance. However, as noted above, there are no objective ways to assess values universally; and outstanding values are not the same for a Western society in Europe and an Aboriginal people in Australia; in addition, heritage values are documented in very different ways depending on social and cultural characteristics. Thus, protecting heritage of outstanding universal value may establish a bias in favour of the views of the financially developed societies, as these are also the main source of tourism flows.

It should be also pointed out that –according to its mission statement– the WHC encourages countries ‘to ensure the protection of their natural and cultural heritage’, and not only heritage of outstanding universal value (WHC 2008, p. 3). This is similar to the provisions of the Ramsar Convention, which concerns the wise use of all wetlands and not only those of International Importance. It is not clear though how the WHC will develop an agenda to achieve this noble goal.

## 2. Current situation

### 2.1 Lack of balance in the listing of sites

There is general agreement on the lack of balance of the World Heritage List. The cultural heritage sites vastly outnumber the natural ones (3/4 for the former and only 1/4 for the latter), while a large majority of sites are located in Europe (which is confirmed by the point made in par. 1.2). This discrepancy is mainly due to the practice of site nomination by State Parties. It is natural that countries with limited resources and human capacity are not motivated to go through the laborious process of site preparation for inscription in the World Heritage List, in spite of the benefits that such an inscription could bring.

Wetland sites, which are of great importance as repository of natural values (as well as cultural ones) could contribute to balancing the list; especially those of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention.

It does not seem clear, however, whether Ramsar and the WHC are seen (in respect of wetland-related natural values) as striving for the same or different aims, and whether, therefore, co-operation between them is mainly a matter of mutual reinforcement and joint efforts or mainly a matter of complementarity (e.g. WH being strong on elite examples, and Ramsar focusing on the fabric of ecosystem functionality). This is an issue to be studied further in the context of improved co-operation.

Priority lists prepared by expert organisations or regional groupings on widely accepted criteria might provide the necessary encouragement to some States Parties, but such encouragement would become truly effective only if it were complemented with capacity and financial support.

In addition, there is a rather small number of World Heritage Sites nominated both for their natural and their cultural values. The rigid separation between the two (see articles 1 and 2 of the WH Convention) further reflects Western values, which must be mitigated. If more numerous and better distributed, they would contribute greatly to the development of an integrated approach (to which the Ramsar Convention is committed). More specifically, the Ramsar concepts of wise use, ecological character, ecosystem services and site management are based on a holistic approach, both to the integration of human and other natural world values, and to the integration of sites with their landscape context (e.g. river basin, coastal zone). Such concepts could be of pertinence to the WHC.

## 2.2 Conservation problems

While considerable care is taken in the analysis and assessment of proposed sites, the same cannot be said about maintaining and improving the conservation status of those already on the List. The great diversity of sites, and the even greater diversity of their conditions, does not allow a uniform appraisal of their situation and the provision of generic guidance and support by the WHC. The difficulties are exacerbated by lack of adequate capacity and resources of numerous States Parties, which weakens their possibility to respond effectively to the international advice provided.

It should be also noted that designation as WH sites itself leads often to partial degradation, because of the considerable increase in visitor pressure and the ensuing ‘wear’ of the tangible and intangible values of some sites. Facing this problem would require even more drastic management and conservation measure, which may not be feasible and forthcoming. Thus, it is not surprising that a considerable number of WH sites is inscribed in the danger list. A careful analysis of that second list might help in assessing objectively the overall situation.

The resulting unsatisfactory situation in various sites menaces the credibility of the WHC and the integrity of its ‘brand’.

## 2.3 Operational weaknesses

Within the structure of the WHC, there are various weaknesses that have been pointed out by various other parties, which are deeply knowledgeable of its activities and operation<sup>2</sup>. It is evident, however, that most of them are due to the very limited human and financial resources of the Convention, which reduce the effectiveness of the entire system. Two areas that seem to suffer the most are:

- the systematic and in depth monitoring of sites on the List<sup>3</sup>;
- the provision of adequate technical and financial support to threatened sites.

It is clear that, with the current resources allocated to the WHC, it will not be able to respond successfully to its present challenges, let alone handle the considerable number of new sites that are predicted<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Such as ICOMOS and IUCN, as well as various States Parties.

<sup>3</sup> The current technical system of monitoring sites and assisting in their management has been already extended beyond its limits with the current 830 WH sites (WHC 2008, p. 193).

### 3. Drivers of change

At this critical phase, the WHC needs to take into account a number of major forces that impact World Heritage Sites and to develop adequate responses. Some of these factors are mentioned below:

- Overexploitation of resources is noted in many of the natural sites.
- Mining and other extractive activities, as well as energy production and distribution (through hydroelectric facilities, oil and gas extraction, wind and solar installations) may have destructive impacts upon WH sites. These need to be recognised and evaluated in SEA and EIA<sup>5</sup> of such activities and projects.
- As rural populations are moving to cities around the world, urbanisation is spreading and may be encroaching on specific sites, creating irreversible losses. These are compounded by the construction of heavy infrastructure works (such as highways, harbours, airports, industrial parks) that are related to urban expansion.
- Tourism and visitor activities are growing globally –although the impact of the current economic crisis on tourism flows is not yet known as to size and duration. Still, the long-term pressure of tourism on WH sites will not decrease and must be managed decisively. It is also probable that public awareness for these sites will increase, leading to further visitor pressures.

Perhaps the major impacts on natural WH sites will be through climate change, causing modifications of the water cycle and temperature variations, driving changes in ecosystems and species distribution (Terrill 2008). Indirect impacts might also become visible in cultural sites. Thus, a comprehensive assessment of the potential impact of climate change on WH sites is necessary, not only on a one off initiative, but on a continuing basis at a five year cycle. Systematic collaboration here with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change would be required, as well as with the other conservation conventions.

### 4. Responding to change

#### 4.1 Redefining goals and priorities

Within the broader discussions concerning the reform of the UN system and the relations of multilateral agreements, the WHC must look at the future wisely and forcefully and must not be afraid to redefine its goals and priorities<sup>6</sup>. In fact, even the elements of the mission of the Convention (WHC 2008, p. 3) must be reviewed and prioritised, so that the resources available can be directed at the most important and feasible ones. The aspects of sustainability of efforts must also be assessed.

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<sup>4</sup> With 20-25 sites added yearly, there may be 1000 sites by 2012, 1500 sites by 2030 and 2000 in 2045 (WHC 2007, p. 192).

<sup>5</sup> Strategic Impact Assessments and Environmental Impact Assessments.

<sup>6</sup> Of interest is the IUCN proposal for 'Vision, Aim and Objectives of the World Heritage Agenda for Nature', October 2008.

A first step has already been made with the discussion on the five ‘Cs’<sup>7</sup>. Implementing them effectively will give the Convention a new impetus; this, however, will not be possible within the current framework of the WHC and will require the approval of additional resources.

#### 4.2 Improving effectiveness

Once new goals and priorities are agreed, and adequate resources provided, the efforts of the WHC should be directed to certain key areas that require greater attention.

- Effective management and conservation of WH sites should remain at the top of the agenda. Thus standards of protection (for example though careful EIA/SEA) should be addressed with the same rigour as standards of nomination of sites.
- This will require actions to avert specific threats. The WHC must act more forcefully towards States Parties that allow activities threatening WH sites.
- On the positive side, assistance in improving management capacity and in finding the required financial resources will be required.
- To assess effective conservation and management, better systems of site monitoring must be developed and applied. Effectiveness indicators might be a useful tool in this process, as well as remote sensing and imaging technologies<sup>8</sup>.
- Improving the legal armour in the protection of WH sites is also a possibility to be examined, although it might be time-consuming and raise issues of sovereignty.
- Promoting globally examples of best practice may provide incentives for good management and offer guidance to those responsible for similar sites.
- Finally, institutional links within UNESCO (for example between the Ecological Sciences Division and Culture Division) need to be strengthened. WHC sits within the latter and does not capitalise fully on the capacity that is available to help it from the former, in relation to natural heritage. This would also cover closer synergy between WH sites and Biosphere Reserves/MaB Programme. If other partners from outside UNESCO are to help in collective efforts, they will need to know that UNESCO itself has its own house in order in the most effective way.

#### 4.3 Augmenting resources through synergy

The direct increase of the WHC budget –as well as those of other international conventions– does not seem very probable in the current global financial context. Other indirect means, therefore, must be found to increase the capacity of the WHC to protect effectively representative human heritage.

One possibility is cultivating synergy and sharing tasks with other complementary multilateral bodies, such as the CBD and Ramsar, establishing real ‘sister institutions’.

Ramsar in particular delivers considerable inputs for global heritage values, to the benefit *inter alia* of the WH Convention’s interests. These include the expertise and support that is

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<sup>7</sup> Credibility, Conservation, Capacity-building, Communication, Community.

<sup>8</sup> Such work is being promoted in the Mediterranean for assessing the conservation of wetland sites, at the initiative of Tour du Valat and MedWet.

brought to the conservation of Ramsar sites where these overlap with WH sites; but they also include wise use of river basins, coastal zones, biodiversity populations and ecological/hydrological processes that are part of the landscape context for the fate of WH sites. They also include advances in scientific understanding and knowledge-sharing about eg climate change, sustainable development, policy innovations etc. Specific Ramsar efforts on monitoring, indicators, advisory missions etc offer areas for good technical cooperation.

It should be noted here that WH sites, Ramsar sites and Biosphere Reserves are the only global systems of protected areas formally administered by governments. They constitute, therefore, the only 'official' vehicle for global protected areas agendas of others, for example the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas. Thus, the CBD should be heavily reliant on these three for delivery of that programme, and strategic cooperation between all these bodies towards co-ordinated aims of this kind is very important (and should –if properly coherent– form a strong case for outside funding support).

In the past, there has been a Ramsar-UNESCO MoU, which was evaluated in 2004 covering specific matters and broader issues (Pritchard 2004). This MoU could be updated, strengthening the collaboration between the two conventions, especially on shared sites. The incorporation of cultural aspects in the work of the Ramsar Convention<sup>9</sup> will facilitate such collaboration.

Ramsar COP mandates for cooperation with UNESCO:

Res X.11 para 13: “URGES the Secretariat to review its joint programmes of work with the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme and the World Heritage Centre with a view to reinvigorating those collaborative mechanisms”;

Res X.11 para 14: “INVITES the Secretariat to continue to develop cooperative relations with UN agencies such as ... UNESCO ... and to seek to reduce duplicative activities;

Res IX.5 para 8: “REQUESTS the Secretary General to cooperate closely with relevant conventions, ... with UN agencies such as ... UNESCO ...

Res X.9 para 18: “INVITES the following bodies and organizations to consider establishing close working cooperative arrangements with the STRP on matters of common interest:

... the Secretariats of ... the World Heritage Convention (WHC); UNESCO – Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB) ...]

A second possibility is to promote regional initiatives. Ramsar has this experience, starting with the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet) in 1992. MedWet is supported financially by the states in the region and has been able to attract serious investments in favour of Mediterranean wetlands during the 16 years of its existence. Similar efforts have started in other parts of the world. The Ramsar Secretariat would be happy to share with WHC the lessons learned concerning regional initiatives.

Strengthening partnerships with donor organisations (already significant) could be further encouraged. Naturally, success will depend on maintaining the credibility of the WHC. Finally, combining WH properties in thematic or geographical networks, taking into account elements of complementarity, might improve collaboration and sharing of costs and re-

<sup>9</sup> Through Ramsar COP Resolutions VIII.19 (2002) and IX.21 (2005) and with the establishment in 2006 of the Ramsar Culture Working Group.

sources, thus making the management of sites more effective. A particular case of high interest concerns transboundary WH sites, in spite of the difficulties of cross border co-operation.

The Ramsar Secretariat looks forward to continued collaboration with WHC for the benefit of both conventions and hopes to be able to contribute further to the creative dialogue on the future of the World Heritage Convention.

### **Key references**

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