

Approaching 40: World Heritage Today and its Possible Future¹

Let us look at figures and also play with them a little: the World Heritage Convention is now approaching the 40th anniversary of its adoption, which is due in 2012. It may also be approaching the inscription of the 1000th property on the List – which will happen... one day, but possibly a little later.² If we were to limit ourselves to a rather superficial and outside view on the history of the Convention's implementation, we would see an almost positive picture, resembling a real success story. Yes, it is true that the 1972 Convention on World Heritage became the most visible and largely known activity of UNESCO. The number of participating State Parties has already reached 185 out of the 192 UNESCO's Member States. The famous World Heritage List has now 878 items (after the new inclusions added during the 32nd session in 2008 in Quebec, Canada) and, in spite of specific limits given to the State Parties, the dynamism of presenting new nominations is still the same.

1. This lecture – presented in Krakow – is largely based on an article published in the ICCROM Festschrift: "Conserving the authentic" (in honour of Jukka Jokilehto), 2009, Roma, ICCROM.
2. If the now usual tempo of inscriptions – 12 to 20 items by session – remains unchanged, this day is going to come in 5–10 years, about the 45th anniversary.

Studying the “prehistory” of the Convention, when the founders wisely joined culture and nature as equally important and significant fields of common heritage of humankind, and using the term “heritage,” one can state that they gave a new impetus to the widening, or even changing, the meaning of the previous approach to “monuments and sites.” Now, after three decades of the real “history” of the Convention’s implementation, we are in the position to evaluate some of its results: enlargement of heritage-identification with different, more or less recently recognised kinds of heritage such as cultural landscape (with its specific sub-types), industrial heritage, sites representing transhumance, heritage of the 20th century architecture (and more recently also urban planning) and the newest, the “heritage of sciences.” However, this process has certainly not reached its conclusion yet.

Looking back at the origins, it becomes absolutely clear that in adopting this Convention UNESCO targeted mainly, if not exclusively, those World Heritage properties which had Outstanding Universal Value. Therefore, the central thought and goal was to create and sustain a tool of international solidarity, in order to facilitate common actions in the field of urgent intervention and help in salving problems affecting properties which were already damaged, or strongly threatened by various adverse factors – not regarding their natural or man-made origins. I do not want to state here that during the three past decades this very important role of the Convention has disappeared, but it certainly has ceased to be a priority. This, of course, has never been declared, but it is clearly visible from a practical point of view. This change in approach certainly has several reasons and it is important to identify them.

The current situation shows some paradoxical character because this change seems to be connected to the above-mentioned success of the Convention. In other words, the Convention in a way could also be seen as a victim of its success, just like several WH properties (but this is a separate matter I will return to later). Another feature which also could be blamed for the unforeseen changes in

the Convention's original conception derives from the financial weakness of the whole, let us say, WH system. To assure this side of international co-operation, the World Heritage Fund was planned and established by the Convention itself. The problem is that this solution, already from the beginning, has been unsatisfactory.

I think it is no exaggeration to say that the current situation has, in some ways, become almost alarming. This is mostly because the system remains the same, without any improvements or even the needed fundamental review, while the number of State Parties and inscribed properties, or more generally – each and every segment of WH activity has been multiplied considerably. In this situation also characterised by lack of financial resources, the expected level of international participation based on funding by the WHF has never been reached; therefore, larger operations e.g. concerning necessary interventions on endangered WH properties have been possible almost only with the help of so-called extra-budgetary co-operations. On the other hand, already very early it was possible to recognise “the good news,” namely the really huge potential of the WH List to assure worldwide visibility for inscribed properties – which has enormous importance also in moving financial sources, and this effect actually would be hardly reproducible by other means.

In order to complete this controversial picture, we should add immediately that this visibility has increasingly meant the highest level of world-tourism. WH Sites began to be, and still are, major tourist destinations, which has brought them all kinds of advantages but also, unfortunately, disadvantages. The advantages are mostly – but not exclusively – on the side of investors and new “heritage based” tourism-industry. The disadvantages concern conservation, whilst the *carrying capacity* (and/or sustainability) of those – in many cases really fragile – properties is not respected...

Going back to the change in the order of priorities in the main “lines” of the Convention's implementation, nowadays there is almost no doubt that inclusion of new items on the WH List initiated

by relevant State Parties has mostly to do with their (national) prestige and not less with gaining those tourist-attraction benefits. With all of this, the WH Convention still has the capacity to promote and strengthen heritage preservation, but through the use of slightly different tools and means from those foreseen in its original form – e.g. through developing new forms of national and international partnership and co-operation between different branches of local, regional and even global players in economy.

Thus, after 36 years, the question is: where are we now, what are the sustainable achievements of the Convention and what old or new challenges should we deal with?

I believe that a possible “tentative” answer to this question could be found in the model suggested by the 2002 Budapest Declaration.³ The Budapest Declaration proposes four objectives known as the “4Cs”. The fact that the first one among them is *Credibility* (of the World Heritage List), already in itself says something about the abovementioned changes in the hierarchy of original goals. Personally, I am convinced that *Conservation* should be the first “C” on the list! I believe there is neither room nor necessity to address here the issue of the so-called Global Strategy; therefore, I will only mention it as the origin of the current concern about “balanced representativity” of the World Heritage list, seen as key to reaching a “credible WH List.” In my view, when the responsible bodies of the Convention were introducing this idea this was also an introduction of a new requirement, because it is hardly possible to identify prescriptions in the Convention itself for doing so (if not for the *composition* of the Committee, but that is a clearly different question...).

I also discern some contradiction in seeking “balance” and “representativity” at the same time, and particularly when this balance is to be proved by *figures*. Comparing the figures of natural and cultural

3. Adopted by the WH Committee during its 26th session held in Budapest, Hungary, June, 2002.

properties, or those between UNESCO regions of the world, really makes me feel uncomfortable. Later I will touch upon the question of “final limits” of possible inscribed items. Here, I only raise the issue of how artificial it was to create an *a priori* fixed framework which could be good or suitable for balance in figures, but from a really professional perspective it certainly has almost nothing to do with representation of different features of cultural and/or natural regions. Regions which are, of course, of the *same importance* but not necessarily having the same amount of properties with ouv should not to be evaluated as equally or not equally represented only on the basis of figures.

What is more, I strongly believe that if we still decide to opt for *balance in figures*, we should refine the system – at least in three ways. One is to fine-tune cultural regions, and develop a new approach with about 12–15 sub-regions, instead of the existing 5 UNESCO regions, which certainly would offer us a more realistic picture. The second way is mostly balancing Nature and Culture (if it is really necessary) not in figures but e.g. in square kilometres, or any other really appropriate measure of comparison. The third, and possibly the most realistic solution, would be to look at the 1972 Convention *always* together with the 2003 Convention (on the protection of Intangible Heritage): this would make it possible to give opportunities to different regions represented by their “stronger” qualities or specificities.

To be a bit more optimistic, it is worth recognising the positive results originated by this Credibility issue, namely all the efforts made in order to extend the list of categories of heritage to be considered as possible WH items. The concept of “cultural landscape” (CL) has gained a new dimension because of this effort, which is absolutely important – not because it is a sufficiently efficient tool for reaching a better balance on the WH List (actually, for the so-called underrepresented regions, the introduction of CL meant no immediate success: again, Europe became the leader also in this field...).

One of the most interesting and most important outcomes of this effort certainly has been the so called “Gap report,” produced

by ICOMOS⁴ as a tool for balancing the List. The idea of using three complementary frameworks is a really fresh and helpful approach, giving support equally to State Parties and to WH Organisations. The fact that this Gap report is also to be subject to a cyclic review does not diminish the extremely high value of its first edition – on the contrary, in this first version we had already a solid basis for future enhancements.

What also becomes more evident after studying the Gap report is the growing importance of (national) Tentative Lists. However, this is something difficult to influence, since the ownership of TLs is exclusively with SPs. I personally don't believe that this could be changed by creating a highest level of participation of Advisory Bodies in the process of constructing and maintaining national TLs. This was a "dangerous" decision mostly for ABs, raising their responsibility without giving them the necessary power or guaranty concerning the final decision of the WH Committee. In other words, the ABs could now possibly be blamed both by SPs if a "pre-filtered" TL item was not good enough for a successful nomination, and also by the Committee for acting against its sovereign decision. I do not want to say by this that TLs could not have a very important role in balancing representation on the WH List, but that they could play this role in a different way: namely, by giving directions and ideas to the Committee and to the ABs about the necessary Global Studies to carry out in order to help revise those TLs.

To wind up the issue of the Credibility of the WH List, it is important to mention that the existing List already contains a lot of information on successful nominations and, at the same time, the Advisory Bodies also have experience on those nominations which were less, or not at all, successful. It is not by chance that research on OUV, as a key feature for inscription, has now become so urgent and vital.

4. The main author of this book is Dr. Jukka Jokilehto; the work itself has been largely organised and supported by Prof. Michael Petzet, the President of ICOMOS at the time, with a large contribution of other ICOMOS and/or independent experts.

I do not think that it is necessary to elaborate here on the already reached results of those discussions, workshops, etc., but I think it is important to highlight the responsibility of the Committee's decisions on inscription. It is true that there are the ten criteria, the test of authenticity and/or integrity and also all kinds of evaluations of successful management of (future) WH properties, but, despite all this, the Committee is free to accept nominations, and their inscription means immediately that the property in question has OUV. In other words, the Committee sets a "precedent law" by its decisions.

Here, the decision makers are facing a further characteristic of the construction of the WH List: this activity has its time-dimension. This evolving process does not have an already fixed final result; it has only a more or less open goal: a possibly holistic and balanced representation of common heritage of humankind. However, there is no definition of the term "holistic," so there is no final picture made out of mosaic-elements which only need to be identified. The final picture is still moving or changing. I do not believe that it is a real problem, but I do think that it is a challenge.

With this not-yet-identified final picture, of course, we are not in the position to fix the limits of inscriptions or to fix final figures for the List; we are not even sure if the limit should exist. To return to the "balanced representation": if we are looking for balance in figures by comparing Natural WH Sites and Cultural Sites, it might turn out that we already have to reduce (!) the number of the cultural sites because there is an (unofficial) outline of the final figure for natural properties amounting to about three hundred... Certainly this is not a way forward. There are some new trends, mostly about serial and transnational nomination, and it is also possible to imagine similar re-unifications of items being inscribed separately today (e.g. cathedrals, etc.). Looking at the tempo and trends in nominations - I have a very personal conviction that the final number could be placed a bit under two thousand - let us play with the figure of "1972".

As I mentioned earlier, to me the most important "C" in the Budapest Declaration is Conservation as the basic goal of the Convention

intended to protect the common heritage of humankind. This was, and should remain, the highest priority in the implementation of the Convention. The challenge is really huge and the adequate solution to it may not be identified yet. The growing importance of and need for efficient management of properties certainly emerged during the last decade because of this expectation. However, the first (and so far, fortunately, the only⁵) deletion from the list and also some particular situation concerning items being on the Endangered WH List are really alarming signs. Conservation of heritage (generally speaking and not exclusively in the case of WH) seems to have entered a period when the dominant paradigm is changing, when the necessity of changes and attempts to find adequate tools to manage them are highlighted.

If we look now at the WH field in particular, we might think that one of the problems for a really successful protection of WH properties lies exactly in the transformed meaning or usage of the Convention. The items on the List now are the hotspots for international (mass) tourism – at least (but not exclusively) the Cultural Sites, which in many cases have also become the most attractive places for investments. WH properties, fragile and vulnerable by definition, are thus exposed to strong influences, and instead of being in a peaceful and protective context they find themselves under pressure from many kinds of threats. Yes, we do have the famous tool of the “buffer zone” in order to alleviate all those factors for the WH property (“core zone”) itself – but this tool is not always efficient (or, in fact, in many cases does not even exist). I strongly believe that it is fundamental to strengthen the status of buffer zones and declare that, although not part of the WH property, they are also under the protection of the Convention, as indispensable and inseparable zones for its protection.

5. The second striking off from the WH List occurred at the 33th session of the World Heritage Committee (2009).

During the last sessions of the WH Committee a number of complex issues came out whilst the Committee studied presentations on new nominations prepared by Advisory Bodies. It becomes increasingly clear that when looking for a “sustainable authenticity and/or integrity,” peoples or their communities easily can be put in a situation where different features of their future changes and developments can be seen as “menaces” against the preservation of OUV. The most memorable case was that of a property in Asia, in which the possible change of the local inhabitants’ faith was named as a “danger” to the traditional way of maintaining harmony with the environment. This is really an ethical question about the implementation of the Convention: are we allowed to ask people to remain “authentic” at all cost and in this way possibly deprive them of any chance for development and modernisation of their living conditions?

But when looking for a better and more efficient preservation of WH properties, the main issue really is: how are we to deal with Endangered Properties? Certainly, this was the first and foremost intention behind the Convention. Unfortunately, as it has already been mentioned, currently the necessary tools are not in the possession of the Committee, nor are they for other bodies of UNESCO. The situation has not changed a lot from the beginning: the proportions between financial sources and current needs for receiving help from the international Community have become even worse. All the extra-budgetary actions and co-operation are really highly appreciated and gratefully received – but the problem is that there is still no powerful system with its own satisfactory funding resources, nor is there any automatically acting process for immediate and adequate “intervention” launched by the international community. This is something to be established, strengthened and always updated – and it should be strong enough to at least help us solve the problems of the properties on the Endangered WH List.

As far as “Capacity building” activities are concerned, I think it is worth underlining that the WH “movement” itself has already made a lot of progress in the identification of those fields and domains

where capacity building is needed. This is very important, not only for conservation of WH listed properties, but also generally for the preservation of cultural heritage. One of the biggest achievements of the 1972 Convention is to make the needs and possible solutions of conservation more visible. In fact, WH could also be seen as a kind of laboratory for this activity. In my view, the only possible adverse effect would be if this concentration on the WH items resulted in something like giving less room (and sources...) for all other, not WH-listed, properties.

All those efforts in Capacity building are closely connected with the next "C," namely Communication. Not being a specialist in this field, I only want to underline that also here there is a need for change or enhancement. Until now, stress – at least in my experience – has been put on new inscriptions; it is not by chance that the media's interest reaches its highest point when the Committee decides on inscriptions. A true and transparent communication could help a lot in better understanding and in promoting large-scale participation conserving values. This communication would mean not only a "one way" approach, mostly dealing with success and with spectacular events, or on the contrary, with some scandals if properties suffer from serious negative impacts, but also presenting the real meaning and challenges, best practices and important efforts undertaken in order to save our common heritage.

The last "C," added in 2007, namely Communities' involvement, is exactly in the same situation. This large-scale participation of peoples and communities is only possible if real information is available, and the Committee takes into consideration also bottom-up suggestions and requirements. This is a very delicate issue: how to reach reconciliation between local and global values and interests. Local and national pride are important but, of course, they are not enough to support OUV on their own. While studying Tentative Lists it becomes clear at which level this local (in better cases: regional) expectation in the selection process plays a role. There is a lot of local initiative for inclusion, certainly not because the local communities

are looking for more restrictions required by conservationists, but because they hope for an economical benefit from WH recognition. A bit similar, but not (only) economical background could lead to special initiatives inside countries (and mostly those having a federal system) in order to “balance” WH properties inside a country.

I believe it is important to take into consideration two features when dealing with communities’ involvement. The first one is to underline the long-term character of WH based impacts on peoples’ property and life. It is crucial not to give them false hopes about immediate benefits and success, and also to be very clear about the main guaranty for success, i.e. success is possible only if local communities are ready to preserve values and not exchange their traditional activities related to the tourism industry (as it is the case in a number of current WH Sites, some of which have been put on the endangered WH list). The second issue is that it is more than helpful to extend communities’ involvement – and “communities” should be understood here as much larger than only those living inside WH properties. The attraction-power of WH Sites could serve also in a larger area, which would enhance the possibilities for all communities in this neighbourhood, and consequently expand the carrying capacity of the WH Site by supporting tourism and its additional requirements, which is no less important than conservation of WH Sites.

In a kind of conclusion I would like to recapitulate that the Convention has become a unique and irreplaceable tool for international co-operation in the field of conservation of common heritage of humankind, but, after more than three decades there is a need for rethinking its main goals and for finding new solutions in order to enhance the efficiency of its implementation.

The Periodic Reporting exercise has already demonstrated the importance of, and, at the same time, the possibility for reaching a more or less global and holistic review on the status of conservation of WH properties, but also has shown that the current situation and the identified tendencies are not really reassuring. Therefore, it

is vital to give priority to conservation of WH properties rather than to continue to inscribe new sites without some essential strengthening of the whole system of this real and working, solidarity-based international co-operation.