Conserving Humanity’s Common Heritage

Imagine a world without the pyramids of Egypt, the Serengeti, or the Great Barrier Reef. What about the Grand Canyon, Everest, or Statue of Liberty? World Heritage sites like these are diverse and unique as the lands and peoples of our planet. Yet they are also irreplaceable, and all are under threat from deterioration, natural disasters, civil strife, or insufficient resources for their care.

The World Heritage Convention

The World Heritage Convention, signed in 1972, has become one of history’s largest international treaties. After the United States established Yellowstone as the world’s first national park in 1872, a movement progressed to conserve more natural and cultural heritage across the United States. This movement, in a variety of forms, eventually spread across the globe. One century later, in 1972, the United States played a key role in developing an international treaty called the Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Aiming to enhance understanding and appreciation of heritage conservation, many see the Convention as applying the United States’ progressive conservation principles to the world.

Conserving them helps the world connect continuously through humanity’s common heritage. These sites—and our care for them—represent our human legacies, our present lives, and what we pass on to future generations. Working together, the people and nations of the world can protect the places that tell our shared human story.

The World Heritage emblem symbolizes the interdependence of cultural and natural properties. The square in a form created by binomial and the circle represents nature, the two being intimately linked. The emblem is round like the world, and at the same time it is a symbol of protection.

The World Heritage Convention

Global Partnerships

The National Park Service (NPS) Office of International Affairs works to promote the NPS mission to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout the United States and the world. NPS works with World Heritage site managers to help them better protect their own natural and cultural heritage, providing technical assistance and promoting exchanges of best practices in site conservation and management.

A Shared Promise to Protect the World’s Heritage

The World Heritage Convention is a shared promise to protect the world’s heritage. To be included on the World Heritage List, a site must be of “outstanding universal value” and meet at least one of the World Heritage criteria. After a country ratifies the Convention, a site must be nominated by that country to be considered for the World Heritage List. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee examines the nominations and inscribes sites on the World Heritage List.

Selection Criteria

To be included on the World Heritage List, a site must be of “outstanding universal value” and meet at least one of ten selection criteria. A site must also meet standards for integrity (must be complete) and authenticity (must be complete and authentic).

CULTURAL CRITERIA

• Be outstanding examples representing major stages of Earth’s history.
• Be outstanding examples representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes.
• Contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-place conservation of biological diversity.
• Represent a masterpiece of human creative genius.
• Exhibit an important interchange of human values on human history and evolution.
• Be outstanding examples of type building, architectural, or technological ensemble or landscape that illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.
• Be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural, or technological ensemble or landscape that illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.
• Bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization that is living or has disappeared.
• Exhibit an important interchange of human values on human history and evolution.
• Be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural, or technological ensemble or landscape that illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.
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NATURAL CRITERIA

• Contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.

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The National Park Service administers several World Heritage sites in the United States, others are managed by states, tribes, local governments, or private owners. The United States and Canada jointly nominated bordering parks to be two World Heritage sites: Waterton-Glacier and Wrangell-St. Elias/Glacier Bay/Tatshenshini-Alsek Klunzien. These designations underscore the nations’ mutually beneficial interaction in long-term resource management and day-to-day activities.

NATIONAL CRITERIA

• Contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.

Safeguarding World Heritage Sites

Cooperation is vital to conserving World Heritage sites. The National Park Service cooperates in a variety of ways to help manage and protect World Heritage sites. Nations identify and nominate their properties to be considered for the World Heritage List—a global collection of properties whose preservation is enhanced through international cooperation. The World Heritage Committee reviews the properties for their “outstanding universal value” to humanity, and selected sites are inscribed on the World Heritage List. Nations pledge to protect their sites while retaining sovereignty and control over them.

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EXPLORE, LEARN, AND PROTECT!

The National Park Service Junior Ranger program provides learning opportunities for people of all ages. Teams up with your local National Park Service staff. Learn more at www.nps.gov/junior/international/world-heritage-junior-rangers.htm.