

World Heritage Watch: we rock the boat

World Heritage Watch is an international NGO based in Berlin. It gives a voice to civil society, closing an essential gap between the reality on the ground in World Heritage Sites and the information provided to UNESCO by State Parties, for us this is the LDNPA via the Department for Digital, Culture Media and Sport. Those who have the difficult job of looking after World Heritage Sites sometimes see this as unwanted interference from local groups. Yet this kind of engagement is precisely what the World Heritage Convention asks for. It's not enough for bureaucracy to speak to bureaucracy – a reality check by the people who live in a World Heritage Site is essential for the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) to be protected.



Currently there are 1223 World Heritage Sites; World Heritage Watch has been involved with around 150 of them. In the UK this includes Stonehenge, Liverpool, Blenheim Palace, the Jurassic Coast and the Lake District. Stephan Doempke, who founded WHW, has been active in heritage protection for most of his life. When in the 1990s Boris Yeltsin

assigned Greenpeace Russia to prepare eight World Heritage nominations they asked Stephan for help. He is also the publisher of the annual WHW Report, to which we have contributed for a number of years.

The LDGLA asked him what common themes there are to the threats that WHW deals with.

Stephan Doempke: One important theme is overtourism, in many sites. Another one is big infrastructure projects. In the case of cultural landscapes, it's also encroaching urbanisation, a slow process of change, of changing the character of the landscape through changing land use and changing architecture. Then there's obviously destruction through armed conflicts, like in Ukraine or Syria, and also natural disasters.

LDGLA: Are there particular challenges for cultural landscapes like the Lake District?

Stephan Doempke: Well, as I mentioned, one is definitely overtourism. Another one is this kind of encroaching, gradual change, where you see

that the landscape has moved away from what it was originally. This gradual process is my big concern, because suddenly it might be too late to intervene, when the values for which they have been inscribed are being lost. And that is something that urgently needs to be addressed, particularly for historic rural landscapes. It is critical to have a list of the attributes of the site that make up the historic character of that landscape. In the case of the Lake District that includes the green lanes. They should be listed in a management plan so that they can be identified and protected. In organically evolved cultural landscapes that is really, really important.

LDGLA: What is your relationship with UNESCO?

Stephan Doempke: First of all, it's an informal relationship. We don't have a statutory role in or with UNESCO. We alert them, we advise them, and put on pressure to rectify things or warn them of developments that are taking place, of which they may be unaware.

LDGLA: You've organised a number of forums which have included UNESCO and ICOMOS, the advisory body on World Heritage sites, so it seems that they do value their relationship with WHW.

Stephan Doempke: Yes, definitely. They do benefit to a great degree from the information that we submit. But all this information means more work and more trouble for them. We rock the boat.

LDGLA: In the Operational Guidelines of the World Heritage Convention the role of civil society, even if it's not formalised, is given a lot of importance.

Stephan Doempke: Yes, of course. That's a policy. We fill a very important gap, in providing information that the state parties don't provide, in observing developments on the ground where UNESCO cannot be except in certain cases, complementing and correcting the State of Conservation reports by State Parties. And that is very much appreciated by UNESCO.

LDGLA: Still in terms of civil society: we now have a petition against green lane driving in the Lake District signed by over 390,000 people. What weight do you think that has for UNESCO?

Stephan Doempke: I think that will have a huge weight. I remember one instance where they received 30,000 signatures on an African site and that had a huge impact. Now you have more than 10 times that number.

LDGLA: Can we talk about monitoring harm to OUV and to the attributes of OUV. How do you measure that? Can any harm be monitored by visitor surveys?

Stephan Doempke: It depends on the attribute. In some cases the damage is obvious and you don't need an expert, like in the case of the Acropolis of Athens. When you see that the whole plateau of the Acropolis is covered by concrete you don't need an expert to determine that there is damage.

For some artworks like a fresco in a Byzantine church, maybe you need to be an expert to tell whether there is any serious damage. But in the case of green lanes it's not so difficult to see that there is damage. And nobody has the same experience about the site as a local inhabitant. So I think the local communities probably are the best at monitoring, because they know what the site was like 10 or 20 years ago. To describe the function of green lanes in the wider landscape and for OUV in general you would need historical and landscape expertise as well.

LDGLA: Last question. What are the sanctions that UNESCO has available. What can UNESCO do? To put things right, to force them to change their views?

Stephan Doempke: The only sanction they have is to inscribe a site on the list of World Heritage in danger, and then in the worst case they can delist the site. There are the cases of Liverpool and Dresden, where the Committee has been very patient for a long time, when they've tried to encourage and suggested measures to be taken. But there will be a point in time when they will say enough is enough, and when they see essentially an unwillingness by the state party to rectify things. When they see a continuing brushing away of the committee's decisions. When they see that the reports that UNESCO receives do not tell the whole truth. And then when they run out of patience things may happen. As we saw in Liverpool, it can happen even during a committee session. In the case of Liverpool, at first it seemed that the committee was against delisting the site. And then one of the committee members requested a secret ballot. And in the secret ballot there was a majority for delisting, and the site was delisted. These things take time, but they may happen and both Liverpool and Dresden are examples to prove this.