

International and Regional Perspectives on the State of World Heritage

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For the past 6 years, I have had the privilege to represent the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) at the annual session of the World Heritage Committee (Committee) where the business of the World Heritage Convention (Convention) occurs. This includes decisions concerning nominations to the World Heritage List, and specific consideration of the issues relating to the State of Conservation of listed World Heritage properties. Most recently, this took place in St Petersburg in the Russian Federation in June 2012.

The International Council on Monuments and Sites is based in Paris. ICOMOS is a non-government organisation (NGO), a global network of cultural heritage practitioners, with national committees in more than 100 countries including Australia. In the World Heritage context, we mirror the role of IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), providing the expert advice to the Committee on cultural heritage issues, including the evaluation of nominations and advice on conservation issues affecting World Heritage properties.

The three Advisory Bodies – ICOMOS, IUCN and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) – are named in the Convention and play a specific role in its implementation. However, at Committee meetings we are not on the podium where the officials of UNESCO support the work of the Committee as its Secretariat. We are not in the front rows where the 21 elected member states that make up the Committee conduct the discussion and make the decisions; and, not in the many watchful seats behind. Our seats are poised in between these others. We are charged by the Convention and its Operational Guidelines to attend, to advise, and to be as scientific, rigorous and objective as possible in our work (UNESCO, 2012a).

The Convention celebrates its 40th birthday this year (UNESCO, 2012b). Many of us know that 40 is not the same as 20, but opinions vary about whether there is a mid-life crisis, or whether the problems that are frequently identified are merely a consequence of the immense success of the promotion and implementation of the Convention. Certainly such birthdays offer a chance to think and argue, to reflect, and renew – to consider what should come next.



In Australia and everywhere – culture and nature are not separate.
Photo © Commonwealth (Parks Australia)



Maheno Shipwreck, Fraser Island.
Photo © Paul Candlin, Commonwealth of Australia

This year saw the first ever live streaming of the Committee's discussions. The meeting also saw the advent of an NGO forum that met prior to the Committee session in St Petersburg (SPB Forum, 2012). Their decision to establish a global World Heritage Watch is particularly significant.

The theme chosen for the 40th birthday celebrations is *World Heritage and Sustainable Development: the role of communities*. This theme mirrors some changes in the World Heritage system over its four decades. In particular it reflects the growing awareness that social and cultural contexts are not peripheral, and that communities are pivotal, even though the implementation of the Convention is a transaction between member states.

In her comment on the year, the Director-General of UNESCO, Mrs Irina Bokova said *"together for 40 years we have protected the world's most outstanding places because this is our shared responsibility, because heritage is a force that unifies humanity, because it is a force for peace"*. This is the very high ideal that underpins the creation of UNESCO itself and the World Heritage system. It sets a very high bar for measuring our success.

There are many issues forming this dialogue beyond this short paper. The following are a few that seem relevant to our discussions about Australia's World Heritage - and by extension, the role that Australia could, or should, play in regional and global processes:

- The 'imbalance' in the World Heritage List regarding the representation of the world's regions and cultures, the relatively low number of natural and 'mixed' properties, and how to fill the perceived gaps, are continuing concerns.
- Conservation is at times overwhelmingly complex and challenging owing to diverse pressures such as armed conflict, climate change, rapid urbanisation, resource exploitation, natural disasters and poverty alleviation. Sustainable development is clearly an appealing framework for addressing some of these pressures – particularly in developing countries. But finding mechanisms that actually achieve both conservation and development goals is a continuing challenge that the 40th anniversary celebrations are actively exploring.
- The '5th C' (Community) was adopted by the Committee in 2007 through the leadership of the Chairperson of the Committee, New Zealand's Tumu Te Heuheu. It joined the other '4 C's' in the Committee's strategic objectives – conservation, credibility, capacity and communication. However, the roles of communities have yet to be incorporated effectively into the processes and outcomes of the World Heritage system.
- Building capacity is a priority, and is much more than just training (UNESCO, 2011). Article 5 of the Convention text urges States Parties to develop national institutions for conservation, protection and presentation of all cultural and natural heritage. However, over the past 40 years, this part of the Convention has been eclipsed by the focus on the World Heritage List.



It is impossible to capture briefly all the facets of an international perspective. The following five vignettes might provide a window on some key issues.

- UNESCO's Director-General has expressed her grave concern about armed conflict and its impacts on the people and the cultural heritage of Syria (and also Timbuktu in Mali), saying “*damage to the heritage of the country is damage to the soul of its people and its identity*” (UNESCO, Press 30 March 2012). The St Petersburg session of the Committee also learned of the deaths of seven staff at the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, killed by poachers. Sometimes our goals of peace and inter-cultural dialogue seem remote.
- Issue 62 of the magazine *World Heritage Review* (2012) was themed ‘World Heritage & Indigenous Peoples’. The Advisory Bodies and the World Heritage Centre are working together to work out what rights-based approaches mean in practical terms, including the implications of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Larsen, 2012; Sinding-Larsen, 2012; Oviedo and Puschkarsky, 2012; Logan, 2012). Australia and the Pacific potentially have important voices in this process, yet we know that many Indigenous people with ‘country’ in World Heritage properties have continuing issues with the recognition of their rights, management, tourism, and economic benefit sharing.
- The admission of Palestine as a member state of UNESCO in 2011 was followed by the withdrawal of US financial contributions to UNESCO, with severe

impacts on the already over-stretched resources available to the World Heritage system. Amongst other implications, this means that innovation – such as the expansion of upstream processes - is less easily achieved at a time when the core functions are difficult to cover.

- In recent sessions, a number of decisions taken by the Committee did not follow the recommendations of the Advisory Bodies. It is difficult to generalise about this or to foresee what the future holds, but it is evident that the role of professional or scientific expertise, and the provisions of the Operational Guidelines are being questioned (Meskell, 2012) (see Murphy and Shadie in this publication).
- The Reactive Monitoring mission to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef by IUCN and UNESCO in March 2012 followed the expression of ‘grave concern’ by the Committee about several reported matters. This reminds us that the work of conservation is never finished, even for such undisputed gems as the Great Barrier Reef. Importantly, the mission also demonstrated the potential of such missions to stimulate constructive dialogue.

In conclusion, I suggest that there are four things that the Australian Committee for IUCN (ACIUCN) and Australia ICOMOS could do right away:

- **Re-think the nature – culture divide.** It is vital to find practical ways to bridge this dichotomy. Forty years ago the Convention brought the heritage of culture and nature into a single instrument for international cooperation. It is time to ‘walk the talk’

in relation to this important pairing, recognising that – in Australia and everywhere – culture and nature are not separate, and that our methods do not match the ways that the lands and waters we term ‘heritage places’ are experienced by people (Hill et al., 2011 and Hill in this publication). IUCN and ICOMOS are actively working on this at the international level, and IUCN’s World Conservation Congress held in Jeju in the Republic of Korea in September 2012 included a number of events with lively exchanges on these matters.

- **Work with Australian Governments.** Australia has a strong record and reputation in the World Heritage system, and has on many occasions shown leadership and innovation (DSEWPaC, 2012). However we will not keep our reputation by congratulating ourselves and resting on the achievements of the past. The national organisations for IUCN and ICOMOS have multiple roles to play, and could be more effective as partners and sources of knowledge for national and State/Territory Governments.
- **Work together.** ACIUCN and Australia ICOMOS need to get to know each other better and coordinate some of the work we do to advise the Australian Government and communities with an interest in the promotion and protection of Australia’s World Heritage. Perhaps we could work together on a few areas where our practice could be improved, such as how to operationalise free, prior and informed consent, the development of an Australian Tentative List, support for the viability of the Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee and the Australian World Heritage Indigenous Network, and enhanced monitoring and management of Australia’s World Heritage properties. My experience at the international level is that collaboration can be very fruitful and creative – and much more effective than when we work in parallel.
- **Look beyond our shores.** While there is much to do in Australia, we should also take care to share and to learn in our own region. It is therefore welcome news that the Pacific World Heritage Hub was recently established with the support of the Australian Government, hosted by the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. Perhaps we can mark this milestone for World Heritage by looking for ways to support this new initiative and to work in effective partnership with colleagues in our region. Let’s see what we can do.

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Links

Australia ICOMOS: <http://australia.icomos.org/>

ICOMOS: <http://www.icomos.org/en>

UNESCO World Heritage Centre: <http://whc.unesco.org/>

IUCN World Heritage Programme: http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/wcpa_worldheritage/

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Biography

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Heritage comes in many forms: Fossil coral at the mouth of Mandu Mandu Gorge in Cape Range National Park. Photo: © Jane Ambrose, Commonwealth of Australia

