

The making of a Unesco World Heritage site

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From Dorset's 'Jurassic Coast' to Ethiopia's Rock Churches, Unesco now lists 851 places of outstanding beauty. But how are they selected, asks Sophie Campbell.

- [In pictures: highlights from the Unesco World Heritage list](#)

Swimming off the Dorset coast near Durdle Door last month, I thought I was splashing past some gorgeous chalk cliffs, white as a Hollywood smile, with tufty grass and tourists on top and a delightful, if decidedly pebbly, beach below.

In fact - as I now know, because I read it on Unesco's World Heritage website - I was alongside a well-developed coastal landform of cave-bays, stacks and rock arches in a near-continuous sequence of Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous rock exposures representing almost the entire Mesozoic era: 185 million years of geological history. No wonder I was knackered.

When the Dorset and East Devon Coasts won a place on the World Heritage List in 2001, it was the result of years of work. Numerous professionals laboured to produce a persuasive dossier, which convinced the 21-strong World Heritage committee that it was worth listing.

The result: more funding, more tourism and a new marketing moniker, the "Jurassic Coast" - which drives locals bonkers, but never mind. It put Devon and Dorset on the world map, alongside a resonant list of alumni - the Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu in Peru, Yosemite National Park in America, India's Taj Mahal, Hawaii's volcanoes, the Lalibela Rock Churches of Ethiopia - and has since been followed by the Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape (2006).

Had I known this, in the clear cold water, as the kelp (not listed) wound itself around my wrists and ankles like soft brown manacles, I would have wondered how it all came about. How did the World Heritage committee decide? Who were we up against? How would you judge between the English coast and, say, Thai royal temples? And who came up with the idea in the first place?

The World Heritage Fund (WHF) - administered by the World Heritage Centre (WHC), which is based in the vast Unesco building behind the École Militaire in Paris - was born out of the destruction of the two world wars.

A mood of co-operation grew between nations, an idea that the human environment should be protected from the depredations of war, or poverty, or natural disasters. It solidified in the 1960s, against a backdrop of turbulent events - the flooding of Venice and Florence, the potential drowning of the temples at Abu Simbel, global post-war development - and culminated in the creation of several cultural organisations.

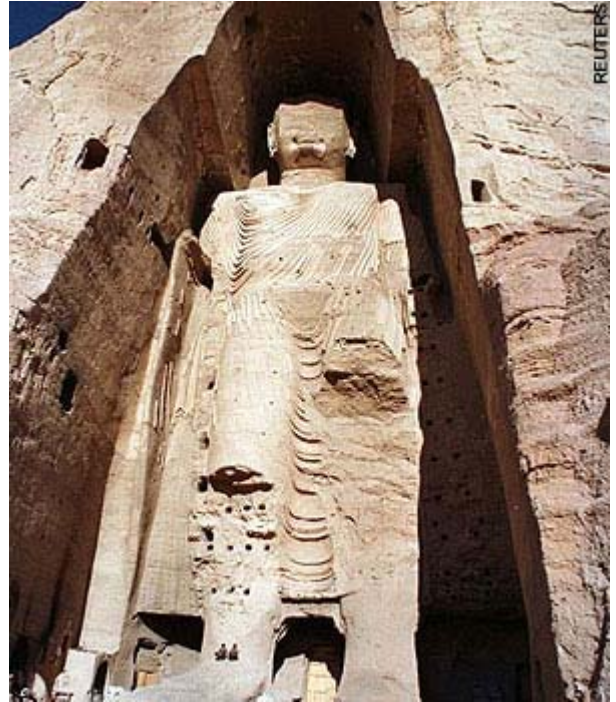
Unesco published its "Convention concerning the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage" in 1972 and listed its first 12 World Heritage sites six years later. It then added a List in Danger, currently with 30 entries, of sites at risk.

"They're not just lists," explains Christian Manhart of the WHC. "That would make no sense. We want the countries we put on the list to commit to conservation. We have a rolling programme of checking: each site is checked every six years."

It is a colossal undertaking, not only for the WHF, which receives just \$4million (£2million) each year in basic funding from Unesco, but for the countries that have to maintain their sites.

A good example is Namibia, which achieved list status in June for its rock art at Twyfelfontein, a 57-hectare site in the north-western region of Kunene, with more than 2,000 panels of engravings believed to be about 2,000 years old. "The application started two years ago," says Karl Aribeb, director of the National Heritage Council, "but the planning started four years before that."

Namibia signed the convention at the turn of the Millennium, identified five possible sites and narrowed them



One of the Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddha statues, destroyed by the Taliban in 2001

down to a front-runner, Twyfelfontein. A consultant was hired to compile the Nomination File according to Unesco's complex guidelines. "The site has to be protected in national law," explains Aribeb. "It must have a buffer zone, in this case another 9,000 hectares; it must be authentic; we must show that we can manage the site - and its tourism."

Twyfelfontein attracts 50,000 tourists annually, so visitor management was already under way - but, admits Manhart, "conservation versus tourism has been an issue for a long time. Before, we slightly ignored it and it was a big, big problem for many sites. Now we help to make sure that tourism is properly managed. We have good partnerships with tour operators, which builds up awareness with their customers, gives them a better tour and brings in funds."

Money is always an issue. "The good thing about WHF is that they put a real international authority behind what they do," says Dr Jonathan Foyle, UK director of the privately funded, New York-based World Monument Fund (WMF). "But they don't have much money to back up their designations." He points out that the basic Unesco budget is a fraction of the \$20million (£10million) it cost WMF to restore St George's Church, Bloomsbury.

Money is a problem for developing countries, which is why Africa, for example, lags far behind Europe and America in terms of listed sites (though this is also a result of different global perspectives in the 1960s).

The WHF helps poorer countries with funds and expertise and tries to increase the number of natural - as opposed to cultural - sites, as this broadens the net. There are now 660 cultural, 166 natural and 25 mixed sites, making a world total of 851.

The judging process is complex. Files are checked for accuracy and then sent to advisory bodies such as the International Council for Monuments and Sites and the World Conservation Union, which produce recommendations for the annual judging committee. It doesn't always follow them. This year the advisory bodies produced a negative report on the silver mines at Iwami Ginzan in Japan, but the Committee listed them anyway.

However, they were all in accord about the first de-listing: Oman's Arabian Oryx Sanctuary. The Oman government has insisted on continuing with oil exploration, reducing the area of the sanctuary by 90 per cent, thereby failing to fulfil the criteria. The site was de-listed in June.

Mansart sees this as a depressing failure: "It showed that we had failed to protect the site. But it also shows that we can't ensure conservation if the host country doesn't co-operate. We can't send an army in."

One weapon is PR: Oman has received numerous negative headlines just when it is building its tourism industry. But bad publicity was not enough to stop the Taliban destroying the 6th-century Buddhas at Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001, an act that dismayed the world. Bamiyan - along with sites in Congo, where mountain gorillas have just been slaughtered by poachers, and 28 other sites - is on the danger list: the WHF is working with other organisations to conserve what remains of Bamiyan's statues and niches.

The flip side is the list of successes, such as the Russian government agreeing to divert an oil pipeline 280 miles to preserve Lake Baikal's ecosystem; or the Egyptian government abandoning plans to run a highway dangerously close to the Giza pyramids.

And the fact that I should still be able to swim past the near-continuous sequence of Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous rock exposures representing almost the entire Mesozoic era when I'm 80 - and it should look exactly as it has for the past 65 million years.

- Unesco World Heritage Centre: whc.unesco.org.

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