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UNESCO

The Process of Selecting UNESCO World Heritage Sites

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Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is responsible for designating and maintaining the list of *World Heritage Sites* with the aim of identifying and protecting cultural and natural sites around the world that demonstrate an exceptional value to humanity. UNESCO tries to further clarify this by defining eligible sites as places of cultural and natural heritage as "irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration…our touchstones, our points of reference, our identity."

A site's journey to designation as a World Heritage Site entails a lengthy and challenging process of documentation, expert analysis and, finally, a vote by the 21 member *World Heritage Committee*. Today 1,092 sites are listed on the *World Heritage List*.

But the process doesn't stop upon a site's inscription onto the World Heritage List. While tourism is not the end goal of designation (the program is intended for protection and preservation) it frequently becomes a byproduct of the honorable title: UNESCO World Heritage Site. The designation alone has the potential to generate millions of tourists per years with all the economic benefits therein. The related presence of a tourism industry which surrounds designation has unfortunately led to the politicization of the selection process.

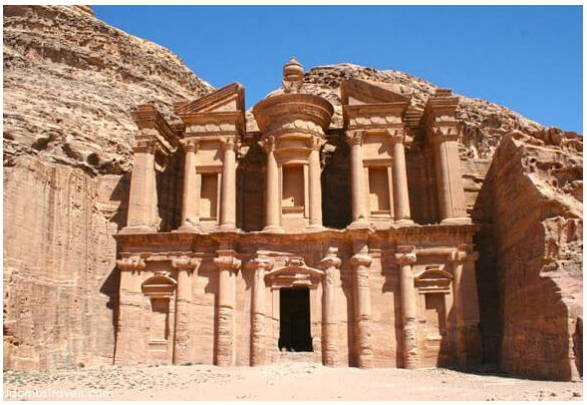
Selecting World Heritage Sites, it would appear, is too important to be non-political. For many countries it raises issues that go to the heart of national identity and territorial control.

Objections primarily come from Israel and the United States, unhappy with elevation of Palestine demands for control over sites in the West Bank and sometimes Israel itself. Uniquely, UNESCO made Palestine a full member, unlike the UN General Assembly.

Other states and groups have found way to use the World Heritage Site process to their own ends. Member States lobby for votes, in search of tourism income. Environmental conservation and wildlife groups use UNESCO for leverage, seeking to protect sites, against the policy of their home countries. Economic interests such as fisheries protection also can be advanced sometimes under the guise of World Heritage Sites.

Politics is never far from UNESCO deliberations. Issues of culture and history have great importance to leaders and peoples today. Who controls a heritage site often is equal to saying who controls history, who tells the tale and who justifies future action. Member States and non-state groups are ready to fight over heritage sites as a matter of national identity.

Territorial issues can create an especially strong incentive to politicize heritage issues. Rival states and non-state groups use UNESCO as a way to establish control over territory. When two states or people's claim the same site, conflict is unavoidable. Conflicts where heritage sites are involved include India-Pakistan, Israel-Palestine, Kosovo-Serbia and Ukraine-Russia (over cites in Russian-occupied Crimea). As a result, UNESCO is a tension-filled organization, the scene of many of the United Nation's most bitter disputes.



UNESCO World Heritage Site: The Monastery, Petra, Jordan

Background

The legal basis for the designation and maintenance of the World Heritage List is the "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" which was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference on 16 November 1972, but the history which led to this signing began in Egypt in 1954. Egypt was preparing to build the Aswan Dam whose reservoir would flood part of the Nile valley and destroy important cultural treasures belonging to the history of several nations. In 1959, Egypt and Sudan turned to UNESCO to request assistance in rescuing these monuments and artifacts before they were lost. In 1960, UNESCO launched an international campaign which was successful in saving thousands of objects and relocating several important temples to higher ground.

The huge success of this multilateral campaign led to other similar projects to save important cultural sites that were in danger of being lost. In 1965, the United States called for the creation of a multilateral trust to preserve the world's important natural and historic sites for the future of mankind. At the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, the proposal was submitted and adopted to create the World Heritage Committee.

Presently 193 states parties have signed the Convention. Of the 193 signatories, 189 of these are UN Member States. Among non-state members, Palestine is the most controversial. Only four UN member states have not ratified the Convention: Liechtenstein, Nauru, Somalia and Tuvalu.

UNESCO World Heritage Site: Old Town, Tallinn, Estonia

Each signatory state must create and maintain a list of important cultural and natural sites. This list is called the Tentative List and nominations for inclusion on the World Heritage list must originate from this Tentative List. The nomination process is very complex and requires numerous resources. Generally a nomination requires thorough maps, thematic studies, property history, and extensive documentation to demonstrate "outstanding universal value" and which of 10 selection criteria the site meets. This nomination requires contributions from local inhabitants, local and state governments, and NGOs. Once a nomination is submitted, it must be reviewed and approved by at least two Advisory Bodies. Only then can it be sent to the World Heritage Committee for the final decision on inscription. The Committee is composed of 21 members who are elected to serve on a 6 year term and meet annually to determine which sites meet the "universal value" criteria necessary for inscription.[1]

UNESCO designation as a World Heritage Site provides international legal protection pursuant to the Law of War, under the Geneva Convention, its articles, protocols and customs, together with other treaties including the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and international law.

Current Situation

Despite the success and popularity of the World Heritage List, a number of issues have developed which politicize the selection process. These issues are:

- The growth of a lobbying industry around the award process
- A Committee process which favors the agendas of current term members
- Exploitation of the list for domestic political purposes
- A nomination process which favors wealthier, more advanced members
- Political issues in connection with territorial boundary requirements

UNESCO World Heritage Site: Naval Dockyard, Antigua and Barbuda

Lobbying: The World Heritage List is widely considered to be a huge success in regards to its intended purpose of protecting and preserving important cultural and natural sites. However, it has also been successful in a less intended way. A sizable lobbying industry has grown around the awards because World Heritage listing has the potential to significantly increase tourism revenue in connection to the sites selected.

Inscription onto the list has the potential to generate millions of visitors to the site every year resulting in massive financial flows caused by tourism. In many cases, this has led to the exploitation of sensitive sites for their income generating potential at the expense of their protection and preservation. The term "UNESCO-cide" has been coined to describe this destructive process.

Beyond the destructive environmental potential of such lobbying, studies have demonstrated that there is a direct correlation between the size of a members lobbying delegation to the annual *World Heritage Committee* meeting at which their nomination is considered and its probability for selection for inscription.[2] This has led to a highly politicized bargaining process rather than the originally intended objective assessment of a site's universal cultural value.

A Rogue Committee: Connected to the prevalence and influence of lobbying efforts, the 21 members of the World Heritage Committee have been accused of acting on their own agendas rather than the as the guidelines intended. The nomination process requires rigorous documentation and the consideration and approval of two technical advisory bodies prior to being considered by the Committee for inscription. While in the past the Committee used to follow more closely its advisory bodies' recommendations, a 2018 study found that the final selection of World Heritage sites has increasingly diverged from the scientific opinions of the advisory bodies, reaching some years peaks of 70% of disagreement in which the Committee opted for inscription against the recommendations of the advisors.

This behavior indicates that the UN agency was bending its own rules under pressure from member states. Thus, World Heritage designation is being used to further states own interests in the conduct of international relations. This has resulted in Committee members' voting behavior to be influenced significantly by factors other than the value and quality of the nomination. Thus, even when a site receives a negative recommendation from the advisory bodies, the Committee's decision is instead based on political and economic factors as well as the relationship the Committee member has with the nominating state.[3]

Domestic Politics and Foreign Policies: The domestic politics and foreign policies of member states have played a role in the politicization of the selection process as well. World Heritage status has been used as leverage by interest groups in political battles to halt the domestic projects of states. In Australia a uranium mine was halted after Aborigines and environmentalists lobbied UNESCO to pressure the state by threatening to withdraw UNESCO site designation. Similarly, a major dam project led by Panama and Costa Rica was halted after UNESCO, at the behest of domestic lobby groups, pressured the governments.[4] In 2008, Malaysian clan jetties were set to be demolished, but they successfully appealed to UNESCO who made an abrupt World Heritage designation to stop demolition despite the lack of proper nomination processes and documentation.[5]

In 1995, the United States was outraged when plans to open a gold mine near Yellowstone National Park got the area placed on the danger list and the US has refused to nominate any new heritage site since. Thus, the World Heritage designation has repeatedly been used as a domestic political tool by special interest groups to further their own agendas. Furthermore, UNSECO has politicized itself by threatening delisting of sites or placing sites on the "world heritage in danger" list.

An Unequal Process: The current nomination process significantly disadvantages poorer and less advanced members. Bids are often lengthy and costly, putting poorer countries at a disadvantage. Furthermore, the required documentation necessitates well kept historical records and substantial technical documentation which may present a major hurdle to many less developed members or members who have lost historical records due to conflict. The end result of this implicit bias is an overrepresentation of

sites in advanced or affluent regions. Just nine per cent of the world heritage sites are in Africa and seven per cent in Arab countries, compared with 50 per cent in Europe and North America.[6]

One study found a high correlation between factors of GDP and the number of years in "high civilization" and the number of UNESCO designated sites. Furthermore, there is a direct correlation between participating in the World Heritage Committee and representation on the list. The 21 member countries of the Committee disproportionately nominate sites and theirs are disproportionately approved. One extreme example occurred in 1997 when ten Italian sites where included in the List during a single session during which the Committee was chaired by Italy.[7]

Territorial Issues: Territorial issues have created a tremendous amount of politicization as rival states use UESCO as a way to establish control over territory. When two states or people's claim the same site, conflict is unavoidable. Conflicts where heritage sites are involved include India-Pakistan, Israel-Palestine, Kosovo-Serbia and Ukraine-Russia (over cites in Russian-occupied Crimea).

Only sites within signatory states can be submitted for consideration and a site must be within the modern territorial boundaries of the state nominating it. This creates some very significant and obvious issues. State territorial boundaries shift over time and often with contention. This means that a major historical site of one culture may no longer be within its territory, or worse, it lies within the territory of an adversary. Furthermore, a state can nominate a site within its territory that is historically significant to a different culture and then profit from the tourism revenue generated from the exploitation of another state's cultural heritage.

The most recent major issue regarding a territorial dispute is the 2017 designation of the ancient city of Hebron in Israeli-occupied West Bank as a Palestinian World Heritage site. This move elicited a shocked reaction from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who called the decision "delusional."[8] This major political dispute resulted in both the United States and Israel announcing they are leaving UNESCO on 31 December 2018.

Role of the United Nations

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee meets once per year to determine the merit of nominated sites for inscription onto the World Heritage List. The Committee consists of 21 representatives of states who are party to the convention. These representatives are elected to the Committee by the UNESCO General Assembly for a term of 6 years. The World Heritage Committee is responsible for implementing the World Heritage Convention, determines the use of the World Heritage Fund, and allocates financial assistance for preservation and protection efforts upon the request of states.

The World Heritage Committee has the final say regarding whether or not a site is inscribed on the World Heritage List. Once a site is inscribed, the Committee is responsible for ensuring compliance of the preservation of sites featured on the list and can ask states to take action when sites are being improperly managed. Furthermore, the Committee manages the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger and has the power to add sites to this list or remove their World Heritage Site designation entirely.[9]

United Nations Actions

Although the UNESCO World Heritage List has been widely considered a success it hasn't been without some growing pains. In 1994, it was determined the World Heritage List lacked balance in the type of inscribed properties and in the geographical areas of the world that were represented. Among the 410 properties designated at that time, 304 were cultural sites and only 90 were natural and 16 mixed, while the vast majority were located in developed

regions of the world, notably in Europe. This led to the launch of the Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List. Its aim is to ensure that the List better reflects the world's cultural and natural diversity.[10] Sadly, the Global Strategy effort has not made significant progress. As recently as 2011, over 50% of all World Heritage sites were still located in Europe and North America.

Furthermore, little action has been taken to address concerns over growing politicization of site selection. Even the former director of the World Heritage Centre, Francesco Bandarin, concluded, "Inscription has become a political issue. It is about prestige, publicity, and economic development"[11]

Country and Bloc Positions

African Union: A cooperation agreement was signed between the African Union and UNESCO in 2006. Nearly all African states are party to the World Heritage Convention. Support for anti-colonial causes is nearly universal in Africa, as is support for Palestinian priorities. This tends to place much of Africa on the Palestinian side in UNESCO Matters. On the other hand, African countries often have cultural site issues of their own, for which they need support.

China: With the US leaving UNESCO at the close of 2018, it is likely there will be an increased Chinese interest in the organization. After the US announced its departure, China released a statement stating, "China values the importance of UNESCO and would like to contribute more to the organization's cooperation."[12] This falls in line with China's global campaign to promote Chinese culture and history.

In July of 2018, the new UNESCO director Audrey Azoulay (France) made her first as Director-General to China. "It's an important visit. The relationship between UNESCO and China is very strong and strategic." She also championed China as a country who defends multilateralism and supports UNESCO.[13]

China has embraced the World Heritage List and is soon to beat Italy as the member with the most World Heritage sites. China has lobbied furiously for its nominations in the past and is highly motivated by the tourism industry that surrounds inscription often at the expense of the site's preservation.[14] But Chinese officials are careful, making sure the government in Beijing does lose sovereign control over its territory and resists international efforts that dilute its control over anything on its territory, including heritage sites.

European Union: The 28 Member States of the European Union have a strategic partnership with UNESCO aimed at working together to achieve common goals. A deep working relationship has developed in which the EU has been grated observer status. As an observer, no funding is mandatory. Despite this, the EU voluntarily funds UNESCO an amount representing the 3rd largest extra-budgetary funding for the organization. Furthermore, EU member states have received decades of benefits from the disproportionate representation of UNESCO World Heritage site selections.

Israel: An example of the way Heritage Site degnation affects regional politics is the designation of the city of Hebron as a Palestinian UNSECO World Heritage site. The city is controlled by Israel and its population includes Israelis. Deignation created serious issues. Following this designation, Israel announced its intention to follow the lead of the United States in withdrawing from the organization at the end of 2018.[15]

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a serious realm of politicization within the organization. UNESCO has repeatedly made resolutions describing Israel as an occupying power in former Palestinian territory. Between 2009 and 2014, UNESCO adopted 46 resolutions criticizing the actions of Israel, but only one on

Syria and none on countries such as North Korea, Iran, China, Russia or Sudan.[16]

Non-Aligned Movement: The United Nation's largest voting bloc, with 120 Member States, is dedicated to principles of anti-colonialism. Support for Palestinian needs and priorities is widespread in the Non-Aligned Movement.

Russia: Following the US's announcement of leaving the organization, Moscow announced that Russian leaders "share the concern by many countries that the activity of UNESCO has been too politicized lately."[17] Russia wants to promote sovereign control over its territory and resists international efforts that dilute its control over anything on its territory, including heritage cites. For Russia, depolitiziation does not mean support for Israel, for example. Rather, means 'leave us alone'. Russia expressed their regret of US's decision to leave the organization and reaffirmed its commitment to stay.

United States: In October of 2017, the Unites States formally notified the UN of its intention to withdraw its UNESCO membership at the end of 2018 citing the organization's "continuing anti-Israel bias." This announcement was made following the Committee's decision to list Hebron, an ancient city in Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory, as a Palestinian world heritage site. This comes on the heels of the US suspending its budget contributions to UNESCO in 2011 when the organization admitted Palestine as a member.[18] Since the suspension, the US has run a balance of $600 million owed to the organization.

This is not the first time the US has withdrawn for the organization it originally helped to found. Under President Ronald Reagan, the US turned away from UNESCO when the organization added Yellowstone National Park to the World Heritage in Danger list following plans to open a gold mine near the perimeter of the park. This designation was denounced as an undercover attempt to subvert America's rights to govern itself and to destroy the fabric of US sovereignty. The US rejoined the organization under the Presidency of George W. Bush.[19]

The US has stated their intention to remain in an observer capacity in order to continue to contribute its "views, perspectives and expertise."

Proposals for Action

Change the way World Heritage Committee members are selected: Currently the 21 members of the World Heritage Committee are elected by the General Assembly of the States Parties to the World heritage Convention. To be elected, a state must submit a candidate for consideration and be current on its dues. Seats are generally allocated by region to ensure a fair distribution. A 6 year gap must exist between terms to prevent consecutive election to the Committee by the same state. In order to reduce suspicion of bias and corruption, the Committee members should be appointed on a rotating basis for each region as long as dues are current. This removes the incentive for lobbying for election to the Committee as well as maintains the critical element of impartiality.

Reduce the authority of the World Heritage Committee to make decisions: There has been a recent trend in the Committee inscribing sites despite the negative findings of the advisory bodies and with lacking evidence in the nomination application. The relaxation of standards leaves increased room for the Committee to be politicized with members voting to pursue their own agendas or the agendas of their allies. It also makes lobbying a particularly effective tool for an enterprise which should be impartial in determining the "universal value" of proposed sites. Thus, it is necessary for the Committee to implement a greater degree of adherence to the findings of the advisory bodies as well as maintain the submission standards of nominations.

Restrict lobbying activity and delegation size: Recent studies have shown empirical correlation between the size of a World Heritage Committee member's delegation and the number of sites are approved for inscription. Furthermore, there is a direct correlation in the amount of lobbying and a site's probability for inscription. To curtail this bias in the selection process, the size of delegations need to be limited. Furthermore, lobbying should not be permitted. As an impartial and non-political entity, the Committee's decision should happen within a black box where the nomination application and feedback from the advisory bodies are the only input. This process will allow the facts to speak for themselves without the noise created by excessive politicization. The World Heritage Committee is first, and foremost, intended to be a non-political and unbiased entity in the interest of the protection and preservation of culture. As such, political action such as lobbying and large delegations are contrary to the organization's intended purpose.

Establish a procedure to resolve issues of territory: There is a critical need to explore and develop possible solutions to deal with territory disputes regarding site nomination, such as issues deriving from rival Israeli and Palestinian claims, or changing control between countries, such as Indian-Pakistan, Kosovo-Serbia. Should there be recognition that territorial boundaries have changed over time? Or should UNESCO be used to solidify the claims of established territorial control? Currently it is possible for states to jointly nominate a site for consideration; however, this presumes a high degree of multilateral cooperation which should not be assumed for territorial disputes tied to conflict.

Assist less developed member states with the nomination process: The nomination process is long and resource consuming. Furthermore, it may not be possible for some of the requirements of historical documentation to be met if these records have been lost due to conflict and broken history. Many less developed members do not have the technological or financial capacity to carry out massive mapping or survey efforts. There exists a need for the World Heritage Committee to provide means of assisting these members both monetarily and technologically so that they receive a fair chance of representation.

Restrict how heritage sites can be used for tourism: One of the biggest complaints of the World Heritage site designation process is the exploitation of the designation by states for tourism revenue as well as the ensuing "UNESCO-cide." The curtailing of lobbying efforts already mentioned would go a long way towards reducing the exploitation of site listing for purely economic reasons. This, however, addresses only part of the problem. If the true intention of the World Heritage list is, in fact, to preserve and protect these important site, then it is paramount the Committee also explicitly recognizes the negative impact that site inscription can have.

One way to control the negative impacts is through implementation regulation. This could come in the form of requiring the member state to have any construction or tourism build-up surrounding the site be evaluated in terms of sustainability of tourism with the protection and preservation of the site at the forefront. In the end, this may require limiting the number of visitors who can access these fragile areas. While this measure is likely to be met with resistance by members, if the true intention is to preserve and protect it may be a standard worth setting.

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