

“THE JEWELS OF THE CROWN”: UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE AND PROTECTED AREAS

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ABSTRACT

Regarded by many as the ‘Nobel Prize for Nature’ (Gaudry, 2006), the intergovernmental *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* provides protection to “outstanding universal value” recognized areas. The core idea is based on the universal outstanding natural, cultural or mixed values which while being part of a common global heritage are contained or expressed in a certain site or area. Adopted in 1972, the Convention recognizes in its Article 4, that each State Party has *the duty of ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, preservation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage as defined in Article 1 and 2 and situated on its territory belongs primarily to that State.*

Since its initial phases, and throughout its 31 previous sessions, the *World Heritage Committee* (the decision-making organ of the Convention) has helped creating a new global reality by uniting humankind through the recognition of our shared heritage, reflected in the diversity of World Heritage sites. The *World Heritage List* has been created as the principle operational mechanism to certify the ‘authenticity’ and the ‘integrity’ of the properties inscribed: the “inscription on the *World Heritage List* is the result of a rigorous selection and monitoring process in line with the 1972 Convention, fulfilling UNESCO's mandate to foster "humankind's intellectual and moral solidarity" (UNESCO, 2008). 851 properties form part of the cultural and natural heritage, including 660 cultural, 166 natural and 25 mixed properties in 141 States Parties (out of a total of 185 which ratified the Convention) (UNESCO, 2007).

Because of their worldwide ‘visibility’, the natural heritage properties that are inscribed in the List (most of them coinciding with protected areas) are expected to play a pivotal role in countries’ nature conservation policies implementation; their management effectiveness is evaluated by IUCN on behalf of the World Heritage Committee, vis-à-vis the initial designation proposal, and on a regularly basis every six year, when the periodical report has to be sent to the World Heritage Centre.

More and more, these ‘jewels of the crown’ are seen as key sites where innovative management practices are to be tested and sustainable development initiatives (e.g. eco-tourism) to be further implemented: in fact, their international ‘fame’ results also on a potential higher attractiveness and consequent risks and threats for their integrity.