

Grenzübergreifendes europäisches Welterbe - Ein Thema für die UNESCO-Projektschulen

Information texts for pupils

"The UNESCO World Heritage Convention" teaching module What is the World Heritage Convention and what is it meant to achieve?

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Introduction to the content of the "UNESCO World Heritage Convention" module

Our World Heritage

What is the connection between the Pyramids of Giza and the Statue of Liberty in New York? What connects the Auschwitz Birkenau Memorial with the Wadden Sea, or the Cologne Cathedral with the Rammelsberg Mine in the Harz Mountains? They are all UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

In the understanding of the international community of nations, a world heritage is a heritage that has unique significance for all of humanity. UNESCO describes this unique significance as an "outstanding universal value".

In other words: World Heritage Sites are valuable material traces, objects, buildings or landscapes of humankind and the earth. They allow us to experience the history of mankind and the planet. Because they still tell us so much today about the different cultures and ages of the world, but also about the diversity of nature, they create cohesion and belonging among people. They are important for securing peace in the world. That is why they belong to the heritage of mankind. Their destruction would be a loss for all people in the world. Accordingly, World Heritage Sites should be jointly protected, that is, by all of us together.

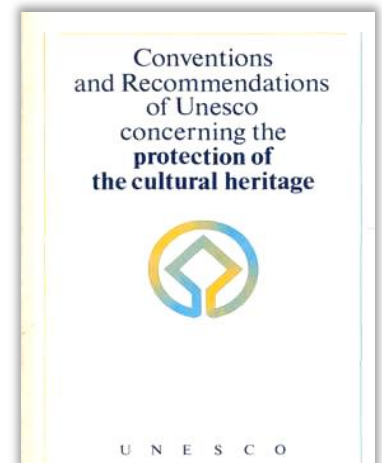


Fig. 1: World Heritage Convention

The natural and cultural heritage of mankind

The definition of what should be protected as World Heritage can be found in Articles 1 and 2 of the Convention concerning the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage. Today, the Convention is better known as the World Heritage Convention. The Convention was adopted in 1972 and lays down all the framework conditions for the protection and use of human heritage.

The understanding of heritage on which the Convention is based is an extraordinary one. Because unlike many instruments of protection, the World Heritage Convention defines heritage not only as cultural objects, for example



Fig. 2: Cologne Cathedral



Fig. 3: Statue of Liberty



Fig. 4: Hiroshima Peace Monument

churches or castles. Rather, it defines world heritage as cultural heritage and as natural heritage.

According to Article 1 of the World Heritage Convention, cultural heritage includes "monuments", "ensembles" and "sites". They all say something about human history. Well-known monuments on the World Heritage List include Cologne Cathedral (Germany), the Statue of Liberty in New York (USA) and the Peace Monument in Hiroshima (Japan).

If a World Heritage Site consists of a group of individual or interconnected buildings, it is usually referred to as an ensemble. These include, for example, historic city centers such as the Old Town of Florence (Italy) or industrial sites such as the Rammelsberg in the Harz Mountains (Germany).



Fig. 5: Mines of Rammelsberg



Fig. 6: Old town of Florence

Large areas with excavation sites or human works are referred to as sites. Well-known examples are the Stone Age excavation site Göbekli Tepe (Turkey) or the excavation site Palmyra (Syria).

The natural heritage includes unique natural formations and valuable habitats for endangered plant and animal species, which must be protected. Objects of important ecological processes and beautiful landscapes are also protected as natural heritage. Article 2 of the World Heritage Convention describes this as "natural structures", "geological and physiographical manifestations and precisely delimited areas" and "natural sites or natural areas". Well-known natural sites on the World Heritage List are the tidal flats of the Wadden Sea (Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands) or the Great Barrier Reef (Australia). Both form unique habitats for thousands of animal and plant species.



Fig. 7: Wadden Sea



Fig. 8: Great Barrier Reef

The beech forests (Slovak Republic, Ukraine, Germany) also belong to the natural heritage as sites of important ecological processes. The Dinosaur Provincial Park (Canada) allows scientific research into what the age of the dinosaurs looked like. The natural rock formation of the Grand Canyon (USA) provides an overview of the geological history of the last millions of years. All of them belong to the UNESCO natural heritage.



Fig. 9: Beech forests in the Carpathians



Fig. 10: Dinosaur Provincial Park



Fig. 11: Grand Canyon

How it all began

But why was it and why is it important for the world community to protect the heritage of all mankind together as a world community? To understand this, it is worth taking a look into the past.

In the 1950s, 60s and 70s the world society was in a state of upheaval. After the destruction of culture and nature in World War II, a need for renewal had arisen worldwide. These renewals were reflected by, among other things, large building projects and modernization works. Monuments from past times often hindered and blocked these modernization plans. They were no longer considered worthy of protection. Rather, they were at best redesigned in a modernist way. At worst, they were demolished. Accordingly, many cultural and natural heritage sites were threatened by social and economic change.

In the early 1960s, however, an outcry went around the world. The construction of the Aswan Dam in Egypt threatened the temple complex of Abu Simbel. It ran the risk of disappearing into the mass of water. Three millennia of cultural history would have had to give way to progress. The only way to save the temple complex was to dismantle it into its individual parts and rebuild it inland at a higher point.

But such an undertaking costs a lot of money and required many experts. UNESCO called for an unprecedented international aid campaign. UNESCO managed to attract 3,000 experts from all over the world and to obtain 80 million dollars, so that the temple complex could be relocated through joint efforts. The success of the rescue operation of Abu Simbel motivated the international community to carry out further conservation campaigns. It also motivated people to develop instruments to preserve and protect unique cultural sites for future generations. This action marked the beginning of the World Heritage Convention.

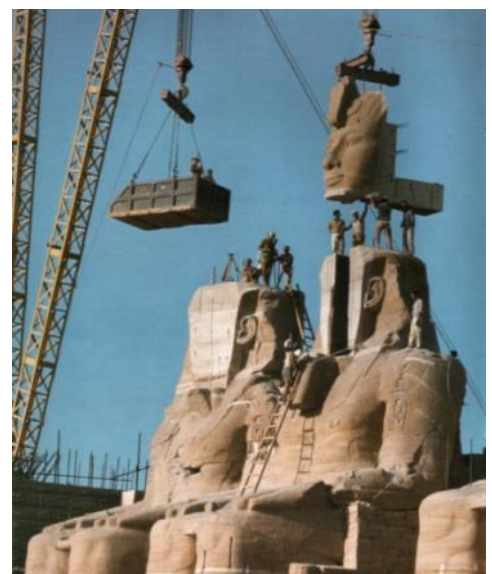


Fig. 12: The rescue operation of Abu Simbel

The World Heritage Convention

The World Heritage Convention is an international agreement between the member states of the United Nations. The aim of the Convention is "to identify, protect, preserve, present and transmit to future generations cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value" (UNESCO World Heritage Convention, Article 4).

Accordingly, the international document defines what is meant by cultural and natural heritage. The Convention describes the criteria and procedures for designating cultural and natural sites as World Heritage Sites. It also explains which bodies are responsible for the nomination. The Convention also defines the rights and obligations of the World Heritage Titles for the so-called Contracting State.

The development process of the World Heritage Convention

With 1,092 protected sites in 167 countries, the Convention is now one of the most important instruments for the protection and conservation of the cultural and natural heritage of humanity.

However, there was a long way to go before these inscriptions came about. The Convention came into force in 1972, after 20 member countries of the international community had signed it. The first World Heritage inscriptions were made as early as 1978. These included the Aachen Cathedral (Germany), the Galapagos Islands (Ecuador) and the historic old town of Krakow (Poland).



Fig. 13: Aachen Cathedral



Fig. 14: Galapagos Islands



Fig. 15: Historic old town of
Krakow

The ratification, i.e. the signing, of the Convention by the individual states of the UN international community progressed rapidly. It took much longer to form committees and commissions. These bodies and commissions are to be empowered and entitled to determine what can and should be World Heritage and what should not.

Finally, an advisory body was set up to provide technical support for the World Heritage application processes. The advisory body consists of members of the International Council of Monuments (ICOMOS), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

In addition to the committees, the formal criteria for determining what constitutes a World Heritage Site had to be defined. The big challenge here: The criteria for the "outstanding universal value" had to be agreed upon through the process of an international agreement. All signatory states therefore had to agree on certain criteria. They had to achieve this despite their different cultural backgrounds and professional convictions. Finally, they agreed on ten so-called World Heritage Criteria.

The World Heritage Criteria

In order to determine whether a site has significance for all humanity or not, it must have an "outstanding universal value" (OUV). UNESCO thus describes the unique significance of a site. This OUV is defined in the form of ten criteria. All registered World Heritage Sites fulfill at least one of the following OUV criteria:

- (i) Man-made artistic or architectural masterpieces - so-called "masterpieces of human creativity" (example: the Great Wall of China, China);
- (ii) Buildings, monuments or places that have influenced the development of architecture, art or urban planning at a given time (e.g. the old town of Florence, Italy);
- (iii) Remains of buildings or evidence of a tradition or culture that still exists or has disappeared (example: the pyramids of Giza, Egypt);

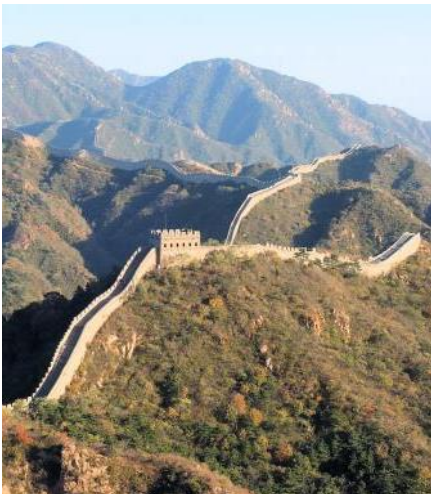


Fig. 16: Great Wall of China



Fig. 17: Old town of Florence



Fig. 18: Pyramids of Giza

- (iv) Special buildings or ensembles of buildings that are typical of a particular period in the history of humanity and that can be used to learn more about the construction and way of life of that period (example: the old town of Bamberg, Germany);
- (v) Places or buildings that tell how people and the environment used to interact and how they used the soil, the landscape or the sea (example: Muskauer Park, Germany and Poland);
- (vi) Places that are directly linked to important historical events, ideas, or valuable artistic or literary works (example: the Peace Monument in Hiroshima, Japan);



Fig. 19: Old town of Bamberg



Fig. 20: Muskauer Park

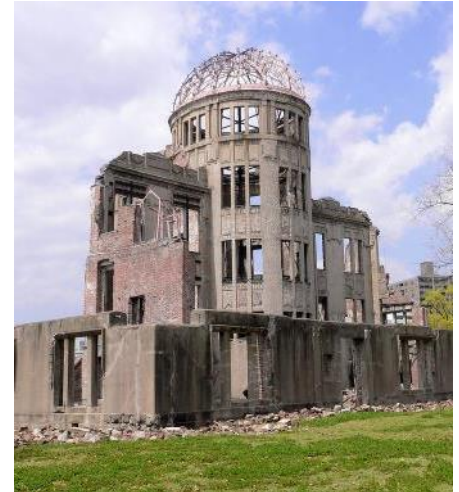


Fig. 21: Hiroshima Peace
Monument

- (vii) exceptionally beautiful landscapes or natural phenomena (example: the Giant's Causeway, Great Britain);
- (viii) Landscapes or places that represent important stages in the history of the earth (example: the archipelago coast - Kvarken Archipelago, Finland);
- (ix) Examples of important ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems as well as plant and animal communities (example: the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador);
- (x) Places, landscapes and habitats that are important for the conservation and study of biological diversity and for the conservation and study of endangered animal and plant species (e.g. the rain forests of Atsinanana, Madagascar).



Fig. 22: Kvarken Archipelago



Fig. 23: Rain forests of Atsinanana

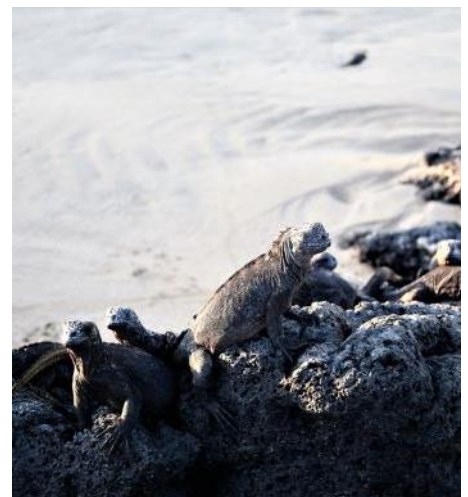


Fig. 24: Galapagos Islands

The road to World Heritage

How does a site become a world heritage site? To become a World Heritage Site, sites must go through a lengthy process.

The selection process starts at the national level. First, each State party to the World Heritage Convention draws up a list of its most important cultural and natural assets. It is important that this list is drawn up in such a way as to ensure that the cultural or natural sites are worth preserving not only for the region; they should have a significance for all people. They must therefore have an "outstanding universal value". In Germany, this process is carried out by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK). The last selection made by the KMK took place in 2015 and included the artists' colony Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt and the Old Synagogue and Mikveh in Erfurt as possible World Heritage candidates. The Alpine and pre-alpine meadow and moor landscapes and the built dreams – the castles Neuschwanstein, Linderhof and Herrenchiemsee – of the Bavarian King Ludwig II. are also on Germany's list of nominees.

The selection process then continues at the international level. As a rule, the Parties to the World Heritage Convention select one or two sites annually from their lists of proposals. These are proposed for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List. For this purpose, the applicants must submit an application form, the so-called nomination dossier. This contains a description of the site. It also provides a clear explanation of why the site selected is so exceptional. It also includes a comparison with similar sites.



Fig. 25: UNESCO Headquarters in Paris

The application will be sent to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in Paris. The World Heritage Centre is the secretariat of the World Heritage Committee. It is responsible for the recording, publication and implementation of all decisions taken concerning the World Heritage Site.

Once the nomination dossier has been received by the World Heritage Centre, the experts of the Advisory Bodies will evaluate the application. The involvement of this advisory board is set out in Article 14.2 of the Convention. For the purpose of assessment, the Advisory Board first examines the content of the nomination dossier. The experts verify that the application is complete and that the arguments are consistent. They also confirm whether the site actually has exceptional universal value.

The experts then visit the nominated sites. They inspect to see how well they are still preserved, i.e. their "authenticity". They examine how it is to be ensured that this remains the case. Finally, they look at what strategies the states have developed to preserve and manage the future World Heritage.

Finally, they draw up an assessment report. In this report, they recommend whether or not the site should be designated a World Heritage Site. If the panel makes a positive decision, the applications are submitted to the World Heritage Committee. Alternatively, applicants are encouraged to revise the application dossier.

The final decision is made by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. The World Heritage Committee is the most important body for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention. The 21 members are elected every two or four years. The shortening of time is decided by lot. The members shall represent all continents and cultures of the world, thereby underscoring the worldwide importance of the Convention.

Angola	China	Zimbabwe
Azerbaïdjan	Guatemala	Spain
Australien	Indonesien	St. Kitts and Nevis
Bahrain	Cuba	Tanzania
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kuwait	Tunisia
Brazil	Kyrgyzstan	Uganda
Burkina Faso	Norway	Hungary

Fig.26: Composition of the World Heritage Committee 2018

The Committee meets once a year for the sessions of the World Heritage Committee. At the meeting, the committee discusses, among other things, new additions to the World Heritage list. Decisions can be made in a variety of ways. A site can be recommended for inscription on the World Heritage List and thus be added immediately. The Committee may also request the applicant country to revise the nomination and resubmit it at a later date. It may also decide not to recognize a site as a World Heritage Site.

Rights and Duties of the World Heritage Title

Once designated a World Heritage Site, it is the State Party's duty to "protect, preserve and communicate the value of its sites" (Articles 4 and 5 of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 1972). Natural disasters, mass tourism, poor preservation of monuments or wars can destroy World Heritage Sites for the long term. Accordingly, it is the task of states to protect their World Heritage Sites from these influences.

World Heritage Sites are not only valuable historical sites or landscapes. They are also places of learning. As places of learning, they show how people lived, where they dwelled and worked in the past. Communicating their special features to locals and visitors is therefore one of the main tasks of a World Heritage Site (Article 27 of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 1972). This happens, for example, in visitor centres, but also through festivals, lectures or publications.

To ensure that the obligations described above are met, World Heritage Sites are subject to periodic reporting requirements. In particular, major development projects, such as construction projects, which could undermine the exceptional universal value of the World Heritage Site, must be coordinated in advance with UNESCO.

World Heritage at Risk

If a site is nevertheless endangered despite all efforts, it can be included on the "List of World Heritage in Danger" also called the Red List of World Heritage. This possibility includes a special protection of the site. At the same time, it demands the responsibility of the international community, which is laid down in Article 11 of the Convention. The Red List also serves to give special attention to sites. At the same time, threatened sites can receive financial support and special advice.

The most famous example are the Buddha statues in the Bamiyan valley. Destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, they were inscribed as World Heritage in 2003 and put on the Red List at the same time. Currently, 54 sites are listed on the Endangered World Heritage listing. If a site is so permanently endangered that it can no longer fulfill the quality criteria as a World Heritage Site, it may also be deprived of its World Heritage title.



Fig. 27: Site of the destroyed Buddha statues in the Bamiyan valley

Challenges of the World Heritage Convention

What challenges do World Heritage Sites face?

A brief look at the World Heritage List reveals a first challenge of the World Heritage Convention: about 50% of all registered World Heritage Sites are located in Europe. The rest of the world shares the other 50%. The regional imbalance of registered World Heritage Sites was apparent from the outset. Nevertheless, UNESCO only reacted to that development in 1992. It set up various working groups to develop strategies to deal with the imbalance. This led to the so-called "Global Strategy," which was adopted at the 18th meeting of the World Heritage Committee in Thailand in 1994. It provides for a series of measures to restore the balance of the World Heritage List.

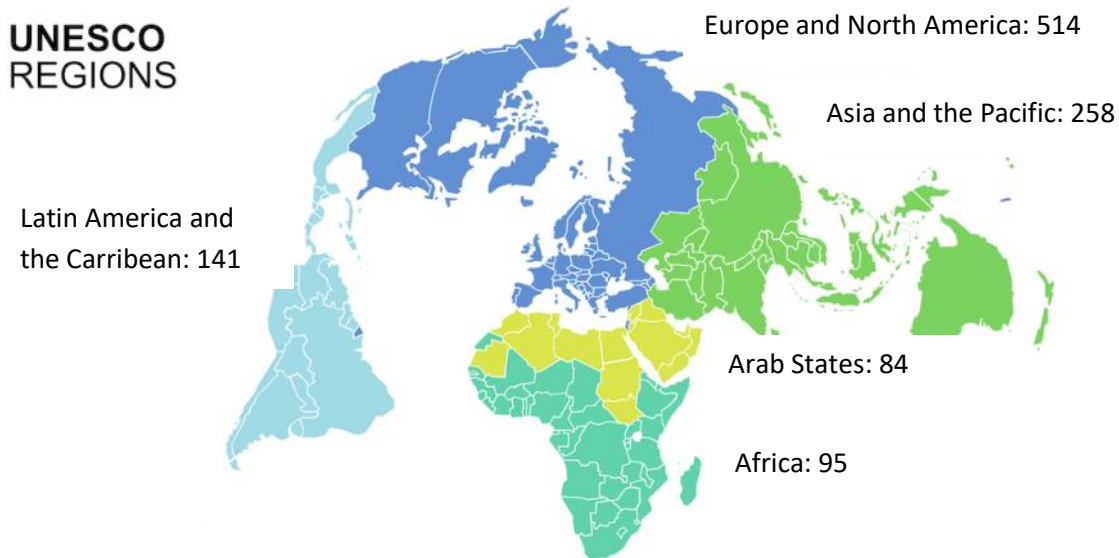


Fig. 28: Regional distribution of World Heritage Sites in 2019

UNESCO cited, as an important cause of the imbalance, the pronounced material understanding of heritage underlying the Convention. The World Heritage title protects built structures, monuments, cities and landscapes. Other expressions of cultural diversity, by contrast, move into the background. However, in order to ensure that both the cultural diversity of the world and that of its objects can be found on the World Heritage List insofar as possible, the definition of cultural heritage has been expanded over the years. While initially monumental and ecclesiastical buildings such as the Cologne Cathedral or the Aachen Cathedral (Germany) or the Taj Mahal (India) were inscribed, later on, industrial buildings such as the Zollverein colliery (Germany) also followed. Cultural landscapes such as Muskauer Park (Germany and Poland) also followed.



Fig. 29 Aachen Cathedral



Fig. 30: Tourists at Taj Mahal



Fig. 31: Zollverein colliery

Mass tourism also poses a particular challenge to understanding the importance of a World Heritage site. In 1972, the Convention aimed to protect humanity's heritage from the pressures of development and the associated impact on valuable objects. In the meantime, the World Heritage status itself may trigger these dangers. Both local authorities and the tourism industry have discovered World Heritage as a brand for their own advantage. With this brand, development and progress can be initiated. Sites are often no longer nominated for the purpose of protection. Rather, the states are pursuing economic interests. In the foreground of many activities are no longer the historical or artistic significance of monuments, squares or cities. Rather touristic uses are becoming increasingly important. The effects are disastrous in some places. World Heritage Sites are transformed into commercial sites precisely because of their attractiveness for tourists.

Despite all these challenges, the World Heritage Convention is still a success story. It impressively shows how international, cross-border cooperation can help to protect and communicate the common heritage of humanity.

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