



# World Heritage Watch – Strategic Goals, Achievements and Challenges after Four Years

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## *Abstract*

The World Heritage Committee routinely receives information about the state of conservation of WH properties from State Parties or ICOMOS or IUCN mission reports. While State Party Reports are often incomplete, outdated or even incorrect, Advisory Missions suffer from being too short and understaffed in order to fully grasp the local situation. The author will show that the observations of civil society must be brought in as checks and balances to let the WH Committee have a full understanding of the dynamics that affect World Heritage Properties. For many years, UNESCO has been requiring the participation of local communities in all procedures of the World Heritage Convention - from tentative lists and nominations to management and monitoring. However, State Parties remain reluctant to implement this - both on the site level and on the Convention level. In response to this situation, World Heritage Watch has been founded as a global network of civil society actors whose goal is to contribute to the safeguarding of World Heritage Sites by bringing information to the attention of the WH Committee, and to strengthen the role of civil society in the proceedings of the World Heritage Convention. Based on practical experience from the field and four years of activity within the organization, the presentation will explain what civil society has achieved, suggest where the challenges are and how they can be met, and provide an unvarnished outlook on the future of the World Heritage Convention.

**Keywords:** World Heritage Watch, Civil Society, World Heritage Sites, World Heritage Convention.

## **What is World Heritage Watch?**

In 2012, Greenpeace Russia and a coalition of activists from St. Petersburg organized the first NGO Forum on World Heritage in St. Petersburg, immediately prior to the World Heritage Committee Meeting. I gave a keynote speech there, listing the problems UNESCO was creating for itself, and the deficits in involving civil society in the processes of the World Heritage. My speech ended with a call: “We need World Heritage Watch!” The call was heeded enthusiastically, and as a result, the Forum adopted a resolution that World Heritage Watch should be founded.

After a lengthy discussion process, WHW was founded in Berlin in 2014, since the WH Committee Meeting in 2015 was to be held in Bonn and we needed a non-profit organization registered under German law in order to fun-

draise for the next NGO Forum. On that Forum, it was decided that WHW should remain the small formal NGO which it was, while the various civil society actors should form an informal global network which would meet once a year, always immediately prior to the WH Committee Meetings. This is the way it has been ever since.

### Why were we founded?

During my more than 20 years of involvement with the World Heritage, I have seen a number of systemic problems in the way the WH Convention works, and all of them have to do with the fact that it is not very well connected to local communities and civil society. While it is the stated policy of the WH Committee to ensure their participation in all processes of identification, nomination, evaluation, management and reporting of the World Heritage properties, very little to this effect has actually been implemented by State Parties. The key problems that I see are as follows:

1. UNESCO does not always have full, correct or up-to-date information about the State of Conservation of the Properties. State of Conservation Reports and Periodic Reports tell about positive developments but fail to explain problems, and sometimes provide outright false information. Missions by the Advisory Bodies IUCN and ICOMOS are too short in order to understand the situation on the ground thoroughly, especially if only officials and experts are heard but not local people.



**Figure 1.** The 5th International NGO Forum on World Heritage at Risk, Manama, Bahrain, 22-23 June 2018



An ICOMOS Reactive Monitoring Mission Report to the WH City of Gjirokastra, Albania, stated a piece of information given by the mayor: “A substantial financing of 85.000.000 lekë has also been allocated for the reconstruction of roads in the historic centre.” In fact, this amount of money had been spent in order to cover historic cobblestone pavements with concrete. The mission, who was one person spending one day in the town without seeing it by daylight, had no chance to check whether the information given to her was correct, and it was only local civil society that was able to correct it and alert the WH Centre about it.

The Albanian government, in its 2015 Periodic Report, provided false information on the visitor facilities in Gjirokastra. While they rated most facilities as “adequate”, the actual situation (added below in *italics*) was much worse:

4.6.6 – Please rate the adequacy for education, information and awareness building of the following visitor facilities and services at the World Heritage property		
Visitor centre	Adequate	<i>does not exist</i>
Site museum	Adequate	<i>opening only upon request</i>
Information booths	Adequate	<i>very little materials available</i>
Guided tours	Adequate	<i>cannot be booked locally</i>
Trails / routes	Adequate	<i>no marked routes exist</i>
Information materials	Adequate	<i>official materials are unavailable</i>
Transportation facilities	Poor	
Poor	Not needed	<i>no evening entertainment available</i>

2. Local people do not know where the boundaries of the WH Property are.

In many cases, no maps are available to the public which would show the external boundaries of the WH property, or its internal zoning. Boundaries are either inadequate to support proper protection of the site, or drawn in a way which makes it difficult or impossible to understand whether it is inside or outside the property.

In the Tajik National Park - an area almost as big as Switzerland - neither external nor internal boundaries follow linear natural structures that would be easy to recognize, such as the course of rivers or the ridges of mountains. As a result, it is almost impossible for local people to know in which zone of the WH they are, and hence, what regulations apply to it.

The desert town of Ghadames, Libya, is recognized as a World Heritage, but in reality, only a small stretch of alleys and houses constitute the inscribed property, a fact that very few people in Libya are aware of.

In Georgia, the WH of Upper Svaneti consists of only one of three hamlets of a village, with some adjacent pastures. While the site is inscribed as a cul-

tural landscape, it is much too small to be called a landscape and to convey its values, and rather impossible to be managed within an area experiencing rapid tourism development.

At the Museum Island WH site in Berlin, Germany, the boundary of the buffer zone even runs through a historic building.

3. Local populations are neither sufficiently informed on the implications of the WH status for their lives and homes, nor involved in the management of the World Heritage property.

The Simien Mountains National Park, Ethiopia, was declared a natural World Heritage in order to protect two globally important species, while ignoring the fact that almost the entire territory of the park is a heavily degraded cultural landscape with villages, agriculture and pastures. Instead of re-conceptualizing the regime of protection, IUCN and the WH Committee demanded that the population should be removed from the park - a clear violation of human rights which UNESCO is supposed to protect. As a result, the local population, that had never been asked for consent about the World Heritage listing, is in violent resistance against the park.

In Gjirokastra, it has never been communicated to the local population how they are affected by the WH status. They do not know whether their house is part of the WH or not, or what they have to observe in case it is. There are no urban guidelines and no guidelines for the restoration or modernization of historic vernacular buildings.

4. Sites escape the attention of the WH Committee.

While the precarious condition of some WH sites are well-known to the WH Committee, others escape their attention for many years simply due to the fact that State Parties don't report about them - either by intention, neglect or lack of proper assessment.

The cultural landscape of Upper Svaneti was inscribed in 1996 when it was unknown to the rest of the world. Since then, it has experienced a sharp increase in backpacking tourism, with mushrooming construction in the buffer zone, but a desperate decline in the WH area due to the prohibition of any intervention in the buildings. This development was unreported by the State Party, and as a result has completely escaped the attention of the WH Committee.

The cultural landscape of Sukur, Northeastern Nigeria, was occupied, raided and devastated by the Boko Haram terrorist militia, but UNESCO remained unaware of this because not even the government had access to the area and hence did not report the situation. It was only when WHW received information from civil society of Nigeria that UNESCO was alerted to the situation.



It remains highly dangerous for government and UN officials to visit the area, and civil society remains the only reliable source of information from the site.

5. The rights and concerns of indigenous peoples are ignored or violated.

In many countries, indigenous peoples receive even less attention by national governments than local communities or NGOs since they remain outside any state structures and decision-making processes. This is in spite of the fact that according to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples no decisions that affect them should be taken without their prior informed consent. Since indigenous peoples mostly live in WH sites which are inscribed under natural criteria, they are particularly threatened to lose their livelihoods through a prohibition of hunting, gathering and pastoralism, or outright eviction from their ancestral lands. IUCN guidelines for the evaluation of WH nominations do not allow to sufficiently check whether the rights and concerns of indigenous peoples will be fully respected once the site becomes a WH.

When China nominated the Hoh Xil Nature Reserve, a huge area in the north of the Tibetan Plateau, no provisions were made for the continuing use of parts of the reserve which had been used for grazing by Tibetan nomads for centuries. On the contrary, the management plan foresaw that the herders would be “encouraged” to leave the reserve. Recent information indicates that the process of pushing the Tibetans out has already begun.



**Figure 2.** The 7th International NGO Forum on World Heritage, “EkoSfera” Sosial-Ecological Center, Baku, 29 June 2019

The Papahānaumokuākea Marine Reserve, a vast area of ocean and islands to the northwest of Hawaii, includes places held sacred by the Kanaka Maoli, or Native Hawaiians. However, the site was inscribed in the WH List without granting them a right to visit these sites and practice their religion, in violation of US and international law.

## What do we do?

### *1. The World Heritage Watch Report*

In order to address such issues, WHW collects reports from civil society and indigenous peoples and helps them to receive the attention of the Advisory Bodies, the WH Centre and Committee with a request to take appropriate action. Every year we have about 40 such reports which we publish in our annual World Heritage Watch Report, usually in May or June. The publication includes many photos and maps which help to understand the quality and dimension of the problems reported.

### *2. Annual International Forum*

WHW's second key activity is to organize an annual International Civil Society Forum on World Heritage at Risk where most of the cases published in the WHW Report are presented and discussed with representatives of the Advisory Bodies and WH Centre. The second day of the Forum is devoted to sharing experiences among the members of the WHW Network, and discussing issues of strategic importance. A special feature is that we try to organize a networking meeting of NGOs in the host country in order to strengthen civil society cooperation both within the country and with the WHW network.

So far, the Forum has been held immediately prior to the sessions of the WH Committee, which allowed the participants to subsequently attend these sessions and intervene on behalf of their sites. Upon request of the Advisory Bodies and the WH Centre, however, since 2019 the presentation of cases happens in January in order to allow a better consideration of the information which we provide.

### *3. Events and Projects*

In addition to providing information to the WH Committee and Advisory Bodies, we also hold events and implement awareness-raising projects on the ground. After the destruction of Palmyra and other sites through armed forces, and after the UN Security Council decided that such atrocities could be considered war crimes, we held a public panel discussion about the question whether a decision by the UN Security Council could be expected to protect a WH site by an international peace-keeping force under the Responsibility to Protect.



In order to address the widespread lack of information about the WH Convention and its implementation procedures, we held seminars for multipliers such as teachers and journalists in Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine.

#### *4. Practical Projects: Podesennya Project*

In the future, we may also support the nomination of new WH sites, especially the full involvement of local communities which shall ensure that they will have a benefit from the inscription in the WH List. The first project of this kind may become the Podesennya Region of north-eastern Ukraine. The Desna River is the biggest completely natural river in all Europe, with huge flood plains and millions of migratory birds. At the same time, the region is the birthplace of the Slavic culture, with extremely old and highly important monasteries. Since the region has been deprived of any economic development for decades, we will put a strong emphasis on eco-friendly products and tourism while the WH nomination shall happen at the end of the process rather than at its beginning.

### **Our Strategic Goals**

From the above it is clear that our paramount goal is to support UNESCO in its effort to have better World Heritage Sites. In order to do that, however, it will be necessary to lobby for more rights of civil society in the implementation of the Convention, and to make them an accepted and established player in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention.

Together with UNESCO, we will have to strengthen public awareness about the World Heritage both locally and globally, and make cooperative efforts for better funding of both UNESCO, civil society, and the WH Properties themselves.

Finally, in order to have sustainable protection of WH sites, we will have to integrate them with sustainable development in order to make sure that local populations support the sites because they have a fair share of the benefits. This is expressed in the Strategic Document which we adopted on our first conference in 2015: “While there can be no sustainable development without the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, there cannot be a successful conservation of natural and cultural heritage outside a general context of sustainable development either. The SDGs’ call to strengthen efforts to protect the world’s natural and cultural heritage opens a great opportunity to integrate the preservation of cultural and natural heritage in national and international sustainable development policies and programs.”

So far, World Heritage has been almost exclusively labelled as a matter of conservation. However, probably 80% of the challenges at World Heritage Sites are not related to conservation (of monuments or wildlife), but to sustainable development: information and awareness-raising, vocational education and

training, urban planning and guidelines, tourism planning and regulations, site management, infrastructure development, business development, promotion, conflict resolution, surveillance and enforcement.

### **Our Achievements**

First and foremost, the fact that we are still here after five years, without notable financial support, is an achievement in itself. We founded WHW because we felt that the world heritage needed a public watchdog group, but we could not be sure whether this idea would be shared by the rest of the world. Today, we can say that five years have proven us right.

Our second key achievement is the establishment of a growing global network of civil society actors. After four years of activity, the network encompasses more than one hundred NGOs, local groups and indigenous peoples' organizations, and about thirty individuals from all continents. While WHW as a small German NGO may be the spider in the web, it is this network which makes us a strong and powerful player which cannot be ignored.

Thirdly, we have managed to build a partnership relation with the WH Centre and Advisory Bodies. While the WH Committee has become what some would call a political bazaar, where diplomats increasingly use the Convention to advance their geo-political interests, the WHW network members have built credibility and reputation as serious players through interventions which consistently have provided hard facts and well-founded assessments, and focusing on the safeguarding of the World Heritage alone. Increasingly, we can see that the information which we provide is not only taken into consideration, but actually makes a difference at the WH sites on the ground.

In the procedures of the Convention our continuing presence at WH Committee sessions has finally brought fruit as well. While in Bonn in 2015, civil society was given the floor only for one statement, progress has been made year by year since then: in Istanbul, in 2016, we were given the floor only in some cases, in Krakow, in 2017, we were given the floor whenever we requested it, but only after the Decisions had been taken, while in Bahrain, in 2018, we had been able to make our interventions before the Decisions were taken, which had an immediate effect in a number of cases.

### **Challenges**

For the foreseeable future, our main challenge will remain to ensure a sustainable financial basis of the organization. We know we are inconvenient, but what is more worrying is that we have not identified one single donor in Germany or abroad whose grantmaking guidelines would allow to support our work.

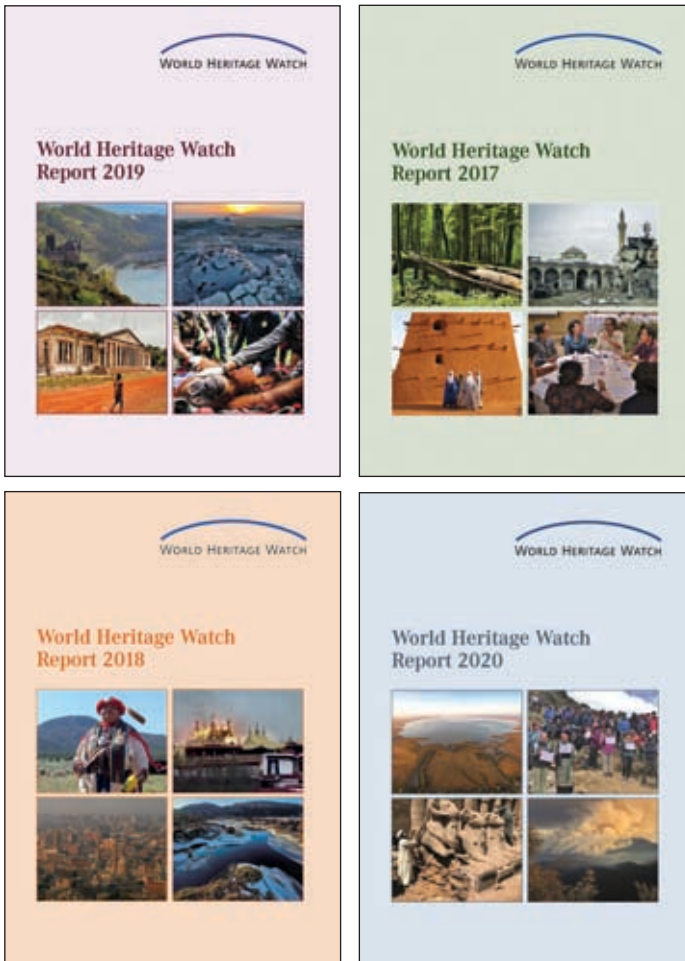




Whatever all of them do is certainly well-justified, but there is a clear gap in the grantmaking world for awareness-raising on World Heritage, and it is necessary to alert the donor community to the fact that the World Heritage is too important to be overlooked.

Expanding the global network is another urgent issue. While we can be proud of what we have achieved, there are still big white spaces on the world map of WHW network members, such as in the Americas, in Africa, and even in many European countries.

While we have succeeded in making ourselves heard in the WH Committee, we have a long way to go before civil society and indigenous peoples will be fully integrated players in all procedures of the Convention. In order to do our work more efficiently, full transparency in the Convention's Proceedings is an urgent requirement, and our rights will eventually have to be enshrined in



**Figure 3.** Covers of the Annual WHW Reports

the Statutory Documents of the Convention. This will take its time, and it will not be possible without creating more publicity and a global awareness that the World Heritage is something that we cannot leave to governments alone, but it is the heritage of all of us, and we truly have to make it ours.

## **World Heritage Watch – obiective strategice, realizări și provocări după patru ani**

### **Rezumat**

Comitetul Patrimoniului Mondial primește în mod obișnuit informații despre starea de conservare a proprietăților WH din partea statelor vizate sau din rapoartele misiunii ICOMOS sau IUCN. Dincolo de faptul că rapoartele statului parte sunt adesea incomplete, învechite sau chiar incorecte, misiunile consultative au dezavantajul de a fi prea scurte și nu dispun de personal suficient pentru a înțelege pe deplin situația locală. Autorul va arăta că observațiile societății civile trebuie aduse ca verificări pentru a permite Comitetului WH să înțeleagă pe deplin dinamica ce afectează proprietățile patrimoniului mondial. De mulți ani, UNESCO solicită participarea comunităților locale la toate procedurile Convenției Patrimoniului Mondial – de la liste provizorii și nominalizări până la gestionare și monitorizare. Cu toate acestea, statele părți rămân reticente să pună în aplicare acest lucru, atât în plan practic, cât și la nivel de convenție. Ca răspuns la această situație, World Heritage Watch a fost concepută drept o rețea globală de actori ai societății civile al căror scop este de a contribui la protejarea siturilor patrimoniului mondial prin aducerea informațiilor în atenția Comitetului WH și pentru a consolida rolul societății în procedurile Convenției Patrimoniului Mondial. Bazată pe experiența practică din domeniu și pe patru ani de activitate în cadrul organizației, prezentarea va explica ce a realizat societatea civilă, va sugera care sunt provocările și cum pot fi îndeplinite și va trasa o perspectivă asupra viitorului Convenției Patrimoniului Mondial.

**Cuvinte cheie:** World Heritage Watch, societatea civilă, siturile Patrimoniului Mondial, Convenția Patrimoniului Mondial.

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