

WORLD HERITAGE WATCH

World Heritage Watch was founded in 2014 with the aim of harnessing information from local communities, NGOs and indigenous peoples for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention and thus strengthening the role of these actors in the implementation of the Convention. The small non-profit organisation coordinates a worldwide network of now over 170 such non-governmental actors on all continents and regularly participates in the sessions of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

The organisation's self-imposed task was based on the practical experience that the reports that the State Parties submit to UNESCO (i.e. the World Heritage Committee, the World Heritage Centre and its advisory bodies ICOMOS, IUCN, and ICCROM) on the state of conservation of the sites often give only an incomplete impression of the actual situation, while UNESCO itself has very limited opportunities to form its own opinion. This is particularly true for threats to sites for which governments themselves are responsible, but also for sites that are not or only partially accessible to UN missions, such as Lhasa, Diyarbakir or Libya. It was only through World Heritage Watch that UNESCO became aware of the occupation of the Sukur cultural landscape in northern Nigeria by the terrorist militia Boko Haram.

Due to their presence on site and through daily observations, knowledge of the actors and understanding of domestic processes, civil society actors can supplement the state reports with information that is relevant for an appropriate assessment of the situation and thus help UNESCO to make decisions that more adequately address threats. Publishing such information is the purpose of the World Heritage Watch Reports.

Thus, a few years ago, civil society in Gjirokastra, Albania, was able to correct the report of an ICOMOS Reactive Monitoring Mission that had not seen the town by daylight and had adopted misleading statements from the municipality without checking them. It could also correct false statements in the government's Periodic Report and make UNESCO aware of the actually dramatic situation of the town. In Carthage, a local activist was able to reveal that the country report had used, among other things, five-year-old photographs, and to compare these with recent photographs.

The World Heritage Watch network sees itself as a complement to the advisory bodies mentioned. ICOMOS, for example,

although set up as an NGO, is also limited in its possibilities due to its statutory function under the World Heritage Convention. Moreover, ICOMOS officials also hold government offices in many countries, which – without prejudice to their personal integrity – impairs their independence and can lead to conflicts of interest. Nevertheless, there is an increasing number of collaborations with ICOMOS on the individual or organisational levels. Wherever ICOMOS accepts the expertise of specialists outside scientific institutions, this development will increase.

The publication cycle of the reports follows the working cycle of the World Heritage Convention. The individual reports are written after the national reports have been published and before UNESCO's World Heritage Panel discusses them and phrases draft resolutions for the annual sessions of the World Heritage Committee.

Of particular value are reports about sites on which UNESCO has not received national reports for many years, such as Upper Svaneti and the Medina of Tunis. In these cases, the reports are meant to encourage UNESCO to send missions to these sites and to put them on the agenda of the World Heritage Committee.

In addition, the World Heritage Watch Report also provides space for reports on sites that are, or should be, on the Tentative List in order to generate attention and to make sure that a potential future inscription will not be prevented due to harmful developments. In the case of the Podessennya cultural landscape in northern Ukraine, World Heritage Watch is helping to ensure that the local population is involved in the preparation of the nomination and will have significant benefits from it.

On several occasions, World Heritage Watch has been challenged by demands for verification of our information. The same question could, however, be equally asked of the national reports. Beyond the duty of care of the authors and editors, it remains the principle responsibility of UNESCO to verify the information it receives, which it does, of course. So far, the information provided by the authors of the World Heritage Watch Report has consistently proved to be reliable. This is its greatest strength, and it is precisely for this reason that the World Heritage network has firmly established itself in the six years since its inception as a respected partner for the statutory bodies of the World Heritage Convention.

Stephan Doempke
Chairman
World Heritage Watch

