Politics Before Lunch? A morning’s work by the World Heritage Committee

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Abstract

In 2012 the Director General of UNESCO expressed concern about decisions made by the World Heritage Committee. This article – written from the perspective of a member of the World Heritage Committee – considers the work of the Committee exactly one year before these comments were made, looking in detail at what happened on the morning of Friday 24 June 2011. It examines the process, debates and organisational aspects of the Committee’s work. In telling the story of what took place, it reflects upon the process involved and provides context to the decisions taken. It concludes that, on this morning at least, the Committee operated in an efficient and effective manner.

Introduction

‘On its fortieth birthday, the World Heritage Convention faces … [a] fundamental challenge – that of its credibility and its future. In recent years, some developments within the inscription process have weakened the principles of scientific excellence and impartiality that are at the heart of the Convention.’ Thus in 2012 the Director General of UNESCO expressed her concern about recent decisions taken by the World Heritage Committee. ‘It is’, she declared, ‘my responsibility to ring the bell (Bokova 2012).”

Figure 1: Meeting room for the 36th session of the World Heritage Committee, held in the Tavricheski Palace in St Petersburg, Russian Federation. (Source: Kristal Buckley)
Many share her concerns. We do need to ring the bell.

The challenges may be fundamental, but they are not necessarily new. It has long been recognised that the Convention has a bias towards Western cultures. Even now, around 50% of the World Heritage List comes from Europe, a type of politicisation that generally attracts political rather than academic concern. And it is important, if sometimes difficult, to retain in sight the full range of benefits that World Heritage can provide – inscription is just one such benefit, albeit a particularly important one (Terrill 2012).

To probe Ms Bokova’s concerns, this paper turns internally – it is a look, by a former member of the Committee, at how the Committee does its work. There isn’t much written about the World Heritage Committee from this perspective. A large volume of material on World Heritage is generated by the system itself, including some 20,000 pages per Committee session. There is some commentary upon the Committee processes and decisions, usually seeing it in terms of an expert–political tension (Turtinen 2000; Meskell 2012; Economist 2010). There is also a large literature on individual sites, and some on the history of the process (Batisse & Bolla 2005; Cameron & Rossler 2013).

Ms Bokova spoke at the opening of the thirty-sixth session of the World Heritage Committee, on 24 June 2012; her comments were prompted by events in the previous Committee sessions. This paper accordingly looks at the work of the Committee one year to the day before her comments were made, the morning of Friday 24 June 2011. There was nothing particularly remarkable about the World Heritage Committee on that day. In part, that is why it features here, though not all days are normal, and not all normal days are alike. Examining the morning of Friday 24 June 2011 offers an indication, but does not provide an inventory, of the Committee at work.

This Friday fell mid-way through the 2011 Committee meeting, and came at the end of Australia’s 2007–11 term on the Committee. The meeting itself was, unexpectedly, in Paris that year; domestic unrest in Bahrain had seen the venue moved at late notice. The decision resulted in a meeting surrounded by less pageantry but, for most delegates, more familiarity. For the Committee’s work, the venue itself makes little difference; as Christoph Brummer has observed, the Committee reconstitutes itself in different locations with similar layout, roles and interactions (Brumann 2012).

This article considers a smooth, even efficient process: a Committee making sound and comparatively swift decisions. Political factors were inevitably present, but on this morning it was common sense and due process that dominated.

Background

In 2006–7, seeking to be elected to the World Heritage Committee, Australia undertook to:

- Strengthen the integrity of the Convention;
- Improve policies conserving World Heritage;
- Support Pacific and other countries in Australia’s region to engage with the Convention.

These goals were motivated by concerns similar to those expressed by Ms Bokova. In addition, for each Committee meeting, Australia had particular priorities. A record of Australia’s achievements during its time on the Committee has been published (Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities 2012).

Australia had put forward a team of three when running for election to the Committee: Dr Anita Smith as cultural adviser (then of Heritage Victoria and La Trobe University, and an archaeologist with extensive experience in the Pacific and beyond on World Heritage); Mr Jon Day as adviser on natural properties (an employee of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and with extensive experience with marine and terrestrial natural World Heritage sites); and the author. The team continued unchanged during Australia’s term on the Committee, although in the 2010 meeting Ms Joan Domicelj stepped in at short notice to join the delegation as cultural adviser. The team was dependent upon support from within the Department by Dr Kate Feros and others.
The team was supported by managers of Australia’s World Heritage properties, academics and NGOs. It worked closely with the Australian branches of ICOMOS and IUCN. The Department established an informal email reference group, which grew to include around 120 people, to provide input into issues under consideration by the Committee and under the Convention more generally, and kept the reference group informed about events in which the Committee team was involved. Australia’s success during its term was in part due to the efforts of the many people from this group.

Australia’s delegation to the 2011 Committee meeting was unusually large, comprising thirteen people: the Committee team of three, plus two Departmental support staff and a senior Departmental official; Australia’s Permanent Representative and member of the delegation to UNESCO (both based in Paris); a representative of the Western Australian government; and two Indigenous people from Kakadu with their two support staff. The composition reflected priorities specific to this Committee session – beyond the general directions – of seeking the addition of Koongarra to Kakadu National Park World Heritage Area, seeking the inscription of Ningaloo Coast upon the World Heritage List, and responding to the Committee’s interest in the Great Barrier Reef.

Meetings of the World Heritage Committee are busy events. As with any decision-making body, they both formalise directions already underway, and make decisions on issues where directions have not been determined. A typical meeting during the period 2007–11 considered:

- Some 35–45 nominations of properties to the World Heritage List, plus some 15–30 boundary modifications, extensions and name changes;
- The situation of the 30–35 sites listed upon the List of World Heritage in Danger;
- Around 150 state of conservation reports about properties on the List;
- A range of other policy, procedural and budgetary matters.

On average, the Committee met for around 70 hours and made around 300 decisions – approximately one decision every 14 minutes.

Given the volume and speed of decision making, the delegation needed to prepare ahead – but faced the challenge of the availability of official Committee documents. The Committee’s Rules of Procedure state that papers ‘shall’ be available six weeks before the start of the meeting (UNESCO 2011c, 2013b) – at best during Australia’s 2007–11 term, around half of the papers were available around four weeks before the start of a Committee meeting. Meetings are as concerned with filling in information gaps, and finalising delegation positions, as they are with engaging in the formal proceedings.

**Friday 24 June: Before the committee session**

*Delegation meeting, 7.45–8.45 am, Miollis building*

The Australian delegation met every morning to plan and share intelligence. This Friday, the first matter was the order of business for the day. The Committee had met until 7.00 pm the previous evening, closing part way through a difficult item. As a consequence, Friday’s timetable was unclear. Would Ningaloo Coast come up for consideration during the day? Many in Australia were interested to know – Ministers wanted to make announcements, local communities to celebrate, and businesses to plan around the new arrangements. But progress was difficult to predict, and timing complicated by time zone differences – 8 hours for Perth and Exmouth, 9.5 for Darwin, and 11 for Canberra.

The agenda for the day presaged slow progress. There were a number of sites recommended for Referral or Deferral, and such recommendations often encountered lengthy challenges. Australia had spent considerable time discussing these sites over previous days with the countries involved, the advisory bodies and others. The bulk of the delegation’s discussion this morning involved nuancing the final Australian approach and preparing to inform ahead of
time the countries concerned about the position the delegation would take on their sites. Some
time was devoted to preparing for likely upcoming challenges, and allocating responsibilities to
prepare for the working groups scheduled to meet over the lunch break.

Bureau, 9-10 am, main UNESCO building

The Bureau of the Committee – one country representing each UNESCO regional group –
typically meets each morning during a Committee session. The Bureau’s key function at these
meetings is to alert the Chair to upcoming issues, and test the handling of the day’s agenda.
Australia was not on the Bureau (it was in 2007–8, and part of 2008–9) but, like most key
countries, attended. This enabled the delegation to see how the Chair planned to handle the
day’s work.

The morning’s meeting of the Committee was to start discussion of nominations to the List,
the highest profile work of the Committee. While Australia had been approached over the
past week by almost all countries that had brought forward nominations – in most cases,
approached multiple times – we had also contacted many countries with questions we had
regarding their nominations. This morning, in the margins of the Bureau, delegation members
were approached by several countries in relation to the item held over from the previous
evening, as well as for last minute lobbying relating to a number of nominations likely to be
discussed during the day, including those from Barbados, Germany, India, Senegal and Vietnam.

‘Lobbying’ is often used as a pejorative term, signifying pressure placed by countries upon
members of the World Heritage Committee to make favourable decisions about their sites.
Such pressure is certainly applied, both before and during Committee meetings. But to see
lobbying as illegitimate misses a crucial point. It is a means for countries to advance fine-tuned
responses to evaluations of their sites by the advisory bodies, as well as to share intelligence
and test concerns. Through the vast number of exchanges that take place – between countries,
the advisory bodies and the many experts attending Committee sessions – it is possible to
gain a much richer picture of the issues facing a site than can be derived from the formal
Committee documentation. Lobbying to this extent increases the ability of the Committee to
make good decisions.

Australia’s default position was to support the recommendations of the advisory bodies. But
the delegation did not always do so. This was partly a matter of principle, for to automatically
support the advisory bodies would be to simply transfer the target of lobbying from members
of the Committee to the advisory bodies. In a minority of cases, the delegation took a
different view from that of the advisory bodies, sometimes with the tacit support of the
advisory bodies themselves. For good reasons the advisory bodies insisted that they could not,
in the busy atmosphere of a Committee meeting and without all necessary experts present,
change positions previously arrived at through their internal processes. In limited cases,
however, members of the advisory bodies were comfortable to quietly acknowledge that new
information that had been provided, or circumstances that had changed, meant that their
formal position had been superseded.

Friday 24 June: The committee session, 10am – 1pm

The Committee opened where it left off the previous evening – discussing an amendment
proposed by Jordan to the Operational Guidelines concerning tentative lists. This agenda item
rarely attracts discussion – it is generally accepted that the Convention gives countries the
right to place any site they wish on their tentative list. However Jordan, concerned about sites
proposed by Israel that in Jordan’s view were in disputed territory, had proposed an amendment
to the Operational Guidelines to require the Committee to endorse, and not merely note,
additions to tentative lists. Australia had been working with Jordan to find a way to meet the
concerns of both sides on the issue. In an important signal of how key players would approach
the issue, Russia – a key player on Middle East matters with a forceful head of delegation and
the likely hosts of the Committee the following year – had the evening before warned against
bringing in such political conflicts to the Committee (UNESCO 2011d).
No deal had been reached overnight, according to delegation intelligence, so discussion on the floor would determine the outcome. In the debate, several Middle Eastern countries spoke in support of Jordan, and Australia, supported by Switzerland, highlighted how the proposed changes would affect all countries and not just the intended target. Australia therefore proposed an amendment to Jordan’s proposal, to stress that Tentative Lists should be updated in conformity with Article 11 of the World Heritage Convention and in consistency with the established World Heritage List, and that the Committee takes note of Tentative Lists presented. The decision was adopted as amended without further debate. All sides were able to claim success – in raising the issue, Jordan had registered the concerns of a number of countries, but for others it was an outcome that did not establish new rules with unexpected consequences.

The agenda moved to consider nominations. Eight nominations had been withdrawn – all had received strongly negative assessments from the advisory bodies. Withdrawal is a way for countries to retain some control over the timing of the nomination; a nomination that has been withdrawn is able to be brought back the following year, whereas the Committee may make a decision that requires a longer time to address. It is also a way for a country of avoiding a negative public discussion.

Three changes of name to existing sites were agreed without discussion.

Four letters from countries addressing apparent factual errors in the evaluations of their nominations had been distributed. The process for dialogue between countries and the advisory bodies is very restricted; the advisory bodies have a tight timetable to evaluate nominations, and the process permits only limited opportunity for dialogue with countries. The Operational Guidelines prohibit the advisory bodies from considering new information received after 28 February each year, some four or so months before the beginning of the Committee session (UNESCO 2011b, 2013a). This helps the production of documents, but causes strain between the advisory bodies and countries where evaluations are not positive. Recently, the focus on communication between the advisory bodies and countries has grown though, while there is a process underway to explore how to do things better, the rules and their anomalies remain untouched (Terrill 2014). Countries, unable to address their concerns with the advisory bodies, turn to members of the Committee to convince them that the issues raised in evaluations are flawed or are out of date.

The factual error process is one of the few cases where the system has evolved to allow formal dialogue about evaluations. It is an important moment, even though it comes late in the process, and the World Heritage Centre deletes any advocacy from the letters before they are distributed. In national capitals before the meeting, countries communicate their wishes through diplomats, and in the corridors delegations lobby; but in formal proceedings such activities are prohibited. There is little attempt in the formal procedures to accommodate legitimate needs for last minute information exchange, or to test last minute claims. In principle, the debate in the Committee is meant to perform this task but, as the debates on this Friday morning testify, short public exchanges may reveal positions, but public debate in a busy meeting is not a satisfactory means to address complex and often politically charged issues.
Face to face discussion is by far the preferred method of lobbying; persuasion here as elsewhere is best when done in person. While Committee meetings have for some years had wireless internet, there are surprisingly few exchanges between delegations by email, phone or SMS. Many delegations buy local SIM cards, so their numbers change each year. Also, much of the information traded at this point has an emotive component, or involves judgements about how an issue will play, or speculation on motives – important to navigate the complex and rapid pace of proceedings, but not matters that are normally written down.

From the podium, the advisory bodies provided an overview of their evaluation of nominations. As usual, the Chair urged them to be brief. With the room filled to capacity – nominations are the highest profile agenda item – the swollen agenda allowed minimal time for recalling fundamental information. Pressed for time, the advisory bodies rapidly outlined their approaches to undertaking evaluations, highlighted the networks of experts that they are able to draw upon, and recalled their internal rules to avoid conflicts of interest. While performing the same functions for the Committee, the approaches of ICOMOS and IUCN differ, as Table 1 summarises:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ICOMOS</th>
<th>IUCN</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of a site is socially</td>
<td>OUV of a site can be determined objectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>constructed. Perceptions of what has OUV can vary over time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sites to which OUV is attributed need not be superlative.</td>
<td>OUV concerns only ’global superlatives’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater value is implicitly attributed to certain cultures</td>
<td></td>
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<td>than to others</td>
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<td>Possible sites are often compared with other sites in the</td>
<td>Possible sites are compared with other sites of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>same ‘geocultural region’ rather than universally</td>
<td>same type worldwide and have OUV in comparison with them</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is no limit to the maximum number of sites with OUV,</td>
<td>There is a finite number of natural sites with OUV</td>
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<td>and the World Heritage List has no limit</td>
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Table 1: Approaches of ICOMOS and IUCN to the evaluation of World Heritage sites. (Source: Schmitt 2009)

One of the achievements of the World Heritage Convention has been to bring cultural and natural heritage under the one instrument. That said, the table highlights that the two domains retain distinct assumptions and employ different methodological approaches.

Following the ICOMOS and IUCN presentations, the Chair recalled that the Rules of Procedure prohibit countries advocating in favour of their sites when speaking; they may only present information (UNESCO 2013b). While the broad meaning of advocacy may be clear, there was no attempt to provide contextual information to explain the rationale for the rule, define what specifically might be considered advocacy, or outline the consequences of breaching the rule. Again, time pressures precluded the rehearsal of foundational information.

A short general debate ensued. Egypt’s questions revealed a hostile undercurrent: had there been communication between advisory bodies and governments of sites being evaluated (implicitly, were governments listened to?); does evaluation contribute to conservation (by implication, should not everything be inscribed?); and are evaluation processes harmonised (an oblique reference to the fact that while any negative evaluation can evoke a hostile response, this happens more frequently for evaluations undertaken by ICOMOS than those undertaken by IUCN)? Brazil also questioned the level of communication. Switzerland recalled how conservation activities fitted into the Convention, while Estonia emphasised that the concept of Outstanding Universal Value is central to the Convention. These were well worn paths; countries were rehearsing arguments that they would use later in debates on particular nominations.
Though this debate concerned policy matters, relevant to all members of the Convention, only Committee members had the right to speak. The World Heritage Committee (though not the General Assembly to the Convention) is unusual in that only some countries have voice; in most international conventions the right of each country to equal formal voice is strictly observed.

Nominations of sites are typically organised into several categories for consideration by the Committee – natural, cultural and mixed, and the regions from which they come. Extensions to existing sites are usually considered after new sites, while other minor changes are generally considered before new nominations. On this Friday, as usual, natural sites were considered first, followed by mixed and then cultural sites.

The Trinational Sangha, nominated by the Congo, Cameroon and the Central African Republic, was the first nomination to be considered. The site comprises three national parks covering a large forested area, sheltering semi-nomadic populations and with a large diversity of flora and fauna. IUCN’s evaluation recognised the values of the site and cooperation between the countries, but noted management challenges arising from hunting, agriculture, mining and forestry. To improve the management of the site, IUCN recommended that the boundary be enlarged. IUCN presented its explanation, but the audience already knew the punch line – IUCN had recommended that the site be Deferred.

This summary fact had underpinned every exchange about this site over the past days. In the way that economists analyse money as providing a single measure of value across diverse goods and services, so the recommendation to Inscribe, Refer, Defer or Do Not Inscribe synthesises the immense variability of sites, their values and their challenges along one critical dimension. In this case, Deferral meant that, in the view of IUCN, the site should not at this point be inscribed on the List, but rather required considerable work and another mission to confirm the situation on the ground, before it could be brought back to the Committee.

If inscribed, the Trinational Sangha would be the first site for the Congo, and the second for Cameroon and the Central African Republic. Africa is often judged to be underrepresented on the List, with a large land mass, rich cultural and natural diversity and, importantly for some, around one quarter of the countries who are members of the Convention. Of the 936 sites on the List at the end of this Committee meeting, only 82 were from Africa. There was also an understandable sentiment in favour of countries that do not have sites succeeding in having a site listed. In such circumstances any recommendation to defer would be likely to be contested.

Congo led the discussion, stating that it accepted IUCN’s recommendation to enlarge the boundary and was in discussion with forestry companies to this end. Accordingly, the three countries requested that the site be Referred, rather than Deferred, a decision which would enable them to make rapid changes and resubmit by 1 February the following year (or at any of the following three years, should they chose) information about the changes they have made. Referral would provide them the fastest path back to the Committee and possible inscription.

South Africa – a fellow African country, with two sites facing critical reports later in the meeting – led the discussion with questions for IUCN; it also introduced an amendment to change the decision to Refer. Switzerland supported IUCN, but a long line of countries spoke in favour of Referral – France, Egypt, Jordan, Russia and more. One of the conventions of the Committee is that speakers may repeat what has already been said. This signals that country’s position to others, and is an important part of the overall image a country creates of itself. Many observers enjoy dissecting whether interventions are characteristically based on research and analysis, or friendship and statements prepared by others.

Australia also supported Referral. We had discussed the IUCN recommendations with two of the three countries, had been reassured by the steps they had undertaken to address IUCN’s concerns. We had also confirmed with IUCN that it was satisfied with the steps underway. IUCN had indicated that it would be satisfied with Referral provided that funding could be found to conduct a mission. Even though such a mission would be outside the formal Committee process, the site was important and WWF, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Rainforest Foundation and others were involved with its ongoing management.
The debate on the Trinational Sangha ended relatively swiftly. Around 18 countries spoke, almost all along common lines, and interventions were generally succinct. The site was Referred (it was Inscribed by the Committee the following year).

The next site was Pendjari National Park, Benin, an extension to the existing site of W National Park in neighbouring Niger. Unfortunately, the nomination had become entangled in some of the technical difficulties facing transboundary sites. W National Park had been inscribed in 1996 on two criteria, ix and x, while Pendjari was nominated on one only. Criterion x. IUCN was concerned that the boundaries of the site did not adequately link to those of W National Park, and there was no buffer zone. IUCN’s evaluation, while positive about the management – since the site had first been submitted in 2002, poaching and other management problems had been rectified, and there was strong cooperation with the two neighbouring countries – therefore concluded that it should be Deferred.

This site, from one African country – Benin, with one site on the List – but managed in cooperation with two others, Niger through a formal link, and Burkina Faso through a shared border, was also likely to attract a sympathetic hearing from the Committee.

Often, the first questions are friendly, and this was the case this morning. Egypt asked why IUCN recommended Deferral when it recognised that the site had OUV. The differences between Referral and Deferral are often the source of confusion. Referral, the quicker option, allows confirmation through a desktop analysis of whether a site is ready for inscription; sites should be Deferred if a mission is required. Sites that have been Deferred can be brought back to the Committee in the following 1-3 years; a site that is Deferred cannot be evaluated for a minimum of two years. The confusion can sometimes be confected, to disguise supporting a country to get a Referal, perceived often as ‘better’ than a Deferral.

France, echoed by Brazil and Mali, asked Benin to clarify the approach used to integrate management across the three countries, a friendly question enabling Benin to highlight its own efforts and the transnational cooperation. Bahrain pursued a similar line, but with a more neutral tone. In response, Benin outlined the ten years of cooperation between the countries. It was followed by IUCN, which noted that the requirements in the Operational Guidelines for physical connectivity between parts were not met by the proposed nomination; that the basis for this extension was different from that of W National Park; and that there was no information on a possible buffer zone.

The recommendation for Deferral was accepted by the Committee without further comment.

Business moved to properties that had been brought back after having previously been Referred or Deferred. The Kenya Lake System in the Great Rift Valley is a remarkable place of three alkaline lakes with some of the world’s most diverse and concentrated bird species; up to 4 million flamingos move between the three small lakes for much of the year. The lakes are surrounded by hot springs, geysers and the volcanic escarpments of the Great Rift Valley. It had been first nominated in 2001, but concerns had been noted at the time: Lake Elementonia, which was critical to the flamingo population, had unclear legal status; Lake Nakuru faced pollution and deforestation threats; and the management plans were incomplete. It was also noted that Lake Natron in Tanzania, important for the Kenya Lake System flamingo population, might constitute a future extension. Since 2001 there had been considerable progress made, and IUCN now recommended inscription.

Preliminaries over. Bahrain and Switzerland asked broad questions about cooperation with Tanzania and the management of tourism. Kenya spoke of its management approach, including planned tourism development, and of cooperation with Tanzania. There were no further comments, and the site was inscribed. Kenya, in thanking the Committee for its decision, acknowledged the help of the Nordic World Heritage Fund, and the involvement of local communities in the management of the site. More than a decade of work underpinned this discussion of some eight minutes.

There is a routine of congratulations and an atmosphere of jubilation when sites are inscribed, particularly where there has been no contestation in the process. Immediately following the
Committee’s decision, a large group of delegates rushed to the Kenyan desk to congratulate members of the delegation. Among those in the line were countries from all around the world. The ritual has an important role. Inscription is the largest single change of status that the World Heritage Convention commonly delivers (the other major change of status is ‘in danger’ listing; de-listing is very rare). Several members of the Kenyan delegation had worked on the nomination for years. They had an emotional involvement in the outcomes, well beyond a normal professional involvement in an issue. They are fortunate be able to share their joy in the shift from hours of nervous waiting, sitting in uncomfortable chairs, to jubilation, with a large gathering of colleagues sharing their professional interests. Few other multilateral conventions elicit such warm displays of emotion during formal proceedings.

Business then moved to new nominations. Ningaloo Coast, Western Australia, was first. IUCN outlined the values of the site: high abundance and diversity of habitats and marine species – including the iconic whale shark – and high terrestrial species endemism. Possible threats included the nearby air base and pollution. IUCN emphasised that the involvement of local stakeholders, including related to pastoral leases and Indigenous land claims, was critical for effective management. As a result of this, it recommended inscription of a smaller area than had been nominated.

Brazil opened, asking Australia about Indigenous land claims; Bahrain followed by supporting inscription and asking about a possible future nomination under further criteria. Egypt supported these two interventions. Australia responded briefly. Ningaloo Coast was inscribed without further discussion. Again, almost a decade of work wrapped up in a few minutes. As for Kenya, so the Australian desk was quickly surrounded by delegates wishing to congratulate the delegation.

That concluded the morning’s business in plenary. The bustle of congratulations over, senior members of the Australian delegation immediately sent news of the successful result back to Australia.

**Friday 24 June: The lunch period**

Other members of the delegation moved quickly downstairs to smaller rooms to attend consultative groups, one on the Future of the Convention and one on the Operational Guidelines. The two consultative groups met over lunch breaks during the Committee session, finishing a day or two before the end to enable results to be presented to plenary.

The consultative group on the Future of the Convention was an initiative established by Australia in 2009 to reflect upon the achievements of the Convention, and to plan future directions as the Convention neared its 40th anniversary in 2012. The group had been tasked at this meeting to finalise five separate decisions: a broad decision on the future of the World Heritage Convention; a report of an expert meeting on decision-making procedures under the World Heritage Convention; a progress report on the upstream processes; a progress report on preparations for the 40th anniversary of the Convention; and a decision on the state of conservation challenges faced by World Heritage properties (UNESCO 2011a).

Drafts of all five decisions had been considered by the consultative group, and the task for the 90 minutes over lunch was to focus upon the first decision, which contained the most new information. At its centre was a vision for the Convention, and a draft strategic action plan for the Convention for the decade ahead, 2012–22. The plan identified a broad policy agenda to ensure the continued credibility and integrity of the Convention – reflecting, though predating, Ms Bokova’s concerns – under five headings:

- **Value:** The Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage sites is maintained
- **Credibility:** The World Heritage List is a credible selection of the world’s cultural and natural heritage
- **Quality:** World Heritage maintains or enhances its brand quality
• Strategic: The Committee can address policy and strategic issues
• Effective: Decisions of statutory meetings are informed and effectively implemented.

This lunch meeting debated how to relate these headings to the ‘five Cs’: the ‘4Cs’, contained in the Budapest Declaration of 2002 (credibility, conservation, capacity-building, communication), plus one ‘C’ adopted in Christchurch in 2007 (community). Despite their analytic shortcomings and diminished relevance to the challenges facing the Convention, the five Cs continued to provide a popular framework. After a somewhat muddled discussion, the consultative group reached a slightly awkward compromise, agreeing that the chair would cast the ‘five Cs’ as a general framework for implementation, with the draft Strategic Plan building on them to achieve long term strategic objectives. It was progress, albeit limited, on an abiding challenge for the Committee.

The tone of this meeting, as of all of the meetings of the consultative group, was business-like and those present worked hard to advance the common good. It was this that enabled the group to make a number of stronger proposals, including that members of the Committee should abstain from bringing forward nominations while they were on the Committee, that meetings of the Committee should be open to the media, and that proceedings streamed live on the internet. (The first of these was quickly quashed by the Committee when the draft decisions were debated a few days later, but media access and live streaming have been features of subsequent Committee meetings.)

The consultative group on the Operational Guidelines had been tasked to work through a large number of proposed amendments, developed in expert meetings as well as by the secretariat. Many of these were straightforward, but the group had become enmeshed in the issue of tentative lists. Today was no exception, and the group struggled to find consensus. The issue was difficult and inevitably political, and the approach of participants understandably somewhat guarded and partisan. (The tentative list issue was passed unresolved to plenary the following week, where it was passed unresolved to the next session for further consideration.)

Conclusion

The World Heritage Committee is a unique mix of bureaucratic, parliamentary and judicial style processes (Brumann 2012). It has grown over the years, though its processes have struggled to evolve to deal with the growing number of sites inscribed on the World Heritage List. Its procedures reflect the UN generally and stem from the need for legitimacy as judged by member countries, which manifests through procedural approaches including the style of documentation, the use of the six UN languages, rights to speak and more. A signature feature of the Committee is the participation of the advisory bodies – ICOMOS, IUCN, and to a lesser extent ICCROM.

It is often lamented that the recommendations of ICOMOS and IUCN are not always followed. On this Friday morning the Committee followed six of the seven recommendations made by the advisory bodies, and the seventh decision was taken with the tacit approval of IUCN. In relation to Pendjari National Park, IUCN’s recommendations were specific and broad-reaching – about basic design of the site, protection and management, and some technicalities of the nomination. IUCN had worked with Benin for a number of years in relation to the site, and it was probably this more than anything that led Benin to accept its recommendation. Likewise, IUCN’s recommendations on the name changes, the Trinational Sangha, the Kenya Lake System and Ningaloo, were adopted unchallenged.

At the same time, the Committee can be hostile to the advisory bodies, as the short debate following the advisory bodies’ opening comments showed on this Friday morning. In addition, debates are not given to analytic explorations of the points made by the advisory bodies, though that may happen. Positions of Committee members are sometimes, though by no means always, characterised by low awareness of the documentation and often highly motivated by solidarity. These features were evident on this Friday morning in relation to the proposals to change the approach to tentative listing.
Whatever their continued influence, the traditional role of the advisory bodies is under challenge. The concept of independent expert advice, challenging the wishes and assertions of nations, belongs to a governance framework that embraces separation of powers. Countries that do not embrace that model domestically understandably see no reason to do so internationally. Additionally, some countries that do have a separation of powers domestically do not wish to be challenged internationally. The number of countries willing to support a separation of powers model is declining, and their influence is receding. The issues that affect the advisory bodies have roots in issues much wider than their individual actions, or indeed the Convention itself.

But demand for the advisory bodies is changing rather than reducing. As their judicial function may be waning, it is being replaced by a facilitative model, where they are employed to help countries achieve what countries want. The ‘upstream process’ is the most prominent recent manifestation of this trend, where ICOMOS and IUCN assist countries with nominations (Terrill 2014). It is a move with challenges; money is a problem, and how to manage the roles of helping countries while reserving the ability later to evaluate them. In other areas, ICOMOS and IUCN have in recent years made efforts to expand their networks around the world; IUCN now has a presence in around 160 countries. ICOMOS has made advances, but may need to do more. Beyond the issues facing the advisory bodies, there is a much broader reform agenda, though progress on this has slowed with the change of personnel and budget reductions (UNESCO 2012).

Overall, the morning and lunchtime of Friday 24 June 2011 showed a Committee operating efficiently, moving steadily through agenda items, and sensible in its decisions. There was politics on a political issue, but not more broadly, and there was no debate over small items of textual drafting. It was an exemplary moment from a complex process. There was no cause, on this morning, to ring the bell.

References


