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A strategy of innovative approaches and recommendations for **enhancing World Heritage** in the next decade

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A promising future

The World Heritage Convention is of central importance in recognizing protected areas of universal value to all of humanity. World Heritage Sites protect over 8% of the total global protected area estate, including our most iconic natural and cultural areas, and should be drivers of change and models of excellence to show how protected areas can succeed as inspiring solutions for nature and people. The promise of World Heritage Sites is to provide the highest level of international protection to our most iconic protected areas, and to provide exemplary leadership within the protected areas movement on land, and in the oceans. Delivering the promise of World Heritage is the litmus test, as allowing these sites to be degraded would constitute a clear failure of the conservation movement. Despite their iconic status and global recognition, World Heritage sites are subject to the same threats and pressures facing the wider protected area estate: they are suffering from the impacts of climate change and are increasingly under pressure from large scale development projects, including a range of very damaging industrial extractive activities. In order to change the dynamic for World Heritage, all stakeholders and rights holders have to act together, making the conservation of these outstanding places a global, joint common responsibility between State Parties, private sector and industry (including extractives), civil society, local communities and indigenous peoples. To be successful we need to commit to World Heritage as a common purpose.

In particular we must ensure the full involvement of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and religious groups in World Heritage site identification, assessment, nominations, and management in accordance with a rights-based approach and the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; using the Convention and the newly launched IUCN World Heritage Outlook and civil society partnerships to monitor and improve site management; raising awareness of the values of sites and the serious and increasing threats they face; reform of the Convention's Operational Guidelines to ensure full participation of Indigenous Peoples in all processes related to sites incorporating any part of their lands, territories and seas and to require free, prior and informed consent from affected peoples to the World Heritage listing of their lands, territories and seas; and developing new tools and guidance, for example addressing the indissoluble links between nature and culture in World Heritage sites and how to implement a wilderness conservation strategy under the Convention. **The World Parks Congress has seen the launch of the first ever global assessment of natural World Heritage, and is a unique opportunity to ensure the leadership role of the World Heritage Convention in the coming decade.**

To ensure the credibility of the World Heritage Convention we must shift the focus from listing to providing leadership in protected area conservation. We must improve the outlook for all World Heritage sites to ensure that they maintain their Outstanding Universal Value, and also ensure their equitable management and shared benefits for the local communities and indigenous peoples that depend upon them.

The current situation

The global context for World Heritage has evolved significantly since the 2003 Congress in Durban in several key respects.

(1) In spite of their global recognition through the Convention and as global demand for resources continues, World Heritage sites are increasingly under threat, both from a broad range of development activities, including extractive industries (currently affecting over 50 sites) and large-scale infrastructure such as roads and hydroelectric projects (currently affecting over 40 sites). State Parties to the Convention often find it increasingly challenging to fulfill their commitment for the protection of the sites in view of these developments. While a number of commitments have been made by individual companies and industry groups recognizing World Heritage sites as no-go areas, much remains to be done to safeguard World Heritage sites. In addition other critical threats, such as the growing impacts of illegal wildlife trade and the continuing impacts of civil conflict on many World Heritage areas, need decisive action. Protecting threatened World Heritage Sites is a litmus test for the success of protected areas: if we cannot save these iconic places, the future of protected areas is bleak. **Thus the World Parks Congress needs to recognise and act to address the most pressing threats to World Heritage Areas.**

(2) The IUCN World Heritage Outlook, the first ever global assessment of natural and mixed World Heritage sites, has been conducted and was launched at the World Parks Congress. World Heritage Sites are recognised for the first time for their good conservation outlook, and challenged to spread their inspiring practice across the World Heritage system and provide a leadership role for all protected areas. The Outlook also confirms the threats to many World Heritage Sites, which are exacerbated in many sites by inadequate on-ground resources and capacity. The Conservation Reports of the World Heritage Committee also indicate a wide range of threats, and many areas where capacity is lacking in both World Heritage Sites and the institutions that protect them. **Now is a moment for States Parties to the Convention and all its stakeholders to ensure that all World Heritage Areas benefit from adequate protection measures and are adequately resourced.**

(3) The World Heritage estate has grown significantly and currently represents 8% of all protected areas and many important gaps in the World Heritage List have been filled. New conservation science is enabling clarity on where the most pressing gaps are for achieving a representative World Heritage List, including gaps in many regions for both terrestrial and marine sites, as well as the lack of recognition of sites in the High Seas. In addition to delivering this new science to local levels, capacity and resources are needed to support States to design, protect and adequately resource the potential gaps on the World Heritage List, and include them in the national Tentative Lists for World Heritage listing. **Thus the World Parks Congress needs to mobilise action to support and protect our most significant protected areas of Outstanding Universal Value, and nominate them to the World Heritage List.**

(4) The Convention has provided protection to over 1000 cultural and natural sites, but over the last several years, decisions taken by the World Heritage Convention have increasingly diverged from the technical advice provided by the Convention's Advisory Bodies, including IUCN, undermining the credibility of the Convention. **The World Parks Congress needs to identify how the high expectations from the global protected areas community for high quality and technical credibility of the governance of the World Heritage Convention will be delivered.**

(5) There has been a major increase in both concern and expectations from indigenous peoples, local communities and religious groups about how positive results can be achieved for protecting indigenous lands and territories, intangible cultural heritage, livelihoods and sacred natural sites, especially those sites with special spiritual or cultural significance. In addition, rights infringements by World Heritage Listing have been reported. Whilst IUCN and ICOMOS have been working to ensure strict adherence to rights based approaches and ensure better recognition of the interplay between nature and culture in the evaluations of World Heritage sites, the lack of adequate policies in the World Heritage Convention and a lack of appropriate requirements for participation, transparency and consent in the Operational Guidelines of the Convention, based on a rights-

based approach in line with international norms, requires clear action. **The World Parks Congress needs to identify new approaches to World Heritage that meet the expectations and needs of indigenous peoples can be put in place.**

(6) Civil society support for the Convention has seen a recent and welcome increase. This is manifested in the number of regional and global NGO networks emerging to support the Convention and its work, strengthened support of individual World Heritage sites, both in terms of site management support as well as advocacy, and increased civil society presence at World Heritage Convention meetings. But the scale of this engagement is still too limited and fragile. The future of the World Heritage Convention will rely on much wider engagement and support from civil society, as well as indigenous peoples, local communities and religious groups. Civil society needs to receive recognition as full actors in the way the Convention functions. **The World Parks Congress provides the platform to broaden and upscale that engagement over the next decade.**

Recommendations for change

1. States Parties to the World Heritage Convention should work with civil society and other partners to ensure that World Heritage Sites serve as models for integrated, effective, equitable and enduring natural and cultural conservation, and have a good and improving Outlook and resilience in the face of global change, as a litmus test of the success of Protected Areas globally.
2. To achieve a credible World Heritage List, which is regarded as substantially complete, the Advisory Bodies to the World Heritage Convention should support States Parties in the targeted nomination of sites that fill the few remaining gaps on the World Heritage List in terms of conserving biodiversity, wilderness, spectacular natural features, cultural landscapes, and geodiversity, in all regions of the globe, and the World Heritage Committee should maintain the high standard of Outstanding Universal Value to ensure only those areas that are the best of the best are inscribed on the World Heritage List.
3. The credibility and integrity of the World Heritage Convention is restored and retained, and decision-taking by the World Heritage Committee is driven by science and objectivity.
4. Civil Society, local communities, indigenous peoples and religious groups should decisively increase their engagement in the World Heritage Convention, for the benefit and support of World Heritage Sites and the communities that depend on them, demonstrating that World Heritage Sites contribute to sustainable development, in a manner consistent with and without in any way detracting from their outstanding universal value, and the eradication of poverty, and should contribute to the forthcoming United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The Congress recognizes that impacts on the Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage Sites may not be compensated by offsets.
5. Global standards for Indigenous Peoples rights, and for the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, including the UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples, should be adopted and implemented in the World Heritage Convention, including through a revision of its Operational Guidelines to ensure respect for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the full and effective involvement of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and religious groups in the Convention's evaluation and monitoring processes and in the management of World Heritage Sites on Indigenous Peoples' lands, territories and seas, in accordance with a rights-based approach.
6. The World Heritage Convention should fully and consistently recognize Indigenous Peoples' cultural values as universal, and develop methods for recognition and support for the interconnectedness of natural, cultural, social, and spiritual significance of World Heritage sites, including natural and cultural sites and cultural landscapes.

Key partnerships needed

- World Parks Congress
- States Parties to the Convention
- National governments and protected areas management agencies
- Civil society – conservation NGOs, groups focused on rights based approaches
- Communities and Indigenous Peoples
- World Heritage Site Managers
- The World Heritage Committee
- IUCN State and NGO members, Regions, and Commissions
- IUCN, ICOMOS, ICCROM
- UNESCO and the World Heritage Centre – The Secretariat of the World Heritage Convention
- Private Sector and industry groups, and their regulators
- The biodiversity conventions
- Documentary film makers and photographers