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CONVENTION CONCERNING THE PROTECTION OF THE  
WORLD CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE

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Information document : Report of the Expert Meeting on Evaluation  
of general principles and criteria for nominations of natural  
World Heritage sites (Parc national de la Vanoise, France, 22 -  
24 mars 1996)

**Report of the Expert Meeting on *Evaluation of general principles and criteria for nominations of natural World Heritage sites* (Parc national de la Vanoise, France, 22 to 24 March 1996)**

## **1. Introduction**

The expert meeting on "Evaluation of general principles and criteria for nominations of natural World Heritage sites" was held from 22 to 24 March 1996 at the Parc National de la Vanoise (France) at the kind invitation of the French Ministry for the Environment. Twenty experts representing natural and cultural heritage disciplines participated in their individual capacity (see List of Participants in Annex I).

The meeting reviewed background papers prepared by Mr. Bing Lucas, Mr. Henry Cleere, Mr. Adrian Phillips and Mr. Michel Le Berre (the titles of these and other working documents are listed in Annex II). The expert group adopted a revised agenda (see Annex III) focussing on three issues: 1. Clarifying concepts, 2. Getting a better coverage of natural sites and 3. Balance, manageability and credibility.

In an introductory statement, Mr. von Droste, Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, welcomed participants and commented on lessons learnt from 18 years of implementation of the World Heritage Convention. He reminded the expert group of the significance of the unifying concept of World Heritage embracing both cultural and natural heritage as outlined in the text of the Convention. He considered that the World Heritage constitutes a continuum which stems from the fact that all areas have been influenced by humans to some degree. At the same time, these places represent a modification of nature. He stressed the need for an overarching Global Strategy for both natural and cultural heritage.

The expert group elected Mr. Adrian Phillips as Chairperson and Mr. Ibrahim Thiaw as Rapporteur for the first day, and Mr. Alain Megret as Chairperson and Mr. Warren Nicholls as Rapporteur for the second and third day.

## **2. Clarifying concepts**

(a) The expert group recalled that different interpretations have been made of the term "*outstanding universal value*" which is a key to the establishment of a selective World Heritage List. In a number of cases the term has been also interpreted as implying the "*best of its kind*". The experts stressed that the notion of outstanding universal value has been constructed over time and may be interpreted as a concept incorporating both uniqueness and representativeness. The experts considered that the concept of "universality" was difficult to interpret without a regional perspective. The experts also referred to the practical applications of the criteria on the

operational level and discussed the general principles which guide the World Heritage Committee in establishing the World Heritage List, which are described in Paragraph 6 of the Operational Guidelines. The experts stressed that there should be a strict application of Paragraph 6(i) of the Operational Guidelines and rigour in the process of nomination and evaluation. With reference to Paragraph 6 (vii) of the Operational Guidelines, it was furthermore agreed that the Committee should consider requesting States Parties which had already a large number of sites to delay submitting new nominations for a specified period of time.

The experts recommended the following changes to the Operational Guidelines:

Add to Paragraph 6 (i) of the Operational Guidelines the following (changes in **bold**):

(i) The Convention provides for the protection of those cultural and natural properties deemed to be of outstanding universal value. It is not intended to provide for the protection of all properties of great interest, importance or value. **Inscription on the World Heritage List is reserved for only a selection of the most outstanding properties from the international point of view. In accordance with Article 12 of the Convention, States Parties should not assume that a site of national and/or regional importance will automatically be included in the World Heritage List.** The outstanding universal value of cultural and natural properties is defined by Articles 1 and 2 of the Convention. These definitions are interpreted by the Committee by using two sets of criteria: one set for cultural property and another set for natural property. The criteria and the conditions of authenticity adopted by the Committee for this purpose are set out in paragraphs 24 and 44 below.

Add to Paragraph 61 (c) of the Operational Guidelines the following (changes in **bold**):

(c) **A comparative evaluation of similar properties is an essential part of the process of evaluation. ICOMOS and IUCN are therefore** requested to make such comparative evaluations of properties belonging to the same type of property;

Furthermore, the experts, in considering the current representativeness of the World Heritage List, made the following recommendation:

To review the World Heritage List on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Convention, in order to take into account the new and revised criteria and to give an accurate reflection of the diversity of the heritage of humankind. The outcome of such a review would also help to address shortcomings and imbalances of the World Heritage List.

The expert group recognized that, while some previous decisions may now be seen

not to comply with the rigour in evaluation called for by the provisions of the Operational Guidelines, such decisions should not be taken as a precedent for a less strict application of the criteria in the evaluation at present or in the future. The critical issue is maintaining the credibility of, and respect for, the World Heritage List.

(b) The expert group discussed natural criterion (iii) of paragraph 44 of the Operational Guidelines: "contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance". Concerning the concept of "*natural beauty*" the experts reaffirmed the importance of this criterion, but also acknowledged the difficulty of assessing it. The concept of natural beauty is essentially subjective and a social construct. The natural beauty and aesthetics of an area may be closely associated with the cultural values. The experts noted that the natural criterion (iii) relates to Article 2 (second paragraph) of the Convention: "natural features consisting of physical and biological formations or groups of such formations, which are of outstanding universal value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view". Despite the firm grounding of these notions in the Convention itself, their application remains problematic. The experts therefore considered that natural criterion (iii) should be used only in conjunction with other natural and/or cultural criteria - apart from very exceptional circumstances. It was noted that a significant literature exists on methodologies for assessing aesthetic and scenic values and the perception of natural beauty, and that the Committee may consider requesting a desk study for guidance.

The expert group recommended to amend Paragraph 44 (iii) of the Operational Guidelines as follows (changes in **bold**):

(iii) contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance (**the Committee considers that this criterion should justify inclusion in the List only in exceptional circumstances or in conjunction with other natural or cultural criteria**); or

(c) Concerning the interpretation of "*natural*", it was noted that human influence can be found in all natural sites and that the notion of pristine nature is therefore a relative one.

The expert group recommended to include the following definition in the Glossary:

A natural area is one where bio-physical processes and landform features are still relatively intact and where a primary management goal of the area is to ensure that natural values are protected. The term "*natural*" is a relative one. It is recognized that no area is totally pristine and that all natural areas are in a dynamic state. Human activities in natural areas often occur and when sustainable may complement the natural values of the area.

(d) The expert group discussed the continuum from nature to culture that is covered by World

Heritage and acknowledged the complexity of the *interactions between nature and culture*. A number of World Heritage sites have been recognized on both grounds, cultural and natural; These sites have been referred to as "mixed". The different types of cultural landscapes, as defined in Paragraph 39 of the Operational Guidelines are considered as a component of the cultural heritage. However, cultural landscapes, owing to their uniqueness and growing importance in the implementation of the Convention, have frequently been referred to as a special case. The expert group suggested that the whole range of interactions between nature and culture be explored to guide the Committee in better defining the scope of the Convention. The objective has to be to better explain to States Parties and to the public at large the different types of properties and their relation to each other. The experts acknowledged that use of terminologies such as natural, cultural, mixed and cultural landscapes to distinguish World Heritage sites was undermining the Convention's uniqueness in its recognition of the nature - culture continuum. The experts proposed to examine the possibility of one single set of criteria:

The expert group recommended that the Committee consider developing one set of criteria, incorporating existing natural and cultural heritage criteria and promoting a unified identity for all World Heritage sites as the outstanding heritage of humankind.

(e) Referring to Paragraph 44(b) of the Operational Guidelines, the expert group stated that the notion of *integrity* has not been fully examined to date and that its complexity needs to be investigated. The expert group recognized that, from the point of view of natural heritage, there are different notions of integrity, including structural integrity (e.g. species composition of an ecosystem), functional integrity (e.g. glacial series with the glacier itself and its deposition patterns) and visual integrity (a notion which relates to both natural and cultural heritage).

The expert group referred to the existence of separate criteria and separate conditions of authenticity defined as "test of authenticity" in Paragraph 24 (b)(i) for cultural heritage and "conditions of integrity" described in Paragraph 44 (b) for natural heritage. The experts suggested, that the notion of authenticity and integrity could be reviewed to develop one common approach to integrity. This would lead to a more coherent interpretation of the Convention and its unique strength in bringing the protection of both nature and culture together.

The experts recommended that the Committee consider the preparation of a study concerning the possibility of applying conditions of integrity to both natural and cultural heritage, and thus of applying one common approach for the identification and evaluation of World Heritage.

The expert group noted that the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* have been in a constant state of revision and agreed that it would be timely to undertake a thorough review in order to better promote the goals of the Convention in a streamlined approach. Some aspects, mentioned above, i.e. establishing one set of criteria for World Heritage incorporating the natural and cultural heritage criteria, and applying one common

approach to integrity for all World Heritage sites, should be given special attention during the review. The experts considered that such a review of the Operational Guidelines could be an important component of the 25 year anniversary of the Convention in 1997. The expert group also recalled that the World Heritage Committee at its nineteenth session in Berlin decided to request the Secretariat to initiate the preparation of a Glossary of Terms independently from the Operational Guidelines. It is envisaged that the initial phase of the preparation of the Glossary of World Heritage Terms (involving the extraction of terms and their definitions from the Convention and the Operational Guidelines) may assist in identifying further approaches to reviewing the Operational Guidelines.

The experts considered that there are numerous inconsistencies in the Operational Guidelines and welcomed the decision by the nineteenth session of the World Heritage Committee to prepare a Glossary of World Heritage Terms extracting definitions and explanatory notes from the Operational Guidelines. A number of revisions suggested by the experts are indicated in the relevant chapters of this report and may be taken into consideration.

### **3. Getting a better coverage of natural sites**

The experts envisaged the building of a Global Strategy as a process of designing comprehensive, overarching frameworks for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention. This should be seen therefore as an on-going process rather than a one-off exercise.

The expert group recognized the applicability and usefulness of a Global Strategy approach to the identification of properties of World Heritage significance and underlined that a series of thematic studies on natural heritage was required. Such studies, as proposed in a project concept by IUCN, may include for example a study on the circumpolar region, marine sites or mountains. As far as fossil sites are concerned, the experts noted, that the study "Earth's Geological History. A contextual framework for assessment of World Heritage fossil site nominations" prepared for IUCN by R. T. Wells. The experts were of the opinion that this type of study could serve as a model.

In order to improve the composition of the World Heritage List, the experts emphasized that there is a need to apply both an inductive and deductive approach. They emphasized at the same time the need for improved *global thematic frameworks* and for the preparation of *national tentative lists*. These tentative lists should be made an obligatory requirement for all types of properties, including natural heritage, as presently the case for cultural heritage as indicated in Paragraph 7 of the Operational Guidelines. The expert group considered that the *harmonization* of these tentative lists in a cooperative effort by States Parties would be the most appropriate way to proceed. Global thematic frameworks should be seen as a tool for helping States Parties to establish tentative lists and to harmonize them.

The expert group recommended to amend Paragraph 7 of the Operational Guidelines as follows (changes in **bold**, deletions ~~crossed-out~~):

The Committee requests each State Party to submit to it a tentative list of properties which it intends to nominate for inscription to the World Heritage List during the following five to ten years. This tentative list will constitute the "inventory" (provided for in Article 11 of the Convention) of the cultural and natural properties situated within the territory of each State Party and which it considers suitable for inclusion in the World Heritage List. The purpose of these tentative lists is to enable the Committee to evaluate within the widest possible context the "outstanding universal value" of each property nominated to the List. The Committee hopes that States Parties that have not yet submitted a tentative list will do so as early as possible. States Parties are reminded of the Committee's earlier decision not to consider ~~cultural~~ nominations unless **the nomination is contained in such a list of properties.**

#### **4. Balance, Manageability and Credibility**

The experts discussed balance, manageability and credibility of the World Heritage List and noted that "balance" is not about numbers, but about representativity for biogeographical regions or events in the history of life. Furthermore, the inclusion of cultural landscapes only under the category of cultural heritage is not consistent with the reality of the nature - culture continuum.

Concerning the manageability of the World Heritage List, it was underlined, that national tentative lists and regional harmonization of these lists may be a tool to better manage the List, rather than through excessively rigorous evaluation procedures. The critical issue is to fill the gaps in the World Heritage List while not losing the manageability and credibility of the World Heritage List through an unreasonable number of inscriptions. The meeting also expressed its concern that while considerable resources were being spent on the nomination process there was an even more urgent need to focus on the problems of management and care of existing properties especially those listed as in danger. Failure to do so would undermine the credibility of the Convention. The experts considered that credibility of the List concerns not only the number of sites inscribed, but the representativeness of sites from the different regions of the world and stages of the Earth's history, the quality of management in designated World Heritage sites and the ability to address threats and dangers to World Heritage sites and to bring them back to their normal conditions. These efforts can only succeed if the List remains credible and manageable. The experts thus, recommend:

For all purposes of standard setting, credibility, manageability and commensurability with available resources, inscription in the World Heritage List should be kept to a

strict minimum. A review of the properties already in the World Heritage List should be carried out with a view to re-assessing the World Heritage criteria in force. States Parties should be consulted about any suggested changes which may result from such an exercise. Priority should be given to properties not yet represented in the World Heritage List.

The experts stressed the crucial importance of international cooperation in the efforts to protect sites of outstanding universal value. The expert group was of the opinion that there is need to further enhance cooperation with other international and regional Conventions and Programmes in line with Paragraph 139 of the Operational Guidelines. The experts welcomed existing cooperation between the Convention Secretariats, including the secondment of a specialist in marine sciences from UNESCO to the Biodiversity Convention Secretariat. The expert group, considered that there was a need for closer cooperation between Convention Secretariats, for maximizing the potential for complementarity and synergy, for reinforcing efforts on World Heritage sites which have other international designations and for promoting the use of regional Conventions to identify sites of regional and national value.

#### **5. Concluding remarks**

The clear view of the meeting was its reaffirmation of the intent of the Convention to bring together the protection of cultural and natural heritage, within a framework of international cooperation. Thus the expert meeting is to be understood to be a first step in the process of developing an overall Global Strategy.

In his closing remarks, the Director of the Centre, Mr. Bernd von Droste, thanked the French Ministry of the Environment, the Conseiller de Haute Savoie, and the site manager of the Parc de la Vanoise for their generosity and for the friendly atmosphere in which the meeting was held. He considered that the meeting has achieved important progress in setting out an ambitious future agenda for the accomplishing a more unifying concept for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention and a more selective approach to balance the World Heritage List. The obligatory preparation of tentative lists by States Parties which wish to nominate properties for the World Heritage List would be an important step in the direction of formulation of national policies for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention. At the same time, global strategy frameworks would provide guidance.



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## **Annex II: List of documents**

### 1. Documents prepared for the meeting:

- \* Bing Lucas: Background paper for the expert meeting on evaluation of general principles and criteria for nominations of natural World Heritage sites. March 1996.
- \* Michel Le Berre: Quel Patrimoine pour l'Humanité? Principes généraux et critères de nomination des sites naturels. Mars 1996.
- \* Henry Cleere: The concept of "outstanding universal value". Revised Version 1995.
- \* Jim Thorsell: How natural are natural sites? (World Heritage Newsletter, December 1995)
- \* Adrian Phillips: The Assessment of Natural Qualities in Cultural Landscapes. A draft note by IUCN. 1995

### 2. Reference documents

- \* Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage. Adopted by the General Conference at its seventeenth session. Paris, 16 November 1972.
- \* Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention. WHC/2/Revised. February 1996.
- \* Report of the Rapporteur of the nineteenth session of the World Heritage Committee. January 1996.
- \* Supplement to 1995 IUCN Documentation on World Heritage Properties. Summary and technical evaluation of World Heritage Nomination of Glacier/Waterton National Parks (USA/Canada). Annex. November 1995.
- \* The World's Greatest Natural Areas, an Indicative Inventory of Natural Sites of World Heritage Quality, Gland: IUCN, 1982.
- \* Earth's Geological History. A contextual framework for assessment of World Heritage fossil site nominations. Report prepared for the IUCN by R. T. Wells. March 1996.

## ANNEX III: Agenda of the meeting as adopted on 22 March 1996

**1. CLARIFYING CONCEPTS**a) What is “ Outstanding Universal Value ” ?

Issues include :

- Does this mean only the “ best of its kind ” ? ;
- The “ Gothic cathedral ” issue ;
- Should we be bound by precedent ? (i.e. how far should we be bound by past decisions in assessing new nominations) ;
- Should there be more consistency between the cultural and natural sides in interpreting outstanding universal value ? (Reference annex to the Waterton Lakes/Glacier nomination).

b) What is meant by “ Exceptional Natural Beauty and Aesthetic Importance ” ? (i.e. criterion (iii))

Issues include :

- If this is a social construct ;
- How can it be measured ? (Reference annex to the Waterton Lakes/Glacier nomination)  
(nb. “ aesthetic ” and “ natural beauty ” are specifically identified in Article 2 of the Convention).

c) Interpretation of “ natural ”

Issues include :

- What is truly natural, if anything ? ;
- If anthropogenic influences are universal, how do we define “natural ” under the WHC ? ;
- Is it valuable to define “ natural ” as meaning when biological and geophysical processes remain as the dominant forces in the system ? ;

d) Interface between Natural sites and Cultural Landscapes

Issues include :

- Is there a continuum from natural to cultural landscapes ? ;
- Are cultural landscapes best thought of as places where human and natural influences have a roughly 50/50 impact ? ;
- How to relate to the associative landscapes, some of which are also predominantly natural areas (e.g. Tongariro, Uluru) ? ;

e) Integrity

Issue :

In light of the above, does the integrity guidance in the Operational Guidelines require significant alteration ?

Output : Amendments to the Operational Guidelines that can be recommended to the World Heritage Committee

**2. GETTING A BETTER COVERAGE OF NATURAL SITES**

a) Biological Diversity (criteria (ii) and (iv))  
suggest a global study as proposed in IUCN paper.

b) Record of life (criterion (i))  
see paper by Prof. Wells on World Heritage fossil sites.

c) Geophysical/geomorphological diversity (criterion (i))

Should there be a global study here too ? (is this where criterion (iii) most applies ?)

Output : Action plan to improve coverage of natural sites, including recommendations to World Heritage Committee on thematic studies.

**3. BALANCE, MANAGEABILITY AND CREDIBILITY**

a) Balance  
Is it a real issue ? and see the comments of the World Heritage Committee at Berlin (in Bing Lucas's paper) ?

b) Manageability

Issues include :

How do we " manage " an ever-expanding list of World Heritage sites ? Is there an upper limit?

c) Credibility

Issues include :

At what point does the list become so long that it ceases to be credible as a list of exceptional places ?

Output : Advice on these matters to the World Heritage Committee.

OVER-ARCHING GOAL :

TO ESTABLISH THE BASIS FOR AN HOLISTIC, INTEGRATED GLOBAL STRATEGY, WHICH REPRESENTS THE CONTINUUM OF CULTURE AND NATURE IN CONFORMITY WITH “ THE CONVENTION CONCERNING THE PROTECTION OF THE WORLD CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE ”.