

Galapagos State of Conservation: Under the United Nations Microscope

Next month, the United Nations will gather to review the state of conservation of this iconic World Heritage Site.

OTTAWA, ONTARIO (ON), CANADA, June 11, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In July, the countries of the world will gather (on-line) to review the state of conservation of World Heritage (WH) sites. They elect 21 representatives amongst themselves to sit on the powerful World Heritage All World Heritage (WH) Committee. This committee sites are subjected to international scrutiny, ensuring that the commitment to conserve the values for which they were allowed onto the World Heritage List is upheld.

The UNESCO WH Convention came into force in 1976 – it's the only UN Convention to our knowledge under which countries give up a little bit of their sovereignty in exchange for having its most outstanding natural and cultural heritage sites formally recognized.

To get a site recognized under the Convention, a country must formally submit a very detailed proposal in which they must present the case for inscription. Only sites that meet strict technical criteria and demonstrate the “outstanding universal values” recognized by the Convention can be considered for the list. Proposals and their justifying documentation often run at over 1,000 pages. The process for developing and formally submitting such a proposal can take several years.

Every year, UNESCO's WH Committee (comprised of 21 elected representatives from among the nearly 200 countries that have ratified the Convention) will review these proposals, and guided by advice from technical experts, will decide on which new sites may be allowed onto the list. The yearly event, usually in July, generates a tremendous amount of press coverage around the world. A country having its site recognized by UNESCO is like winning a gold medal in the Olympics. Local, regional and national politicians rejoice when a site is inscribed under their watch.

Above: World Heritage Committee meeting in St Petersburg

MINIMUM CONSERVATION STANDARDS MUST BE MAINTAINED... OR ELSE

But things don't stop there. Once having had their site admitted into the exclusive WH club, governments commit to maintaining minimum conservation standards. To that end, the WH Convention secretariat in Paris (where I worked for 11 years) carries out on-going monitoring of a site's state of conservation. Through a variety of direct and indirect means, it gathers information / intelligence and assesses if a particular site risks falling afoul of WH Convention requirements.

At its annual meeting, the WH Committee will also take several days to review "State of Conservation Reports" for up to 200 WH sites that, for one reason or another, elicit concerns in regards to their conservation status.

GALAPAGOS UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

This July, the state of conservation of Galapagos will be subjected to the WH Committee's review. I used to lead that effort at the WH Convention's secretariat (the WH Centre) and would produce, with support from technical advisors, the "Galapagos State of Conservation Report". The report described the latest information on conservation threats to the site, along with a summary of the Ecuadorian government's own report on its efforts at dealing with them. It concludes with a "draft decision" for the WH Committee to adopt, or amend. Once completed, the State of Conservation report would be sent to the 21 members of the WH Committee for their review several weeks before the annual meeting. At the meeting, I would present the content of the report, along with our technical advisors, and we would field questions from the Committee.

WH Committee decisions usually call for the government to take specific actions on specific issues. In the worst case scenario, should the WH Committee determine that a country is not assuming its responsibilities in conservation a site, it could decide to remove that site from the list (this has happened only twice in the history of the Convention).

The 2021 WH Committee meeting will be held on-line, from the 16th to the 31st of July. The Galapagos State of Conservation report has recently been made public and can be consulted here (I have extracted the relevant 6 pages from the 492 page document).

For those keen on understanding the mechanics of international conservation efforts through the WH Convention, it's a good opportunity to be appraised of those issues that raise concerns. In brief, these are:

Fishing/collecting aquatic resources (illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing / collection of aquatic resources)

Legal framework (inadequate implementation of the Special Law on Galápagos)

Governance

Identity, social cohesion, changes in local population and community (high immigration rate)

Illegal activities

Impacts of tourism / visitor / recreation

Invasive Alien Species / biosecurity (inadequate and ineffective quarantine measures)

Major visitor accommodation and associated infrastructure

For a full description, see the report here.

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