

**Committee:** UNESCO

**Issue:** Are Natural World Heritage sites a universal common good?

**Author:** Poland

Poland is a country in Central Europe and the fifth-most populous country of the European Union. Furthermore, the country has 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, two of which are natural: The Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe (which has 94 component parts in 18 different countries) and the Bialowieza Forest (with components in Poland and Belarus). Finally, we also have one site on the "Tentative list": The Dunajec River Gorge in the Pieniny Mountains.

The World Heritage Convention, signed in 1972, has allowed us to "protect the most extraordinary natural places on the planet". This mission is being accomplished by urging governments and stakeholders to prioritize conservation over economic exploitation and to adopt policies that safeguard these sites for future generations, such as setting up sustainable tourism or collaborating with other states. UNESCO is the institution where the concept of Natural World Heritage has been conceived and is the one that makes sure that all the 257 protected natural sites preserve their cultural value. Nevertheless, some countries disagree with the proposed method for protecting natural sites, i.e., turning them into universal common goods since it stops the government from taking advantage of the economic growth they could provide. Considering all the above, deciding whether natural World Heritage sites are a universal common good or not is a pressing issue that members of the United Nations need to address.

Regarding this issue, we believe that UNESCO's classified natural sites should stay the way they are. However, the criteria set for their protection should be less strict, so that every country is able to reap the benefits offered by the natural sites in its territory while still preserving them. Indeed, Poland commits to follow the rulings of UNESCO involving the sites that will be included in the list but reserves itself the right to have the last word on every matter, since it is still a part of its territory and therefore of its sovereignty.

We agree that the 1972 convention is an effective tool that allows us to address contemporary challenges related to climate change, uncontrolled urbanization, mass tourism and natural disasters by protecting the most exceptional natural sites. As a matter of fact, in addition to ratifying the already mentioned 1972 Convention, Poland has joined UNESCO's Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat of 1971, as well as the Protocol to amend the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat and ratified the Protocol to amend articles 6 and 7 of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat of 1982 and 1989 respectively. All of which contribute to prevent relevant natural sites and resources from being overexploited and destroyed. Moreover, we have supported the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage of 2001, the High seas Treaty of 2023 and the Bern Convention of the European Union (CEE at that moment). The latter aims to promote cooperation among the signatory states to ensure the conservation of wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats, as well as to protect migratory species threatened by extinction.

Finally, Poland's natural site The Dunajec River Gorge in the Pieniny Mountains is a candidate for registration on the world list of sites protected by UNESCO since 2006, as we already said. We believe that this shows our huge concern on preserving the main natural sites for future generations, and our commitment to UNESCO's natural world heritage mission. However, we maintain the belief that the principle of national sovereignty gives each country the right to exploit the benefits from all natural sites in its territory. They should also be able to privatize a previously internationalized site in a straightforward way since it is their property.

We are of the opinion that a new convention must be signed, where states commit to be sincere with UNESCO about which sites have a real value that must be preserved, without letting their interests interfere in the decision. Specifically, the convention will continue to allow each country to decide which of their natural sites, if any, should be protected by UNESCO and which should become a universal common good. Moreover, by signing the convention, each state commits to not let their economic interests influence its decision.

Nevertheless, UNESCO will not have any power or influence over the sites that do not appear in the countries' lists, even if it believes that they should be protected. Every signatory country will also commit itself to respect UNESCO's rulings for protecting the classified sites. However, the rulings should be less strict, since every country needs to be able to benefit from the resources on its territory, given that it does not constitute a serious threat for its natural value. If the natural site is located in different countries, a vote by the representatives at UNESCO of each of the involved countries must be held to decide which activities should be allowed on the site.

Finally, as already mentioned, if a country's government decides to withdraw a site from the protected list or to stop it from being a universal common good, they should be able to do it in an efficient way, because it is the base of national sovereignty, and no supranational institution has the right to rule over it. We restate that Poland commits itself to respect the decisions taken by UNESCO to protect every natural site; however, if we consider that the decision is clearly harmful to our country, we retain the right to contest it.

Taking all the aforementioned into account, we believe that all natural sites are a national good. We also agree that some of them represent a priceless cultural, historical, and human asset. These must be well-protected to be preserved for next generations, who have the same right as we to enjoy the world's natural heritage. This is why UNESCO's mission and role are so important. To accomplish this goal, we firmly believe that each site which constitutes an important natural heritage should become a universal common good. However, every country should have the capacity to do whatever they find more convenient for their country's development, be it performing some activities in the site while not harming it or recovering national control over it.