

Protecting World Heritage Sites

by Michael Curtis



Since its creation in London on November 16, 1945, UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, founded to strengthen the foundation of international peace and sustainable development, has been concerned with masterpieces of human creative genius, with unique or exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or civilization which is living or has disappeared, and with sites of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance. At its meeting in Paris, October-November 1972, the General Conference of UNESCO, noted that the cultural heritage and the natural heritage were increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions. It considered that deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constituted an impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world, and held it was incumbent on the international community as a whole to participate in protecting the heritage of outstanding universal value.

The meeting therefore adopted a document concerning the protection of the world heritage, a document that took effect in December 1975 after it had been ratified by 20 countries. Three years later, in 1978, the World Heritage Sites, WHS, program was created, beginning to designate sites to be protected as part of the world's cultural and natural heritage. Among the first sites listed were the Galapagos Islands, and in the U.S. the Mesa Verde National Park and Yellowstone National Park.

Today, there are 1121 properties listed by WHS as of outstanding universal value, 868 of cultural value, and 213 of natural beauty. Italy has the largest number, 57, China comes next with 55; the UK has 31 and the U.S. 24 sites. Some sites are difficult to visit, such as the Seychelles and Bikini in the Marshall Islands, but most are easy to visit, such as the Paris Banks of the Seine, Rome, and the Tower of London. Among the 24 listed sites in the U.S. are the Statue of Liberty, Independence Hall, Monticello, the Grand Canyon, and the Everglades.

UNESCO has a so-called "danger list," sites ascertained with specific and proven imminent danger, or in potential danger from threats that could have deleterious effects on its inherent characteristics. At this point, the list includes 52 properties, one of which is Everglades National Park.

So far, only three sites have lost their status: one is the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in Oman, the home of the rare antelope which was delisted in 2007 because Oman insisted on reducing the size of the protected area by 90% ; the second is the Dresden Elbe Valley, after there had been construction of a four lane motor way bridge across the river, in the heart of the cultural environment. It was delisted in 2009.

The third site to be stripped is the city of Liverpool which was added to the list in 2004 in recognition of its role in world trade in the 18th and 19th centuries, and for the

architectural beauty of its waterfront. Liverpool had been the city of innovative technology and building techniques of its maritime industry, models for other port cities in the world. It was also the European port most involved in transporting enslaved people between 1695 and 1807, with more than 5,000 voyages to Africa. However, it was delisted in 2020 because the city plans a remodeling program costing 5.5 billion pounds in its dock side area to build towers and a major stadium, costing 500 million pounds, for the Everton football club in the redevelopment of parts of its waterfront. This change of the city skyline means, for UNESCO, that the city has lost its characteristics, is detrimental to the site's authenticity, and has caused irreversible loss to the historic value and image of Victorian docks. So far, no comment on the delisting has come from the remaining Beatles, who may not recognize their home town, or from Paul McCartney who is a supporter of Everton.

Other WH sites in the world are in danger or are being challenged because of environmental damage, excessive development or over-tourism. The Australian Great Barrier Reef, the world's largest coral reef system, a major international tourist spot, has experienced massive coral damage, and has lost some half of its corals since 1995. UNESCO at first recommended that the site should be listed as "in danger," but then did not list it as an endangered site. This will be reconsidered in 2022.

Two popular tourist sites are under review. It has long been familiar that Venice gets over-crowded with tourists, and that there is need for a more sustainable tourism management. At the moment, Venice will not be included in the danger list, but officials are working on protecting the city from the lagoon, and from over-touring and population decline.

Budapest is an outstanding example of urban development, but a major renovation of the Buda Castle quarter has caused alarm. The proposed changes have been criticized as

detracting from the site, and are driven by ideological factors, promoting Hungary's pre- Communist national identity.

The Scottish capital Edinburgh is warned it might be delisted because of plans for a new multiple "bin hub" system to collect garbage on its Georgian streets, with neo classical architecture, could desecrate the architecture of the area, the historic architecture.. The plan is to use the bin collections in the historic city to replace the bags and boxes left on the pavement for early morning collection.

Britain has a formidable list of sites. Among the most well-known ones are Blenheim Palace, Canterbury Cathedral, the city of Bath, the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey, the city of Edinburgh, the Tower of London, and Stonehenge.

There is now anxiety about the possible delisting of Stonehenge, probably the world's most recognizable set of stones, recommended for WH site status in 1986 because it was of outstanding value to humanity. For centuries, people have puzzled over the history, perhaps 5,000 years ago, and purpose of these prehistoric monuments, an outer ring of standing stones, each 13 feet high and 7 feet wide, and an inside ring of smaller bluestones, located two miles from Amesbury on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire.

The site is under threat because of the plan, costing 1.7 billion pounds, backed by the government to turn a road A 303 into a dual carriageway and build a two mile tunnel. Part of the proposed dual carriageway would be exposed in open landscape. The road would cut through a scattering of prehistoric artefacts and buried remains of earlier copper and bronze age settlements.

The campaign to save Stonehenge as a WH site is being fought by historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, environmentalists, and by Druids who view it as a sacred site. Amusingly, the Druid, a man named Arthur Pendragon, who claims

to be “the once and future king,” has vowed to lie down in front of the builders to stop the scheme.

Stonehenge must stay a world site. It would be a shock to the image of Britain, to the cultural standing of the country and of Boris Johnson, if Britain were the first country in the world to have more than one historic site struck off the world heritage list.