

World Heritage and wilderness

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The vast natural forest of Yellowstone National Park (United States) covers nearly 9,000 km².





Mosi-oa-Tunya / Victoria Falls (Zambia/Zimbabwe) is the world's greatest sheet of falling water.

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Recent global environmental conferences held by the United Nations, including the 10th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2010 and the Rio+20 meetings in 2012, provided the scientific community with the opportunity to take stock of the state of the planet's environment. Unfortunately, the results were not encouraging. Scientists confirmed that the global biodiversity and climate change crises are accelerating rapidly. In fact, they suggested that we have now altered our natural environment so profoundly that we may be approaching a human-induced global 'state-shift', an ecological transformation that could be even greater than the changes brought about by the end of the last Ice Age.

The upside

Fortunately the continuing bad news is tempered by the fact that we do have mechanisms at our disposal to address the

growing environmental crisis. Protected areas of all types – whether they are established and managed by governments, communities, Indigenous groups or private entities – are an integral part of the global response. They are essential to protect biodiversity and to provide natural solutions to climate change.

They also play a crucial role in ensuring livelihoods and safeguarding traditional cultures, and forested protected areas in particular are indispensable for food security and for regulating the quality and flow of freshwater supplies. Protected areas are also important places for humans to interact with wild nature for their physical, mental and spiritual health. In recognition of the many benefits they provide, protected areas are now understood to be the foundation of green economies and more attention is being paid by governments to integrating the value of natural capital into national income accounting and corporate accounting processes.

In short, protected areas are increasingly recognized as essential life-support systems on all scales – local, national, regional and global. Greater appreciation of the central importance of protected areas has translated into rapid and continuing expansion of the global protected areas estate over the last few decades, including in the marine biome where conservation efforts have lagged but are finally making major strides. Significant additional resources and more protected areas are needed to ensure comprehensive, effective, representative and viable global networks. But the good news is that we are making progress.

A global protected areas strategy

Accelerating climate change combined with the very rapid fragmentation of the remaining intact landscapes dictates that a global protected areas strategy must include a wilderness component: i.e. we need a systematic strategy for creating



A manta ray in Phoenix Islands Protected Area (Kiribati).

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larger protected areas and ensuring these areas are interconnected. These landscape and seascape conservation efforts linking core terrestrial and marine protected areas are essential for long-term protection of biodiversity and ecosystem services, including climate change mitigation and adaptation. Here too, we are seeing some progress. Large-scale connectivity conservation initiatives are moving forward around the world, often across borders and on continental scales – from the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative in North America to the Eastern Pacific Conservation Marine Corridor between Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia to the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area which includes parts of Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The Guiana Shield is the most intact tropical rainforest wilderness left on Earth and covers large portions of the countries of Suriname, Guyana and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the French overseas department

The Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA) of Kiribati, at 408,000 km², is the largest and deepest World Heritage site on Earth.

of French Guiana and the northernmost parts of the Brazilian Amazon, and includes many very large protected areas. World Heritage sites (e.g. Central Suriname Nature Reserve and Canaima National Park in Venezuela) often serve as anchors for these large connectivity initiatives.

The World Heritage Convention is well-situated to contribute to wilderness conservation globally. One reason is that the Convention has recognized, and continues to recognize, very large iconic areas. From the Central Amazon Conservation Complex (Brazil) to Kluane/Wrangell-St. Elias/Glacier Bay/Tatshenshini-Atsek (Canada/United States) and Okavango Delta (Botswana), the 1,000th site to be added to the World Heritage List at the 38th session of the World

Heritage Committee in Doha in June 2014, many very large sites are listed. Another is the amazing Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA) of Kiribati, at 408,000 km², the largest and deepest World Heritage site on Earth. As one of the few site-based global environmental agreements (the Ramsar Convention is perhaps the only other example), the World Heritage Convention is a very useful international instrument to bring a focus to the importance of wilderness areas.

Another reason why the Convention is a useful mechanism for wilderness protection is that it is unique in its explicit linkage of nature and culture. In practice procedural and methodological challenges have made it difficult to recognize these

linkages in individual sites as often as they could be done, simply because cultural and natural values are evaluated separately by two different organizations (ICOMOS and IUCN). However, these challenges are in the process of being addressed. This is very timely because nature–culture linkages are particularly important in the context of wilderness conservation involving Indigenous peoples and local communities.

Nature and culture

Indigenous peoples and local communities make enormous contributions to protecting the planet's biodiversity and ecosystem services: the area protected in Indigenous and community conserved areas is probably as large or larger than the approximately 13 per cent of the planet's terrestrial area which is already in protected areas. The individual areas under protection by Indigenous peoples and communities are often quite large and very intact wilderness areas (e.g. Kayapó Indigenous Territories in the southern Brazilian Amazon, covering 11.5 million ha). The reason that some of these areas remain in good condition and under good stewardship is precisely because they are owned and managed by Indigenous peoples whose cultures and traditional lifestyles are inseparable from the wild lands they have long inhabited, sometimes

for millennia. These lands are often sacred or hold special spiritual value, which can further contribute to their protection.

The important issue of the often indissoluble links between nature and culture, and in particular Indigenous peoples, has now been taken up by the Convention, in part as a result of a Committee decision relating to the nomination of the very large, intact and Indigenous managed Pimachiowin Aki area in Canada. Much more can and must be done to support Indigenous peoples and local communities in their conservation efforts, and to implement rights-based approaches to conservation. A wilderness approach under the Convention can contribute to these important objectives in the case of large Indigenous managed sites with Outstanding Universal Value.

A third key point with respect to the Convention and wilderness conservation has to do with the added protection against industrial threats that the Convention can provide to existing and prospective wilderness World Heritage sites. The Convention was established in response to international concern that some of the most extraordinary places around the world were being destroyed or threatened with imminent destruction. The Convention requires sites to be well protected and managed and to demonstrate 'integrity'. As



Kayapó people are protecting their traditional lands, the Kayapó Indigenous Territories in the southern Brazilian Amazon.

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Guitarfish at Coiba National Park (Panama).

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Canaima National Park (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) is spread over 3 million ha in south-eastern Venezuela along the border between Guyana and Brazil.

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a result, sites inscribed on the World Heritage List are clearly understood to be no-go zones for industrial activity as this would be inconsistent with good management. Whereas many sites continue to be under threat despite their World Heritage status, there is a growing number of examples where the no-go principle is being adhered to. Governments are cancelling concessions in sites to ensure World Heritage listing (as in the case of Okavango Delta), companies are foregoing concessions that were granted in World Heritage sites, recognizing that these should not have been awarded (as in the case of the oil company Total in Virunga National Park, companies are refusing products sourced in World Heritage sites (e.g. Tiffany's policy on diamond sourcing) and banks are refusing to fund projects in World Heritage sites (e.g. HSBC).

Protection of sites

The World Heritage Convention has been instrumental in protecting many wilderness sites around the world. However, we believe that it can and should adopt an even more systematic approach to protecting wilderness areas. Discussions regarding a potential World Heritage wilderness approach under the Convention were initiated by IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas at WILD10, the 10th World Wilderness Congress in Salamanca (Spain) in

late 2013. A well-attended side event chaired by IUCN-WCPA and co-organized with the Pew Charitable Trusts was subsequently held at the World Heritage Committee meeting in Doha, and the possibility of a wilderness approach was very well received. IUCN's World Parks Congress will be the next major international venue for further discussion and deliberation on this important theme. Wilderness will figure prominently in the World Heritage cross-cutting theme sessions at the congress, which are being co-organized by IUCN, IUCN-WCPA and the World Heritage Centre.

Following the World Parks Congress the objective will be to hold a workshop specifically dedicated to this theme, preparatory to developing IUCN thematic guidance on World Heritage and wilderness. Developing thematic guidance will involve some complexity, as the wilderness theme brings together a number of important issues – from rights-based approaches, to nature – cultural linkages where wilderness protection is inextricably tied to cultural practices, to an examination of the potential of each of the natural criteria to contribute to a wilderness approach under the Convention. But developing thematic guidance will be worthwhile and will constitute a useful tool to help implement a more systematic approach to wilderness conservation under the Convention. ♻️