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Forum: Environmental Commission 1 (EVC1)

Issue: Measures to save Natural Heritage in Danger listed by UNESCO

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Introduction

Natural heritage represents the planet's most extraordinary ecosystems, biodiversity, and landscapes, preserved for the benefit of humanity and future generations. Recognized by UNESCO, these sites hold immense cultural, environmental, and scientific value, fostering global cooperation to protect Earth's treasures. However, many natural heritage sites face severe threats, including climate change, deforestation, illegal activities such as poaching, and unsustainable development, leading to their designation as "In Danger" under UNESCO's World Heritage program. This means that these areas are at high risk of disappearing.

While this recognition raises awareness and mobilizes resources, it also underscores the urgency of addressing these threats to safeguard these irreplaceable sites. Balancing conservation efforts with the needs of local communities remains a significant challenge, as mismanagement or lack of funding can exacerbate the decline of these areas. Effective preservation requires coordinated international action, innovative policies, and sustainable practices to ensure these natural wonders endure for generations.

Definition of Key Terms

Natural Heritage

Natural heritage refers to natural sites or areas recognized for their outstanding universal value due to their ecological, geological, or biological significance. Examples include unique ecosystems, endangered species habitats, and landscapes of exceptional beauty.

UNESCO World Heritage Site

A UNESCO World Heritage Site is a landmark or area selected by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization for its cultural, historical, scientific, or natural importance. These sites are protected under international treaties to preserve their value for humanity.

In Danger

The "In Danger" designation is given to World Heritage Sites facing severe threats such as natural disasters, human activities, or environmental degradation. This label aims to raise awareness and prioritize international conservation efforts.

Biodiversity

Biodiversity encompasses the variety of life forms on Earth, including species, ecosystems, and genetic diversity. It is crucial for maintaining ecological balance and providing essential resources like food, water, and medicine.

Deforestation

Deforestation is the large-scale clearing of forests for agriculture, logging, or urban development. It poses a significant threat to natural heritage sites, leading to habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, and climate change.

Climate Change

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in global temperatures and weather patterns, primarily driven by human activities such as greenhouse gas emissions. It endangers natural heritage sites by causing rising sea levels, extreme weather, and ecosystem disruption.

Sustainable Conservation

Sustainable conservation involves protecting natural heritage while balancing environmental, economic, and social needs. It focuses on minimizing harm to ecosystems and ensuring resources are preserved for future generations.

Poaching

Poaching is the illegal hunting or capturing of wildlife, often for trade in animal parts such as ivory or fur. It threatens biodiversity and undermines conservation efforts at natural heritage sites.

Overtourism

Overtourism occurs when excessive numbers of visitors damage a site's natural or cultural resources, straining local ecosystems and infrastructure. It is a growing concern for many World Heritage Sites.

Ecosystem Restoration

Ecosystem restoration is the process of reviving degraded ecosystems to their original state by addressing factors like deforestation, pollution, or habitat loss. This is a critical measure in saving natural heritage sites in danger.

International Cooperation

International cooperation involves multiple nations working together to address global issues, such as preserving endangered heritage sites. UNESCO facilitates such efforts by coordinating funding, expertise, and resources.

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

An Environmental Impact Assessment is a systematic process that evaluates the potential effects of a project or development on the environment. It helps mitigate risks to natural heritage sites before activities begin.

Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)

NGOs are independent organizations that operate at local, national, or international levels to address social or environmental issues. They play a vital role in advocating for and implementing conservation projects.

Habitat Fragmentation

Habitat fragmentation refers to the division of natural habitats into smaller, isolated sections due to human activities like construction or agriculture. It disrupts wildlife migration and reduces

biodiversity.

Funding Gap

A funding gap arises when resources needed for conservation exceed the available financial support. Many endangered natural heritage sites face challenges due to insufficient funding for protection measures.

Background Information

Natural Heritage and Its Importance

Global Significance

Natural Heritage are critical for maintaining biodiversity, supporting the survival of endangered species, and acting as natural laboratories for scientific research. Furthermore, these sites often hold immense cultural and spiritual significance, serving as symbols of identity for indigenous peoples and local communities. The preservation of natural heritage is not just an environmental concern but a moral obligation to protect the Earth's most remarkable places for future generations. Furthermore, these sites often hold immense cultural and spiritual significance, serving as symbols of identity for indigenous peoples and local communities. They are deeply intertwined with traditional knowledge systems, practices, and beliefs, often acting as sacred grounds or sources of inspiration. For example, the Amazon Rainforest is not only a biodiversity hotspot but also the lifeblood of many indigenous tribes, whose cultural heritage and way of life depend on its preservation. Similarly, Mount Kilimanjaro, aside from being a UNESCO natural heritage site, holds sacred meaning for local communities who view it as a spiritual entity.

Economic and Environmental Contributions

Natural heritage sites provide crucial ecosystem services such as clean air, water purification, flood control, and carbon sequestration, which directly combat climate change.

Economically, they are significant drivers of sustainable tourism, offering livelihoods to millions through ecotourism and recreation industries. For instance, the Galápagos Islands generate substantial revenue through carefully managed tourism, which supports local economies while preserving the ecosystem. However, economic gains must be carefully balanced with conservation to prevent resource overexploitation, which can degrade these areas beyond repair. For example, mangrove forests sequester up to four times more carbon per hectare than tropical rainforests. Economically, nature-based tourism generates around \$600 billion annually, with sites like the Galápagos Islands contributing tens of millions of dollars through carefully managed tourism that supports local economies while preserving ecosystems. However, economic gains must be balanced with conservation to prevent overexploitation and degradation.

Environmental Threats Facing Natural Heritage Sites

Natural Disasters

Natural disasters such as earthquakes, wildfires, and floods pose a significant threat to natural heritage sites. These events often result in immediate and severe damage to ecosystems, destroying habitats and displacing wildlife. For example, the 2020 wildfires in Australia severely impacted the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, burning millions of acres and threatening endemic species such as the greater glider. Similarly, frequent flooding in the Sundarbans, a UNESCO-listed mangrove forest in India and Bangladesh, disrupts the delicate balance of the ecosystem. These disasters often have long-term consequences, such as soil erosion and loss of biodiversity, making recovery efforts challenging and expensive.

Rising Sea Levels

Rising sea levels, driven by climate change, are a growing threat to coastal and marine heritage sites. Low-lying islands and coastal areas, such as the Sundarbans and the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, are particularly vulnerable. The Maldives, home to some of the world's most pristine coral reefs, faces an existential threat as sea levels rise, leading to habitat loss for marine species and salinization of freshwater sources. Additionally, cultural landmarks

tied to natural heritage, such as Venice's lagoon ecosystem, face similar risks. Rising sea levels not only alter landscapes but also increase the frequency and severity of storm surges, exacerbating damage to these sites.

Habitat Shifts

Climate change-induced habitat shifts are disrupting the ecological balance of natural heritage sites worldwide. As temperatures rise, species are forced to migrate to cooler areas, often leaving behind ecosystems that depend on their presence. For instance, the iconic snow leopard's habitat in the Himalayas is shrinking as warming temperatures push the species to higher altitudes. Similarly, coral reefs, such as the Great Barrier Reef, are experiencing bleaching as marine species struggle to adapt to rising sea temperatures. These shifts threaten not only individual species but also the interconnected systems that define these heritage sites, leading to cascading ecological effects.

Extreme Weather Events

The increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events—such as hurricanes, typhoons, and droughts—poses a major challenge to the conservation of natural heritage sites. For example, Hurricane Irma in 2017 caused extensive damage to the Virgin Islands National Park, a UNESCO-listed site, uprooting trees and destroying critical habitats. Prolonged droughts in Africa's Serengeti National Park have led to water shortages, affecting both wildlife and local communities dependent on the ecosystem. These extreme events not only cause immediate destruction but also hinder long-term recovery by altering ecosystems and making them more susceptible to future disturbances.

Human-Induced Threats Facing Natural Heritage Sites

Illegal Logging

Illegal logging is a major human-induced threat to natural heritage sites, leading to

deforestation and the loss of biodiversity. This activity not only destroys habitats but also disrupts the ecological balance by removing key species that support the ecosystem. For example, illegal logging in the Amazon Rainforest, a UNESCO-listed site, has resulted in habitat fragmentation and increased vulnerability of endangered species such as the jaguar and giant otter. Furthermore, the removal of trees exacerbates soil erosion and reduces carbon sequestration, contributing to global climate change.

Poaching and Wildlife Trafficking

Poaching and wildlife trafficking pose severe risks to natural heritage sites by targeting species for illegal trade. Endangered animals such as rhinos, elephants, and pangolins are often hunted in protected areas like Africa's Virunga National Park. This activity disrupts food chains and leads to population declines, threatening the overall stability of ecosystems. Additionally, the loss of iconic species diminishes the cultural and ecological value of these sites, impacting both conservation efforts and sustainable tourism.

Unsustainable Tourism

Over-tourism and unsustainable tourism practices strain natural heritage sites, often causing irreversible damage. High visitor numbers can lead to habitat degradation, pollution, and overuse of natural resources. For instance, Mount Everest's base camp has suffered from excessive waste accumulation due to increased trekking activities. Similarly, coral reefs in popular destinations like the Great Barrier Reef experience physical damage from boats and divers, as well as water pollution. Without strict management, tourism's economic benefits can be outweighed by the ecological harm caused.

Urbanization and Infrastructure Development

The expansion of urban areas and infrastructure development around natural heritage sites often leads to habitat destruction and fragmentation. Projects such as road construction, mining, and large-scale agriculture encroach on protected areas, reducing their ecological integrity. For example, infrastructure projects near the Sundarbans have disrupted the habitat of Bengal tigers and other wildlife. These developments also increase human-wildlife conflicts, as animals are forced to venture into human settlements in search of food and shelter.

Pollution

Pollution, including air, water, and soil contamination, significantly impacts natural heritage sites. Industrial activities and agricultural runoff introduce harmful chemicals into ecosystems, affecting both wildlife and plant life. For instance, agricultural runoff has caused nutrient overloads in Lake Baikal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, leading to algal blooms and declining water quality. Similarly, plastic pollution in marine heritage sites like the Galápagos Islands endangers marine life, as animals often ingest or become entangled in plastic waste. Pollution not only diminishes the ecological value of these sites but also reduces their appeal for ecotourism.

Conservation Challenges

Lack of Funding

One of the most pressing issues in conserving natural heritage sites is the scarcity of financial resources. Many governments in developing countries lack the funds to enforce conservation laws, invest in sustainable infrastructure, or provide alternative livelihoods for communities dependent on these sites. International funding mechanisms, such as the World Heritage Fund, exist but are often insufficient to meet the growing needs. Without adequate financial support, even well-meaning conservation plans fail to achieve their objectives.

Weak Governance and Enforcement

Corruption, political instability, and weak enforcement mechanisms undermine conservation efforts in many regions. Illegal activities, such as logging or mining, often occur with little consequence due to inadequate monitoring and enforcement. Furthermore, conflicting interests between conservation and development can lead to poor decision-making, as seen in cases where protected areas are cleared for industrial projects. Strengthening governance structures and ensuring transparency are critical for overcoming these challenges. Throughout the world there is corruption found which explains the weak enforcement of conservation challenges as government officials do not see this as a priority. These types of situations are most prevalent in non-developed countries.

The Role of Local Communities

Community Involvement

Local communities play a pivotal role in conserving natural heritage, as they are often the closest stakeholders to these sites. When communities are involved in decision-making processes, the outcomes tend to be more sustainable and culturally sensitive. Successful examples include community-led conservation programs in Namibia, where local tribes manage wildlife reserves, benefiting both biodiversity and their own livelihoods. However, lack of education, resources, and government support often limits community participation in many regions. The lack of community involvement is a major cause as to why governments are not implementing change within countries.

International Cooperation and Policy

Challenges in Implementation

Despite the frameworks in place, challenges such as inadequate funding, political instability, and conflicting development priorities often hinder the success of international initiatives. For instance, while the Paris Agreement has spurred commitments to reduce emissions, many countries struggle to balance conservation with economic growth. Strengthening accountability measures, increasing funding, and fostering cooperation between nations are vital for overcoming these barriers and ensuring the success of conservation efforts.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United States

The United States is home to numerous UNESCO-listed natural heritage sites, including Yellowstone National Park and the Everglades. The country has made significant efforts to preserve its natural heritage through legislation like the Endangered Species Act and the

creation of protected areas. However, challenges such as industrial development, over-tourism, and climate change continue to threaten these sites. For example, the Everglades faces ongoing issues like water pollution and invasive species, despite federal and state restoration projects. The U.S. also provides financial and technical support to international conservation programs, emphasizing the importance of collaboration in protecting endangered sites globally.

Australia

Australia is recognized for its commitment to conserving natural heritage sites such as the Great Barrier Reef and Kakadu National Park. Despite substantial conservation funding, the Great Barrier Reef has faced severe bleaching due to climate change, prompting Australia to invest in reef restoration and carbon reduction initiatives. The government works closely with UNESCO and scientific organizations to monitor and protect its natural heritage, although criticism has been raised over its continued reliance on coal exports, which exacerbate global warming. Australia's dual focus on conservation and economic development highlights the complexities of heritage preservation.

Brazil

As home to the Amazon Rainforest, one of the world's most biodiverse ecosystems, Brazil plays a crucial role in global conservation efforts. The Amazon faces deforestation, illegal mining, and agriculture-driven land conversion, threatening its status as a UNESCO natural heritage site. While Brazil has implemented conservation measures like protected reserves and anti-logging laws, enforcement remains inconsistent due to political and economic pressures. International partnerships and funding from organizations like the World Bank and WWF have been instrumental in supporting Brazil's conservation initiatives, although much work remains to be done to combat illegal activities and protect indigenous territories.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

The DRC is home to several UNESCO-listed natural heritage sites, including Virunga National Park, renowned for its mountain gorillas. Despite its rich biodiversity, the DRC faces significant conservation challenges, such as poaching, armed conflict, and deforestation driven by illegal mining and charcoal production. International organizations like UNESCO and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) collaborate with the DRC to enhance anti-poaching measures, promote sustainable livelihoods, and improve park management. The DRC's efforts to protect its

natural heritage are crucial not only for biodiversity but also for the livelihoods of local communities dependent on these ecosystems.

India

India has a diverse range of UNESCO natural heritage sites, including the Western Ghats and Sundarbans National Park. The government has implemented strict conservation laws, such as the Wildlife Protection Act, and has partnered with international organizations to address threats like habitat loss, poaching, and climate change. The Sundarbans, a critical mangrove ecosystem, is particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels and cyclones caused by climate change. India's focus on integrating local communities into conservation efforts, such as through ecotourism and sustainable resource use, has been a key factor in its success in managing these areas.

Organizations

UNESCO

As the primary body overseeing the World Heritage Program, UNESCO plays a central role in identifying, monitoring, and protecting natural heritage sites. It collaborates with member states to develop management plans, provide technical assistance, and mobilize funding through the World Heritage Fund. UNESCO's "In Danger" list raises awareness about sites at risk, such as the Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra, and coordinates international efforts to address these challenges. Despite its significant contributions, UNESCO often faces challenges related to political disagreements and limited funding, which can hinder its ability to implement effective conservation measures.

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

The WWF is a leading international NGO focused on biodiversity conservation and environmental sustainability. It works to protect endangered natural heritage sites through initiatives like anti-poaching programs, habitat restoration, and community-based conservation. The WWF collaborates with governments, local communities, and other organizations to promote sustainable practices, such as in the Amazon Rainforest and Virunga National Park. Its emphasis on addressing the root causes of threats, like deforestation and climate change,

makes it a vital player in global conservation efforts.

Global Environment Facility (GEF)

The GEF provides financial support to conservation projects aimed at protecting biodiversity, mitigating climate change, and combating land degradation. It funds initiatives in developing countries to address threats to UNESCO natural heritage sites, such as deforestation in the Congo Basin and coral bleaching in Southeast Asia. By partnering with international organizations like UNESCO and the WWF, the GEF helps bridge the funding gap faced by many countries in implementing effective conservation strategies. Its focus on sustainable development ensures that economic growth and environmental preservation go hand in hand.

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

The IUCN works closely with UNESCO to evaluate and monitor natural heritage sites, providing scientific expertise and recommendations. It plays a crucial role in the nomination process for World Heritage status and in assessing the threats to sites already on the list. The IUCN also collaborates with governments and NGOs to develop conservation strategies, such as improving park management and promoting sustainable tourism. Its Red List of Threatened Species serves as a vital tool for understanding biodiversity loss and guiding global conservation priorities.

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)

CITES regulates international trade in endangered species to ensure that it does not threaten their survival. It plays a critical role in protecting wildlife within natural heritage sites by curbing illegal trade in species like elephants, tigers, and pangolins. By working with national governments, law enforcement agencies, and NGOs, CITES helps combat poaching and promote sustainable use of wildlife resources. Its efforts complement broader conservation initiatives, ensuring that natural heritage sites remain viable habitats for endangered species.

Timeline of Events Relevant

Date	Description of event
December 4, 1978	The first World Heritage Sites are designated, including Yellowstone National Park in the U.S. and the Galápagos Islands in Ecuador.
June 3–14, 1992	The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro establishes Agenda 21, emphasizing sustainable development and conservation.
November 16, 1994	The Global Strategy for a Balanced, Representative, and Credible World Heritage List is adopted to improve representation of natural heritage.
March 21, 2003	The UNESCO World Heritage Marine Programme is launched to focus specifically on conserving marine heritage sites like the Great Barrier Reef.
July 15, 2005	The Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention are updated to include climate change as a significant threat to heritage sites.
November 28, 2007	The Virunga Alliance is formed, a collaborative initiative to protect Virunga National Park from deforestation, poaching, and industrial activities.
November 29, 2011	The World Heritage Committee adds the Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra to the "In Danger" list due to illegal logging and agricultural encroachment.

December 12, 2015	The Paris Agreement is adopted, including commitments to mitigate climate change impacts on natural heritage sites through global cooperation.
July 2, 2018	The World Heritage Committee removes Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System from the "In Danger" list following successful conservation efforts.
October 13, 2020	The IUCN World Heritage Outlook 3 report is published, highlighting the critical role of local communities in conserving natural heritage sites.
July 30, 2021	The UNESCO World Heritage Committee adds Australia's Great Barrier Reef to its watchlist, citing concerns over climate change and coral bleaching.
July 5, 2023	The World Heritage Committee adopts a new strategy to address the increasing impacts of climate change on heritage sites, focusing on resilience and adaptation.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Efforts to protect natural heritage sites have a long history, often beginning with national programs addressing specific threats. In the United States, the Comprehensive Everglades

Restoration Plan (CERP) was launched in 2000 to restore water flow and reduce pollution in the Everglades, a UNESCO site. While the program has made some progress, it has faced challenges such as delays and funding shortages, highlighting the difficulties of large-scale environmental projects. Similarly, Australia has implemented the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan to protect the Great Barrier Reef from agricultural runoff, invasive species, and over-tourism. Despite substantial investment, the reef continues to suffer from climate change-induced coral bleaching, demonstrating the limitations of local interventions against global environmental challenges.

In Brazil, the Amazon Rainforest, a UNESCO-listed natural heritage site, has been a focal point for conservation policies. Initiatives such as the Amazon Region Protected Areas (ARPA) program have expanded protected zones and improved management practices. However, economic pressures and political shifts have often undermined these efforts, resulting in record deforestation rates in recent years. International initiatives have also played a key role. UNESCO's "In Danger" designation has successfully raised awareness and mobilized resources for sites under threat, such as Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This designation has led to increased funding and anti-poaching measures, although the effectiveness of these efforts varies depending on the political will and capacity of the countries involved.

Global organizations such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) have provided critical funding for conservation projects targeting endangered natural heritage sites. These funds have supported initiatives like coral reef restoration in the Philippines and sustainable land management programs in Africa. While these projects have shown measurable success, the global funding gap for conservation remains a significant obstacle. Another key international effort is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which regulates the trade of wildlife to protect species in natural heritage sites. CITES has been instrumental in reducing illegal poaching, particularly for elephants and rhinos. However, enforcement of these regulations remains inconsistent, particularly in developing countries, limiting the overall impact of this treaty.

Innovative approaches have also emerged at the community level. Namibia's community-based conservation model has empowered local populations to manage wildlife and protected areas. This program shares tourism revenues with communities, creating economic incentives to protect biodiversity, and has been widely celebrated for its success in species recovery.

Similarly, Costa Rica has become a leader in sustainable tourism, using ecotourism to generate funds for conservation and reinvest them into UNESCO-listed sites like the Area de Conservación Guanacaste. While these models demonstrate the potential for effective conservation, they rely heavily on strong local governance and sustained international support, which are not always present in other regions. These efforts illustrate the challenges and successes of past attempts to protect natural heritage sites, highlighting the need for continued innovation and collaboration.

Possible Solutions

Addressing the challenges facing natural heritage sites requires a multi-faceted approach that combines local, national, and international efforts. One critical solution is increasing funding for conservation initiatives. Governments, international organizations, and private sectors must work together to allocate more resources toward protecting endangered heritage sites. This can include expanding financial mechanisms such as the World Heritage Fund or leveraging private investments through public-private partnerships. Providing funding directly to local communities for conservation efforts, particularly those that promote sustainable tourism and ecotourism, can help alleviate poverty while also preserving natural heritage.

Another essential solution is strengthening governance and enforcement at both national and international levels. Many natural heritage sites suffer from inadequate protection due to weak political will, corruption, or poor enforcement of conservation laws. Increasing the capacity of local governments to enforce laws and manage protected areas is crucial. International treaties like CITES and the World Heritage Convention can be made more effective by improving monitoring and accountability systems, ensuring that countries follow through on their commitments to protect natural heritage. Additionally, international cooperation and information-sharing among governments can help mitigate illegal activities such as poaching, illegal logging, and mining, which threaten these sites.

Incorporating local communities in the conservation process is another promising solution. Many successful conservation programs have involved local populations, ensuring they benefit economically from the preservation of natural heritage. For example, community-based conservation initiatives, where locals manage and protect their environments, have been effective in Namibia and Costa Rica. These programs provide alternative livelihoods and reduce

reliance on activities that harm the environment, such as logging or poaching. Empowering local communities through education, training, and providing sustainable alternatives like eco-tourism and organic agriculture can create lasting solutions that both protect the environment and improve local economies.

Additionally, there is a growing need to focus on climate change mitigation and adaptation as part of conservation strategies. Climate change poses a significant threat to many natural heritage sites, causing sea-level rise, coral bleaching, and habitat destruction. Governments and international bodies must invest in research and strategies to build resilience in these areas, such as by creating protected corridors for wildlife or using natural climate solutions like reforestation. Additionally, the implementation of renewable energy projects and sustainable agricultural practices can help mitigate the environmental pressures that contribute to the degradation of heritage sites.

Finally, public awareness and education campaigns are essential for fostering global support for the protection of natural heritage. Increasing awareness of the value of these sites, not just for biodiversity but for cultural and economic reasons, can garner international attention and support. Encouraging sustainable practices and consumer choices, such as promoting eco-friendly products and services, can also reduce the human impact on these sites. Education campaigns can involve local communities, tourists, and governments, ensuring that conservation is seen as a shared responsibility across borders and cultures.

These solutions, when implemented effectively, can help mitigate the threats facing natural heritage sites and create a more sustainable future for these irreplaceable parts of our planet's natural and cultural legacy. However, successful implementation will depend on collaboration, long-term commitment, and the active involvement of all stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, local communities, and international organizations.

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