

EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

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41st Session of the World Heritage Committee Kraków, 2-12 July 2017

The 41st session of the World Heritage Committee (“the Committee”) was held in Kraków, 2-12 July 2017. It was Poland’s first time hosting experts from around the world who came together to discuss the system of the protection of the World Heritage Sites. The Committee’s meeting (composed of 21 States Parties) was chaired by Professor Jacek Purchla, Chairperson of the Polish National Committee for UNESCO.

The public and the media always focus most of their attention on the nominations of new sites to the World Heritage List. Undoubtedly, the 41st session will be remembered by Angola and Eritrea because they had their first sites inscribed. Two capitals, Mbanza Kongo – the ancient capital of Kongo, and Asmara – the capital of Eritrea were also added. Others included a site from Poland – Tarnowskie Góry – which became a 15th Poland’s inscription on the World Heritage List. In Kraków 21 new World Heritage Sites – 3 natural and 18 cultural – were added, which increased the total number of inscriptions on the List to 1073. Four of the existing sites were extended, among them the Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe.

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Regrettably, new sites were also placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. At first, five World Heritage Sites were examined: Historic Centre of Vienna (Austria), Cerrado Protected Areas: Chapada dos Veadeiros and Emas National Parks (Brazil), Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California (Mexico), Kathmandu Valley (Nepal), and Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore (Pakistan). After long discussion, the Committee decided to only inscribe the Old Town of Vienna on the List of World Heritage in Danger. According to the Committee Austria did not comply with the requests to change the height of new constructions in the area (the Vienna Ice-Skating Club – Intercontinental Hotel – Vienna Konzerthaus project), which will impact adversely the outstanding universal value of the site. Another cultural property inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger – Hebron/Al-Khalil Old Town – was simultaneously put on the List of World Heritage.

Some of the sites were approved for removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger. The Georgian site of Bagrati Cathedral and Gelati Monastery, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1994 and put on the List in Danger in 2010, introduced a major reduction in the boundaries of the site. The new boundaries exclude Bagrati Cathedral, which has undergone major reconstruction that's detrimental to its integrity and authenticity. Thanks to this decision of the Georgian authorities, the Monastery of Gelati retained its standing as a World Heritage Site of outstanding universal value. Other examples refer to the Simien National Park (Ethiopia) and Comoé National Park (Ivory Coast). The List of World Heritage in Danger presently numbers 54 sites.

In addition to selecting new entries to be added to the List, the Committee also decides on measures of protection of the World Heritage Sites, as well as budget and general issues related to the state of conservation of the objects. This year the Committee examined 154 World Heritage properties, including the Białowieża Forest. During the plenary discussion the WHC draft decision (41 COM 7B.1) was changed and the States Parties of Belarus and Poland were obliged to submit an updated report on the state of conservation by 1 December 2018 and to invite a joint World Heritage Centre/IUCN Reactive Monitoring mission to come in. The experts will examine whether Białowieża Forest meets the criteria for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger due to the numerous reports from NGOs expressing their concerns regarding logging activities in the part of the forest that's located in Poland.

The protection of World Heritage is a complex system, based on the principles and procedures set out in the Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention and the work of experts from consultancies UNESCO – ICOMOS, IUCN, and ICCROM. In addition to the governments of States Parties to the 1972 UNESCO Convention, which are responsible for the proper implementation of the Convention regarding the protection and management of World Heritage Sites, their direct guardians, administrators, and local communities also play an important role in the system.

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For the first time in history of the Committee's sessions two additional initiatives introduced by Poland took place. The World Heritage Site Managers Forum was organized for people responsible for the protection and management of World Heritage Sites at the local level to share their experiences, challenges, and problems. As a result, the participants and site managers from all regions of the world prepared a statement in which they stressed the vital role of furthering capacity building throughout the world heritage management sector. None of the goals of the 1972 UNESCO Convention can be fully achieved without effective co-operation between State, local authorities, and site managers. Consequently, the discussions presented led to the identification of a series of opportunities in the following three main areas: the World Heritage capacity building, the World Heritage (eco) system, and World Heritage processes. They also stressed that an "alignment of strategic visions at international and national levels with site management needs to be achieved both among authorities and between authorities and civic society".

The other initiative introduced by Poland during the session was dedicated to representatives of international non-governmental organizations who could speak up at the Civil Society Forum. Both events were appreciated by the Committee, which decided that these meetings should be organized every year by the country hosting the session. Similarly, young experts meetings have been accompanying the Committee's sessions for years. The World Heritage Young Professionals Forum focused on "lost and restored heritage".

This year's session gathered delegates from 126 countries, although there are 193 States Parties to the 1972 UNESCO Convention. The main organizer of the session on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Poland was the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, with the National Heritage Board of Poland as the executive organizer.