The future of the World Heritage List

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At the time of writing this paper, the World Heritage List has 981 properties comprising 759 cultural properties, 193 natural properties and 29 mixed properties across 160 countries. Of these, 44 properties are in danger. The 38th annual meeting of the World Heritage Committee in Qatar will no doubt see the 1000th inscription – an impressive milestone and encouragement to reflection.

There are many pressures and tensions in the World Heritage system, as well as benefits and opportunities, and many if not most of these relate to the World Heritage List. The List was originally conceived as ‘a list of properties forming part of the cultural heritage and natural heritage … which (the World Heritage Committee) considers as having outstanding universal value’ (World Heritage Convention 1972: Article 11/2).

The first 12 inscriptions were made in 1978, and included the Galapagos Islands, Mesa Verde National Park and Aachen Cathedral. Australia’s first three inscriptions, the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and the Willandra Lakes region, occurred in 1981. Since that time, the World Heritage system, the List and its prestige have grown enormously.

While there is no doubt the World Heritage List includes great treasures, various concerns have arisen: is the World Heritage brand degraded by so many inscriptions; does the List represent the diversity of the World’s natural and cultural heritage of Outstanding Universal Value; is the List a balanced portrayal of this heritage across all regions; and are all of the properties truly of Outstanding Universal Value when assessed by experts, or have politics and diplomacy had an undue influence on inscription decisions? These concerns have been expressed in the context of achieving a representative, balanced and credible World Heritage List.

There are many possible futures for the World Heritage List. In one future the List becomes increasingly constrained, with new inscriptions much rarer. This seems highly unlikely given the political pressure, interest and great enthusiasm in favour of continuing new inscriptions. Countries with many existing inscriptions want more, and those with none or few want some. Another future might involve a decline in the role of politics and a reinforcement of the important and central role of expertise – strengthening the credibility of the List and a return to the situation envisaged in the Convention itself. While this is what the future ICOMOS and the other advisory bodies fervently wish for, this also seems an unlikely outcome in the current circumstances.

On the other hand, one possible future is for politics and diplomacy to continue to play a strong if not dominant role, marginalising the advisory bodies when their recommendations are not convenient.
The continued evolution of the concept of World Heritage is yet another possibility. For example, cultural landscapes and the vital role of communities have been two strong and evolving themes in World Heritage in recent years. The continued philosophical and methodological development of World Heritage, with its spin-off impact on national and local heritage, is another future which may arise.

The most likely future is some hybrid of all of these possibilities, and others not mentioned. The future of World Heritage is a very active subject of international debate, and probably will continue to be so. The future is likely to see very positive developments in our understanding of the World’s precious cultural and natural heritage, and in related concepts, tools and techniques. But at the same time, the current pressures, issues and problems appear set to continue. The passion for new inscriptions and the dominating influence of politics will also shape the future of the World Heritage List.