

Panel introduction speech, Wednesday 8 February

Lord Parkinson, UK Minister for Arts and Heritage

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, whether you are in the room or online. Thank you Laura for your introduction and for inviting me to speak today.

I am delighted to be here with the UK Delegation to UNESCO at this very special event which celebrates 50 years of World Heritage and, very excitingly, brings Stonehenge to Paris!

I hope some of you were here last night like me, and had the chance to visit the 'igloo' in the garden and experience the sights and sounds of this extraordinary Stonehenge display.

If you haven't had a chance to visit please do so as you leave today - unfortunately Stonehenge cannot stay in Paris indefinitely. And for those of you joining us online, please do check out the photos on social media.

I am pleased to open what promises to be a fascinating day of speakers and case studies.

At the 50th Anniversary conference in Delphi last year, UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay identified three areas for action to help make World Heritage more Representative, Accessible and Sustainable. I look forward to hearing from the Director of the World Heritage Centre, my friend Lazare, about these and other future challenges shortly.

Today, nine experts from across the UK will be talking about how they approach World Heritage in their sites and their communities. I use the pronoun in its full Convention sense: world heritage is a shared treasure and a shared responsibility, so you'll be hearing not just about sites in the UK, but projects that run from Orkney to Nigeria, from the Atlantic Ocean to North America.

Heritage is rooted in communities, so we wanted today's focus to be grassroots. But we recognise that getting the conditions right for World Heritage for the Next 50 is the responsibility of the States Parties – all the Governments who have signed and ratified the Convention of 1972.

So I will be speaking today about what I and my Government are doing to support the ambition to make World Heritage more Representative, Accessible and Sustainable; reflecting on some of the prestigious World Heritage Sites in the UK and our Overseas Territories, and some of the work that we are doing towards this aim.

I hope you will indulge me as I reflect first on our own special relationship with the World Heritage Convention.

The UK ratified the World Heritage Convention on 29 May 1984, meaning there will be cause for our own 40th anniversary celebrations in the UK next year!

All four nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are represented. From sweeping, stunning prehistoric landscapes such as Stonehenge and Avebury, to the awe-inspiring coastal phenomena of the Giant's Causeway, and what remains to this day the UK's only mixed cultural and natural site - and one of only 39 in the world - the ancient, remote archipelago of St Kilda.

I am also proud that we have added to the World Heritage List a mix of cultural and natural sites in four of our Overseas Territories.

I am also pleased that, more recently, the UK has expanded beyond traditional representations of heritage.

The incredible Slate Landscape of Northwest Wales is a wonderful example of a vast industrial community which supplied around a third of the world's roofing slates by the late 19th Century. It influenced building styles and helped to develop the slate industries in other countries. You will hear from the team later today on the significance of World Heritage designation for the local communities in and around the site.

Jodrell Bank Observatory is one of the world's leading radio astronomy observatories. Still in active use today, its multiple telescopes, engineering sheds and buildings date back to 1945, and reflect humankind's enduring passion better to understand our place in the solar system.

The Observatory is a remarkable site with a unique blend of culture and science. It demonstrates the very best of the UK's contribution to world history, and continues to grow humanity's understanding of the universe at large. It also hosts the extraordinary Blue Dot festival, bringing science and music together, that you will hear about this afternoon.

Most recently, I was honoured to support and sign off the nomination for The Flow Country in Scotland, the world's largest area of blanket bog and a unique habitat for a number of rare plant and animal species. Bringing this globally important site to the attention of the World through (we hope!) inscription on the World Heritage List is vital for raising awareness and knowledge of our planet's natural heritage and biodiversity, and the very real threats of climate change.

A newer feature of the Convention has been transnational sites: these nominations which put the 'World' back into World heritage. Hadrian's Wall as part of the extensive Frontiers of the Roman Empire and most recently a second World Heritage recognition for the City of Bath as part of The Great Spa Towns of Europe.

I also welcome the UK's international collaboration with the United States, Germany and Denmark on the transnational Moravian Church Settlements nomination, and I look forward to seeing this partnership develop.

All of these sites show the huge value of the World Heritage Convention. The ability to connect and inspire local communities; the means to progress our knowledge and understanding of cultural and natural sciences; the opportunity to build international collaborations. These are some of the remarkable opportunities that World Heritage creates.

There are obvious complexities at the management level with transnational sites, but they are a great way to support UNESCO's Global Strategy and encourage better geographical representation on the World heritage List

I am very aware that the UK has had a privileged position to be able to make the most of the opportunities of the World Heritage Convention.

I have, so far, referenced only a handful of the UK's current 33 World Heritage Sites (and my apologies to those I haven't had the time to mention today!)

33 is no small number - it is the eighth-highest of any State Party to the Convention.

At a global level, I believe the latest count is 1,157 sites across 167 countries on the World Heritage List, with this number only going upwards in the years to come.

The workload of the World Heritage Centre, the World Heritage Committee and the Advisory Bodies can therefore only be described as overwhelming.

Whether or not he mentions it later, I'm sure this is one of Lazare's most significant challenges in the next fifty years.

Their work is crucial for upholding and implementing the Convention, and the UK stands ready and willing to do what we can to provide support and expertise.

The UK is fortunate to have an enormous depth and breadth of expertise in the field of heritage protection and I am keen that we support UNESCO's desire to see a World Heritage List that is more balanced and representative of heritage across the globe.

The UK is committed to supporting Small Island Developing States and the Africa region in listing more World Heritage Sites and receiving the associated recognition and protection.

We took note of ICOMOS and IUCN's reports that identified the nomination process and the identification, assessment and evaluation of sites as challenges. It is for this reason that I warmly welcome Historic England and UK experts' initiative to provide funding and expertise to support development of new tentative list sites for countries that currently have no or only one World Heritage Site, and are seeking support to

change this. And I'm also pleased that I was able to tell ADG Culture yesterday that the UK would be providing complementary financial support to the World Heritage Centre Nominations Unit, to enable them to provide upstream assistance.

Over the past year, I have overseen the development of the UK's own Tentative List of future prospective World Heritage Sites.

This has been a bottom-up, community-led endeavour. The call for applications attracted a diverse mix of applicant sites from across the country, then assessed by a panel of UK World Heritage experts.

At the outset, we committed to continuing the UK's approach of only nominating sites every two years - an approach we adopted in 2012.

I am personally committed to ensuring that those sites that are represented on the Tentative List add value to the **global** list. I look forward to announcing the UK's new Tentative List in the near future.

As part of a broader package of support, we are also committed to reviewing our 'Technical Evaluation' process.

This is where, with close involvement from the UK National Commission for UNESCO and the four statutory heritage bodies in the UK, sites that are in the process of developing their nominations undergo an assessment from a range of experts.

Feedback and advice provided to sites ultimately strengthens the quality of their nominations and increases the likelihood of successful inscription on the World Heritage List. This is very much in the spirit of the new two-stage nomination process introduced by the World Heritage Centre.

I hope that with our combined efforts, the quality of our future nominations put forward for the World Heritage Committee's consideration will continue to be high, and that sites can benefit from a streamlined and efficient nomination process.

I have mentioned a few times the value that recognition and designation as a World Heritage Site brings to local communities.

World Heritage designations - and indeed other UNESCO designations - can create jobs, attract investment and shine a light on often underappreciated and overlooked places.

In the midst of the growing challenges over the past fifty years, notably efforts to mitigate against climate change and to resolve tensions between development and conservation, this important point about the value of World Heritage to local communities holds firm.

It won't surprise you to hear a UK speaker making my next point! The World Heritage Sites may be UNESCO's best known geographic designations, but they are far from being its only ones.

Globally, our Geoparks, our Biospheres and our World Heritage Sites cover 10 million square miles. Over 300 million people live in them. What unites them is their energy and determination to improve economic, environmental, social and cultural conditions for the people who live, work, and visit these special places. And what makes that possible is the UNESCO underpinning.

Three months ago, the UK and Canada published a report looking into all three types of designation. We found that they faced the same challenges. Although by definition exceptional places, they are also as vulnerable as anywhere else to climate change, overdevelopment, deprivation and loss of biodiversity – along with every other evil of modern life

But the report also found that these sites have the tools to respond – because they have the habit of bringing people together to address these challenges

But the World Heritage Convention also provides a great value to the wider global community. We must never forget its importance as a UNESCO Convention as a force for good in promoting peace and prosperity on the global stage.

Together, we are part of a global community, with a global heritage, which tells the story of humankind - our cultural and natural heritage as a record; a testimony; a reminder of our past.

Unfortunately, there are some who do not respect and uphold global peace efforts, who do not respect UNESCO's commitment.

They act in stark contrast to the spirit and letter of the World Heritage Convention, which commits us all not to take any deliberate measures which might directly or indirectly damage the cultural and natural heritage within the territory of another State Party.

UNESCO figures show that as of 1 February 2023, Russia has damaged 238 cultural sites in Ukraine. Last month, the World Heritage Committee emergency-listed Odesa on the World Heritage List and List of World Heritage in Danger - in recognition of the risk it faced from Russian shelling.

I am grateful to all who Stand With Ukraine at UNESCO: any nation's loss of any aspect of their heritage is a shared loss for all of humanity. That is why we also welcome - with the same sadness that it was necessary - the listing of important sites in Yemen and Lebanon that are endangered for other reasons.

Our shared challenge is to ensure that the words enshrined in the Convention 50 years ago translate to action 'on the ground' for sites at most risk. In this way, the

Convention's objectives to recognise, promote and protect the world's cultural and natural heritage today will continue to be realised. I must also acknowledge the appalling tragedy of the earthquake in Turkiye and Syria. My deepest sympathies to the millions of people affected by this awful event.

The World Heritage Sites in our care reflect the extraordinary and diverse global heritage.

I would like to end by thanking UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee for the activity and work of the last 50 years of the World Heritage Convention.

I look forward to the future. Together we can ensure our World Heritage Sites will still be there for humanity to enjoy in 50,000 years time, yet alone the next 50!

Thank you, and enjoy the rest of the event.