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38th session of the World Heritage Committee

Jul 27, 2014

Understanding the Management of the Outstanding Universal Value.

The field of Heritage Safeguarding had one of its most important moments in 1972 with the creation of the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The Convention established that States Parties that signed and ratified it agreed to protect sites considered to have outstanding universal value and preserve them for future generations. Today, the Convention has been accepted by 191 countries and this makes it the most successful of all UNESCO Conventions in number of signatory states.

For the implementation of the Convention, the UNESCO General Assembly designates 21 states to be a part of the World Heritage Committee. Committee members hold their position for up to six years, but usually only form part of it for four years to give other states the opportunity to be members. The Committee meets once a year to make the most important decisions of the organization. They include inscribing sites on the World Heritage List and the List of World Heritage in Danger; managing the budget of the World Heritage Fund; approving the State of Conservation of the listed sites; and accepting the proposals of States Parties to the Tentative List. The current Committee members are Algeria, Colombia, Croatia, Finland, Germany, India, Jamaica, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Senegal, Serbia, Turkey and Vietnam.

The Committee held its 38th Session from June 15 to 25, 2014 in Doha, capital of Qatar. The program included eight parts: opening and closing ceremonies; reports of the World Heritage Centre and Advisory Bodies; State of Conservation examination; establishment of the World Heritage List and the World Heritage in Danger; review of the global strategy for a representative, balanced and credible list; Periodic Reports; and Financial issues. In addition to the members of the Committee, the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies other States Parties, NGOs, academics, consultants and companies were also allowed to attend, although they were required to be somehow linked to World Heritage.

In my case I attended as a member of the “Grup d’Arqueologia Pública i Patrimoni” (GAPP) , a group mainly formed by researchers linked to the University of Barcelona. My status fell under “Other Observers”. Following the session in person had the benefit of being able to witness the proceedings and also the parallel activities that can not be tracked via the internet. I also had the chance to meet other people who are working in the World Heritage field from very different approaches.

During the ten days of the session, the points on the agenda that generated more debate and interest in the States Parties and the media were the review of sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger and discussions for new inscriptions on the World Heritage List. In the days before the decision, lobbying was aimed at achieving a favorable vote of the members of the Committee for the promoters of the nominated sites. In total 36 site nominations were discussed: 26 cultural, two mixed (cultural and natural) and eight natural. The Advisory Bodies recommended the registration of only 15 and accepted proposals for the expansion of four more. At the end 26 sites were inscribed, bringing the list reached 1007 sites and breaking the symbolic figure of one thousand.

Among others, I would like to highlight the inscription of the Cultural Landscape of Battir, South of Jerusalem, nominated by Palestine, which was decided by secret ballot and placed directly on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Other interesting sites inscribed were those nominated by Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iraq which were the focus of intense debate on the floor. Also relevant for their particularities were the Andean Road System nominated by Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, a nomination put forward after a decade of collaborative work between the countries. Other inscriptions were the Decorated cave of Pont d’Arc, known as Grotte Chauvet-Pont d’Arc in France; the Pyu Ancient Cities, first World Heritage site in Myanmar; Ancient Mayan City and Protected Tropical Forest of Calakmul, Campeche, the first mixed site in Mexico; the Vineyard landscape of Piedmont: Langhe-Roero and Monteferrato, Italy’s 50th site in the list, and the Okavango Delta in Botswana, the 1000th World Heritage site.

Alongside the main program, three types of activities were conducted: Cultural visits to heritage sites of the host country, highlighting the archaeological site of Al Zubarah inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2013. Parallel events organized by States Parties, NGOs, the World Heritage Centre and Advisory Bodies, which were spaces to know more details on projects, programs, initiatives and research. Finally the special events, such as the presentation of an orchid named UNESCO by the Singapore government or the public acknowledgment of the Chairperson of the Session, H.E. Mrs. Sheikha Al Mayassa Bint Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, for her work during all the event.

Personally I consider that this experience will allow the working group GAPP to have an opportunity to participate in the future with a large section dedicated to the preservation, research and dissemination, with positive consequences for projects with which the group is involved (such as the H@V project) . It also allowed me to become familiar with the negotiation process necessary to achieve inscription in the World Heritage List, to support a decision of the Committee or to avoid it. I only wished that there had been an opportunity for other students like me to meet more formally to discuss World Heritage issues. This could facilitate communication and synergies for the future.

Some academic references that discuss the proceedings of the Committee meetings are Meskell (2013),

Omland (2006) and Bart (2005). They have documented the Political and ethical issues as well as the practical challenges of implementing the Convention, in which the role of the Committee, the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies has been pivotal.

The session can be tracked online via streaming since the session of 2012 or via Twitter using the hashtag #worldheritage. Currently Session recordings are available on the World Heritage Centre's website www.whc.unesco.org.

The 39th Session of the World Heritage Committee will be from June 26 to July 8, 2015 in Bonn, Germany.

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