

## UNESCO's world heritage sites

# A danger list in danger

In its care for precious places, the UN cultural agency is torn between its own principles and its members' wishes; the principles are losing ground

Aug 26th 2010



WHEN an archipelago famed for its flora and fauna is deemed to have escaped from environmental peril, that might sound like good news for anyone with an interest in the fate of life on Earth. But UNESCO's recent clean bill of health for the Galapagos islands was greeted with dismay by many of the people who care passionately about the place.

The decision to remove the islands from the list of "world heritage sites in danger"—taken at a meeting in Brasilia that concluded on August 3rd—was only one of several signs that the UN agency is bending its own rules under pressure from member states. And since UNESCO is supposed to be an unprejudiced protector of the whole world's built and natural environment, such slipping standards are not merely of concern in remote Pacific islands.

But take the Galapagos case first. Since 1978, the 19 islands (each with its own idiosyncratic ecosystem) have been recognised as a place of "outstanding universal value" to humanity, and therefore placed on UNESCO's list of world heritage sites, which now number 911. The government of Ecuador is proud of the site's inclusion and sensitive to any suggestion of poor stewardship. When, in 2007, UNESCO expressed concern about the islands, President Rafael

Correa declared a state of environmental emergency and said he was ready to curb tourism. It was, and remains, clear why action was needed: the islands' iguanas (see picture), tortoises and exotic birds are under threat from a noxious species known as *homo sapiens*, as well as creatures, from rodents to flies, which follow in its wake. Apart from an ever-rising influx of tourists, the islands' resident population has grown in the past half-century from about 2,000 to more than 30,000, many of them illegal squatters.

Mr Correa's move failed to pre-empt action by the Paris-based UN agency, which later that year put the archipelago on its danger list—one of the strongest signals it can send that the integrity of a place which matters to the world either has been, or could soon be, compromised. Depending on the circumstances, putting a site on that list can be seen as an act of solidarity with a country, or else as a scolding.

Ecuador felt that to stay on the list was a slight and lobbied to get the islands removed; by this year, when ministers (from a rotating group of 21 member states) convened for a world heritage meeting, it was clear that the Brazilian hosts had been won over. After a secret, contested vote, the islands were deemed out of danger.

All over the world, NGOs devoted to the Galapagos conveyed a similar message: yes, the government in Quito had done some helpful things, but it would be a disaster if UNESCO's move suggested all was well. "I am concerned that [UNESCO's] announcement is premature and may give the impression that the natural wonders of the Galapagos are no longer threatened," said Toni Darton of the London-based Galapagos Conservation Trust.

Not all the decisions taken at UNESCO's meeting in Brasilia disappointed environmentalists. After another secret vote, a forest in Madagascar, where rosewood is being felled illegally, was declared in danger—despite the awkward fact that China is a big market for the timber, which takes a century to grow. And America, in a widely praised move, got the Everglades Forest in Florida reinserted on the danger list; it had been removed in 2007.

By declaring the alligator-infested wetlands in peril once again (because less water and more pollutants were flowing in), the federal government was giving itself an extra card in its dealings with other parties, from the local authorities to companies. Other cases where countries declared their own sites in danger have included war-ravaged lands like Croatia and Cambodia: in the port of Dubrovnik and the palaces of Angkor, a danger-listing attracted support for repair and conservation. "It's a pity so many countries see the danger list as a slap in the face," says Kishore Rao, acting head of UNESCO's world heritage centre. "It can also mobilise help."

But the hard fact is that danger listings, as well as inscribing sites in the first place, are getting infected by politics. At the Brasilia shindig, some 21 new sites were added to the heritage list—even though the expert advice suggested only ten were eligible. Some countries, it seems, will not take no for an answer. China, for example, successfully nominated some wilderness in the south of the country, with subtropical forests and spectacular cliffs. The Swiss-based International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)—on which UNESCO relies for advice on natural sites—had opined that the bid was premature: not enough had been done to define the area and plan for its protection. But given that China had invested funds and prestige in the bid, a rejection would have been awkward, say people who went to the Brasilia meeting. At least two other proposals for world heritage sites were so tied up with national pride that it would have been hard to turn them down: a village north of Riyadh where the Saudi royals originated, and an imperial palace in Vietnam where a millennium celebration is being held this year.

For man-made sites, UNESCO relies on advice from the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), a conscientious fraternity of conservation professionals. Its head, Gustavo Araoz, says that "we respect the UNESCO committee's right to reject our views." But as far as it can, his institution tells the UN body to ponder not just whether a site is nice or interesting, but whether it has been cared for, and will be in future. "We urge a renewed emphasis on conservation," he sighs.

Why would it matter if UNESCO's currency were debased? Well, it would be tough for countries who take the care of sites seriously, and for worthy Japanese who try to visit as many as possible. But as Tim Badman of the IUCN points out, graver matters are at stake. His agency talks a lot to mining firms who are keen to avoid sullyng their name by harming places of cultural or ecological value. If the gold standard of a UNESCO listing is adulterated, such discussions lose their edge.

Meanwhile, UNESCO's private competitors see the travails of the heritage list as symptomatic of wider problems. The New York-based World Monuments Fund has a "watch list", and a programme of practical help with conservation, that carries no stigma, says a spokesman. Any individual in the world can propose a place for the watch list, so the process is not seen as a beauty contest, or a dunces' parade, involving governments. And Jeff Morgan, of the California-based Global Heritage Fund—which provides intensive, long-term help at a limited number of sites—says UNESCO lacks the resources to monitor its ever-growing list of places, especially if they are vast bits of wilderness. Satellite technology has made monitoring (of forests, say) possible, but the Paris agency lacks the ability to use it. "If a firm had so little knowledge of the assets in its care, it would go out of business," he said.

Imbued, even in its better moments, with old-world cultural pride, UNESCO is not about to become a corporation. But it could do one thing to enhance the credibility of its choice of sites and danger listings: its annual world-heritage meetings, including votes and the expert testimony, should be thrown open to the public.