



IUCN Key Messages

48th session of the World Heritage Committee (48COM)
Busan, Republic of Korea, 19-29 July 2026

Summary of main messages for 48COM

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention is among the most widely accepted international conservation treaties, ratified today by 196 States Parties. The Convention's recognition from the outset that natural (biological, ecological or geological) and cultural values are linked makes the Convention a pioneer in recognizing the links between nature and culture.

The 48th session of the World Heritage Committee will take place in Busan, Republic of Korea, from 19 to 29 July 2026. As the [official World Heritage Advisory Body for nature](#), IUCN reaffirms its commitment to supporting the World Heritage Committee and States Parties through advice that is grounded in technical independence, science, field experience, and collaboration.

The session comes at an important moment following the adoption of the [IUCN Programme 2026-2029](#), in which World Heritage is now explicitly framed as part of the Union's wider ambition to scale up effective, equitable and inclusive conservation.

At the 48th session of the World Heritage Committee, IUCN will highlight five key messages:

- 1. World Heritage sites face cumulative threats that require integrated responses.**
World Heritage sites are being impacted by an increasing combination of pressures, including from development and infrastructure, weak management, invasive alien species, climate change, conflict and unsustainable tourism. States Parties should act early, use impact assessment tools systematically, and strengthen site management and climate adaptation.
- 2. Indigenous Peoples' engagement must move from recognition to implementation.**
IUCN supports stronger recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights, values, knowledge and stewardship in World Heritage processes. The roadmap to enhance Indigenous Peoples' engagement in the Convention proposed at this meeting is an important step.
- 3. Strengthening representation of natural heritage in the Convention.**
Natural and mixed World Heritage sites remain underrepresented, and many States Parties still have no site inscribed for nature conservation values. IUCN encourages practical support to States Parties to identify, protect and nominate exceptional natural places, while maintaining the highest standards of Outstanding Universal Value.
- 4. World Heritage needs effective management systems, capacity and tools.**
The Convention needs to focus on implementation, using the many tools available to support good practice, including guidance on management planning, impact assessment, climate action and internationally designated areas. There is a need for greatly increased support for capacity-building for site managers, rights-holders, communities and national authorities.
- 5. Sustainable financing is essential to deliver World Heritage conservation.**
The growing pressures on World Heritage sites cannot be addressed without adequate and sustained financing. IUCN encourages governments, donors and partners to embed World Heritage in biodiversity, climate, protected area and sustainable development finance, and to support innovative approaches that strengthen long-term conservation outcomes.

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IUCN co-drafted nearly 50 World Heritage [state of conservation reports](#) for examination by the Committee ([items 7A and 7B](#), including the addendums) this year. Fifteen of these reports are for sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger. IUCN will also present its evaluation for new nominations that are proposed for their nature conservation values (item 8 ([EN](#); [FR](#))), including for [five sites](#) which IUCN considers meet the requirements for World Heritage listing as specified in the Convention's Operational Guidelines, and several other sites with potential for future inclusion on the World Heritage List.

The summary reports of the Advisory Bodies (item 5B ([EN](#); [FR](#))), including IUCN, give an overview of activities since the previous session of the World Heritage Committee.

IUCN is also taking action in support of Priority Africa, including follow up to the [Nairobi Declaration](#) (item 5C ([EN](#); [FR](#))) and also to support World Heritage and Small Islands Developing States (item 5D ([EN](#); [FR](#))).

In addition to IUCN's statutory activities on World Heritage, [IUCN also supports the protection and conservation of natural World Heritage in countless other ways](#).

The following sections provide further context for the five key messages and indicate where they relate to the 48COM agenda:

1. Cumulative threats to conservation (items 7, 7A, 7B)

The State of Conservation process remains at the core of the World Heritage Convention, to examine threats, identify necessary actions and mobilize support.

Recent analyses show that pressures affecting World Heritage sites are increasingly characterized by the cumulation and interactions of multiple threats. These include management challenges, development and infrastructure pressures, conflict, tourism pressures, invasive alien species, and climate change ([item 7](#)). The fourth edition of the [IUCN World Heritage Outlook](#) and the [2025 Issues Brief on Natural World Heritage and Climate Change](#) shows that climate change is now the most widespread threat to natural World Heritage sites.

This means that World Heritage sites need integrated approaches that combine action to ensure effective management, impact assessment, climate adaptation, emergency preparedness, sustainable financing and inclusive governance.

Development pressures, in particular, is a significant and recurring threat. IUCN continues to stress that potential impacts on World Heritage sites must be assessed at the earliest possible stage for proposals within the World Heritage site, its buffer zones, or in the wider setting, to avoid any negative impacts.

2. Strengthen Indigenous Peoples' engagement (items 5A, 5B, 7)

IUCN continues to advocate for the rights, values, knowledge and stewardship of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to be recognized, respected and upheld, and to enhance their engagement in the Convention. The roadmap to be considered by the World Heritage Committee, co-developed by the World Heritage Centre, IUCN, ICOMOS, ICCROM and the [International Indigenous Peoples' Forum for World Heritage](#) (IIPFWH), is a crucial activity to move from recognition to implementation.

3. Priority for nature (items 5B, 8B)

The World Heritage List should reflect the full diversity of the world's most exceptional cultural and natural places. Yet natural and mixed World Heritage sites remain significantly underrepresented compared with cultural sites. Almost 40% of States Parties do not have any World Heritage sites that are inscribed for their nature conservation values.

IUCN considers that addressing this imbalance requires practical and enhanced support to States Parties, including for the identification of potential sites, the preparation and revision of Tentative Lists and the use of the new Preliminary Assessment mechanism.

IUCN has already produced over 30 thematic and gap studies to help identify natural heritage priorities and potential gaps on the World Heritage List. For 19 of the 26 States Parties yet without any World Heritage site, IUCN has identified at least one potential candidate site and/or theme not yet represented on the List.

The underrepresentation of natural and mixed sites matters for the global biodiversity agenda. Natural World Heritage sites protect some of the planet's most important areas for biodiversity and geodiversity conservation which contribute to climate resilience, disaster risk reduction, water security and the well-being of people and communities.

IUCN is also embarking on the Key Geoheritage Areas initiative which aims to identify geoheritage sites of global significance, some of which could inform future World Heritage nominations. This work reflects geodiversity as a fundamental dimension of nature conservation.

4. Effective management systems, capacity and tools (items 5A, 5B, 6A)

Management effectiveness needs strengthening across natural and mixed World Heritage sites. This includes the use of tools developed through the [World Heritage Leadership Programme](#), delivered jointly with ICCROM and in collaboration with UNESCO, ICOMOS and partners. Through the World Heritage Leadership Programme, IUCN supports capacity-building on effective management, impact assessment, resilience, and climate action. These efforts are directly aligned with the IUCN Programme's focus on using knowledge, standards and tools to scale up effective and equitable protected and conserved areas.

Capacity-building must also support a more inclusive World Heritage system. IUCN will encourage approaches that strengthen participation by Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women and youth, and that help integrate nature and culture in management practice. IUCN welcomed the landmark report '[Nature conservation and cultural rights](#)' from the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, which makes a timely and compelling case that cultural rights are central to conservation.

In 2025-2026, IUCN co-hosted an [interactive online consultation](#) to shape future guidance on preparing and updating management plans, co-launched a new resource manual, and supported a workshop to strengthen the participation of Indigenous Peoples in World Heritage processes (item 5A.2 ([EN](#); [FR](#))). IUCN also continues to support management effectiveness in World Heritage sites through the [IUCN Green List Standard](#).

IUCN is also continuing to work on the management of World Heritage properties that overlap with other international designations, recognizing that such Multi-Internationally Designated Areas (MIDAs) can benefit from more coherent governance, reporting and management approaches. A forthcoming publication, developed in consultation with the Global Research and Training Centre for Internationally Designated Areas (GCIDA) and the Secretariats of the relevant designations, will update IUCN's [2016 report Managing MIDAs](#).

5. Sustainable financing

The growing pressures on World Heritage properties cannot be addressed without adequate sustainable financing. IUCN found how 15% of all natural sites are highly at risk from a lack of sustainable financing, and several others have urgent financial needs, compromising the resilience and prospects of the world's most iconic places.

IUCN stresses the potential to include World Heritage in existing nature conservation and livelihoods projects, as we do, for example, in [Southern Africa](#). As a GEF/GCF Agency, IUCN has shared practical tips with UNESCO and States Parties on how to embed World Heritage in their national biodiversity portfolio. IUCN has also proposed to include World Heritage in the GEF-9 programming directions as part of a synergistic approach to simultaneously deliver on the Convention for Biological Diversity and other Multilateral Environmental Agreements, and is available to support States Parties and UNESCO in addressing World Heritage needs (including potential nominations) in their GEF-

9/GBFF portfolio, similar as is being done in [Sri Lanka](#) and [Senegal](#), for example.

IUCN urges governments, corporate partners, donors and international partners to step up collaboration, leveraging opportunities such the 55th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention in 2027, the [International Marine Protected Areas Congress](#) (Senegal, March 2027) the [IUCN World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress](#) (Panama, September 2027), or consider other innovative financing options, such as a possible [World Heritage bond](#).

Additional information

For more information about IUCN's work on World Heritage, visit <https://iucn.org/our-work/topic/world-heritage> and follow on LinkedIn [@IUCN WorldHeritage](#).

For the IUCN World Heritage Strategy, visit <https://iucn.org/resources/grey-literature/iucn-world-heritage-strategy-new-ambition-world-heritage>.

For the full list of documents for the World Heritage Committee meeting (available in both English and French), visit <https://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/48COM/documents/>.

The livestream of the World Heritage Committee is available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/48COM/>.