

Background Guide
UNESCO
Cultural Heritage



I. Introduction to the Committee

UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It seeks to build peace through international cooperation in education, sciences, and culture. UNESCO's programs contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals defined in the 2030 Agenda, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015.¹ As early as 1942, in wartime, the governments of the European countries, which were confronting Nazi Germany and its allies, met in the United Kingdom for the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education (CAME). World War II was not over; yet, those countries were looking for ways and means to rebuild their education systems once peace was restored. The project quickly gained momentum and soon acquired a universal character. New governments, including that of the United States, decided to join. Upon the proposal of CAME, a United Nations Conference for the establishment of an educational and cultural organization (ECO/CONF) convened in London from 1 to 16 November 1945. Scarcely had the war ended when the conference opened. It gathered representatives of 44 countries who decided to create an organization that would embody a genuine culture of peace. In their eyes, the new organization was to establish the "intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind" and thereby prevent the outbreak of another world war.²

Over the years, UNESCO has launched pioneering programs to achieve this goal. UNESCO mobilized philosophers, artists, and intellectuals from every country. From the very beginning, UNESCO debunked racist theories, and the organization developed innovative projects that changed the world such as the Universal Copyright Convention (1952) and the Man and the Biosphere Program (1971). UNESCO gave rise to global centers of scientific research, from CERN (1952) to SESAME (2017) and developed a global tsunami early warning system. UNESCO brought together experts and scholars to write the first ever general history of Africa and all five continents. UNESCO carried out literacy campaigns that spearheaded the development of countries such as Italy, Korea, and Afghanistan. UNESCO has also established universal principles for scientific ethics and the human genome and protected the temples of ancient Egypt – among other sites.³

Faced with the challenges of our age, UNESCO is more relevant than ever – and with 193 member states, it continues to lead the way forward. The organization does this by imagining the future of education to navigate to our new world, living in peace with others and the planet, establishing common standards on open science and ethics of artificial intelligence, developing new tools to fight new forms of racism, hate speech, and misinformation.⁴

II. Statement of the Issues

UNESCO defines cultural heritage as artifacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific, and social significance. It includes tangible heritage

¹ "UNESCO in Brief," UNESCO.org (UNESCO)

² Ibid

³ "History of UNESCO," UNESCO.org (UNESCO)

⁴ Ibid

(movable, immobile, and underwater), intangible cultural heritage (ICH) embedded into cultural and natural heritage artifacts, sites, or monuments. The definition does not include ICH related to other cultural domains such as festivals, celebrations etc. It covers industrial heritage and cave paintings.⁵ Armed conflict and war, earthquakes and other natural disasters, pollution, poaching, uncontrolled urbanization, and unchecked tourist development pose major problems to World Heritage sites. Dangers can be ‘ascertained,’ referring to specific and proven imminent threats, or ‘potential,’ when a property is faced with threats which could have negative effects on its’ World Heritage values.⁶

Sites subject to unusual levels of pollution, natural hazards or other problems may be placed on the associated “List of World Heritage in Danger” until improvements are made. Climate change, urbanization, and natural disasters are a persistent threat to World Heritage sites around the globe, and two locations – the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in Oman and the Dresden Elbe Valley in Germany – were removed from the World Heritage list because of development within the protected areas.⁷ During the Bosnian conflict (1992-95), Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) cultural objects and historical sites were intentionally destroyed as part of the ethnic cleansing campaign conducted by the Yugoslav and Bosnian Serb armies. In 2001 in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, the Taliban demolished a pair of massive statues of the Buddha as part of their campaign against non-Islamic artifacts.⁸ Beginning in 2015, the pace of such destruction accelerated dramatically as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS) expanded its control in the Middle East. ISIL fighters looted what treasures could be sold to support their military campaign, and they destroyed as well as defaced significant portions of the ancient cities of Nineveh and Hatra in Iraq.⁹

Climate change is also a significant threat to cultural heritage sites. The melting of glaciers around the world is affecting the appearance of sites inscribed for their outstanding beauty and destroying the habitat of rare wildlife species such as the snow leopard, in the Sagarmatha National Park in Nepal.¹⁰ Seventy percent of the world’s deep-sea corals are expected to be affected by changing conditions related to rising temperatures and increased ocean acidification by 2100. The Great Barrier Reef in Australia is expected to be subject to increasingly frequent bleaching events, cases in which corals turn white and may die to rising sea temperatures. Close to 60% of the world’s coral reefs – home to hundreds of thousands of fish species – are at risk.¹¹ Biodiversity on land is also threatened by climate change; for example, at the Heritage Site of Cape Floral Region Protected Areas in South Africa, the biodiversity is threatened by shrinking bioclimatic habitats. Climate change is also expected to damage archeological World Heritage

⁵ “Cultural Heritage,” UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics)

⁶ “World Heritage in Danger,” UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO)

⁷ Naomi Blumberg et al., “World Heritage Site,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., August 16, 2022)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ “Climate Change Threatens UNESCO World Heritage Sites,” UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO, April 10, 2007)

¹¹ Ibid

sites. For example, Chan Chan Archeological Zone in Peru is having issues with precipitation and drought cycles, humidity, and soil chemistry. These changes can and will impact the conservation of archeological remains.¹²

III. History & Past UN Action

For decades, the UN has called upon member states to solve educational technology issues. In 2015, member states created and adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The Sustainable Development Goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere.¹³ These goals are a part of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the goals.¹⁴ Cultural Heritage falls under SDG 11: Make Cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Resilient and Sustainable. This is the first time an international development agenda refers to culture. More specifically, SDG 11.4 calls for the “strengthening of efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.”¹⁵

UNESCO seeks to encourage the identification, protection, and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. This is embodied in an international treaty called the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, adopted by UNESCO in 1972.¹⁶ The Convention defines the kind of natural or cultural sites which can be considered for inclusion on the World Heritage List – a list of places with outstanding value to preserve them. It explains how the World Heritage Fund is to be used and managed and under what conditions international financial assistance may be provided. The Convention also stipulates the obligation of State Parties to report regularly to the World Heritage Committee on the state of conservation of their World Heritage sites.¹⁷

UNESCO is also responsible for oversight of the 1954 *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*. Considering that the preservation of cultural heritage is of immense importance for all peoples of the world and thus needs universal protection, the 1945 Convention was adopted. Now widely referred to as the 1954 Hague Convention, it is the first and the most comprehensive multilateral treaty dedicated exclusively to the protection of cultural heritage in times of peace as well as during armed conflict. The Convention aims to protect cultural property, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, archeological sites, works of art, manuscripts, books, and other objects of artistic, historical, or archeological interest, as well as scientific collections of any kind regardless of their origin or ownership.¹⁸

IV. Latest Developments

¹² Ibid

¹³ “The Sustainable Development Agenda - United Nations Sustainable Development,” United Nations (United Nations)

¹⁴ Ibid

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¹⁶ “World Heritage,” UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸

The World Heritage Committee meets once a year and consists of representatives from 21 of the States Parties to the Convention elected by their General Assembly. The Committee is responsible for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, defines the use of the World Heritage Fund and allocates financial assistance upon requests from States Parties. It has the final say on whether a property is included on the World Heritage List. This year marks the 45th session of the Committee; however, this session has been indefinitely postponed because the plenary meeting was due to be held in Kazan, Russia. Given the war in Ukraine and Russia's destruction of cultural sites, the Committee has decided to postpone the session until further notice.¹⁹

One important success story of UNESCO is the temple of Abu Simbel in Egypt. The temple was built by Pharaoh Ramses II and twice a year the light of the sun rising illuminates the inside of the temple and the statues that guard it. Eventually, it was forgotten until it was rediscovered in 1813. Decades later, it was threatened by flooding due to the creation of the Aswan High Dam. The dam was created to help irrigate the lands and provide water to rural areas. In 1964, experts from 50 nations and UNESCO worked together to save the temples. The entire site was cut into large blocks, dismantled, lifted, and reassembled in a new location 65 meters higher and 200 meters back from the river. Today, the statues and temple watch the sun rise each day as they did 3,000 years ago.²⁰ Other sites such as Venice, Italy, Angkor, Cambodia, and Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina are cultural heritage sites that UNESCO is working to protect.²¹

V. Problems That Resolutions Should Address

The issue of cultural heritage has expanded over decades as conflict, climate change, growing global population, and limited resources increases the number of sites and artifacts that are destroyed and defaced. Several interrelated issues need to be addressed while addressing cultural heritage.

Delegates are encouraged to consider the following issues and questions in their research and position paper writing:

- Who pays for restoration of damaged antiquities?
- How has conflict affected global cultural heritage sites?
- How have NGOs and philanthropic organizations helped in the restoration and protection of sites and antiquities?
- Have there been successful criminal prosecutions at the national or international level regarding the willful destruction or degradation of World Heritage sites?

¹⁹ "45th Session of the World Heritage Committee," UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO)

²⁰ "Cultural Heritage: 7 Successes of UNESCO's Preservation Work," UNESCO.org (UNESCO, June 7, 2022)

²¹ Ibid

VI. Helpful Sources

- UNESCO www.unesco.org
- Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations www.sdgs.un.org/goals

Endnotes

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3. "History of UNESCO," UNESCO.org (UNESCO)
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7. Naomi Blumberg et al., "World Heritage Site," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., August 16, 2022)
8. Ibid
9. Ibid
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11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. "The Sustainable Development Agenda - United Nations Sustainable Development," United Nations (United Nations)
14. Ibid
15. "Goal 11 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs," United Nations (United Nations)
16. "World Heritage," UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO),
17. Ibid
18. "1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict," UNESCO (UNESCO, October 10, 2021)
19. "The World Heritage Committee," UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO)
20. "45th Session of the World Heritage Committee," UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO)
21. "Cultural Heritage: 7 Successes of UNESCO's Preservation Work," UNESCO.org (UNESCO, June 7, 2022)
22. Ibid

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