



Rivers without Boundaries International Coalition (RwB)

2021 Updates to the “[Heritage Dammed](#)” Report.

Overview

Sharp rise in negative impacts on World Heritage sites, occurring despite limitations of COVID, is in particularly obvious for properties affected by dams and other water infrastructure. In 2019 the RwB and World Heritage Watch presented at the 43rd Committee Session in Baku the “[Heritage Dammed](#)” Report, listing 50 such properties¹, while now in 2021, despite special decisions made by the Committee to prevent such damage, we can list up to 80 sites that have been threatened or already degraded by hydro-engineering projects. Only 14 affected sites are cultural properties and 5 are mixed, while the rest (75%) are natural properties. At least 15 of cases added to our list emerged\became evident during last 2 years between the 43rd and 44th sessions of the World Heritage Committee.

Water-infrastructure conflicts are widely spread globally, with some State-Parties being associated more than with one case. According to our records, there have been 3 and more properties threatened by Water infrastructure related to Australia, USA (only domestic impacts), Russia, India (both domestic and transboundary impacts from other riparian countries), China, Ethiopia, Mongolia, Turkey (both domestic and transboundary impacts on adjacent riparian countries). In addition Iraq, Tanzania, Spain, Nepal, Georgia, Romania and Cameroon each have two properties on our list. However number of cases does not indicate their relative severity.

Altogether 29% of natural properties have by 2021 experienced threats\damage from water infrastructure. This is notably higher than 25% observed in 2019, which clearly shows insufficient safeguards against such threats. 13% of all listed mixed properties are also subject to such impacts\threats. Only in 11% of cases situation has somewhat improved in last 2-3 years, while in more than 50% of cases it stayed highly problematic or deteriorated\worsened. In three thirds of such cases problems were caused by hydropower development. In most cases

¹ “[Heritage Dammed](#)” Water Infrastructure Impacts on world Heritage Sites and Free Flowing Rivers.
<http://www.transrivers.org/pdf/2019HeritageDammedFinal.pdf>

dams cause irreversible impacts on natural ecosystems that cannot be fully mitigated afterwards.

At the 44th Session the challenge was demonstrated by deliberate destruction of central elements of the Selous Game Reserve, facilitated by state companies and financiers from several State parties-Committee members, as well as continuous disruption of natural water regime in the Ahwar of Iraq, Luang Prabang and Lake Baikal show growing inability of the Convention mechanisms and parties to protect freshwater ecosystems lying at the heart of many World heritage sites. Two other properties having water infrastructure conflicts (and many other problems in addition to that), “Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid region” and “Volcanoes of Kamchatka”, in 2021 were recommended for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Kamchatka escaped such listing, partly, due to official notice delivered by the State Party of Russia on full indefinite cancellation of hydropower and other water infrastructure plans.

In some cases such as Vat Phou in Laos or Chitwan NP in Nepal the problems have not been revealed by monitoring and the State of Conservation reports do not mention potential threats from upstream or downstream dams, thus failing to resolve future problems preemptively. This is due to limited scope of reporting on SoC by State Parties and absence of mandatory analytical studies which could early discern potential conflict between planned development and World heritage values.

Some properties known to have problems with water infrastructure such as Danube Delta or Los Glaciares have not come to formal review for years. Normally no strategic analysis of development pressures is conducted at basin-level neither during the inscription process, nor during later monitoring by the States parties, leaving many impacts unidentified until it is too late. Thus at the 44th Session a Georgian property, protecting endemic sturgeon as one of its OUVs was inscribed with evaluation not even mentioning obvious impacts from existing and planned dams upstream of the property on Rioni River. This makes us think that real number of potentially affected properties many become significantly higher as full information becomes available on each property.

We call for special focused action of the Committee, UNESCO and parties to the Convention to protection of rivers running through the properties, to ensure that Convention effectively protects water bodies and freshwater ecosystems and the World Heritage Committee does not tolerate or incentivize their destruction and degradation. In 2019 we developed and presented to the Committee and Convention Secretariat comprehensive recommendations, but serious discussion on how to improve the situation has not even started yet.

Trends: Hydropower and World Heritage

Hydropower-related cases so far stand at 60 out of total of 80-82 properties with water infrastructure conflicts. However, some properties threatened by hydro may simultaneously also suffer from other types of water infrastructure.

Among the 59 properties having hydropower-related issues the following trends are observed:

In 32 cases situation in 2019-2021 continued to be highly problematic or changed to the worse due to hydropower impacts, lack of assessments or announcement of new construction plans.

Some properties are being physically destroyed and degraded due to hydropower impacts, such as Selous Game Reserve, Lake Baikal, Lake Ohrid, Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan PAs, Manas NP, Wood Buffalo NP, Ahwar of Iraq, etc. Other properties face increasingly uncertain future due to delayed assessments of new dams, either planned or even already under construction or operation (e.g. Ifugao Landscape, Durmitor, Luang Prabang, Victoria Falls, Iguacu\Iguazu, etc.)

There are also “unnoticed” cases of potential dam impacts so far neglected both by countries and the World Heritage Convention bodies, such as at Chitwan NP in Nepal, Los Glaciares NP in Argentina, Burkhan Khaldun Sacred Mountain in Mongolia, Vat Phou in Laos, Maloti – Drakensberg in South Africa, etc.

In 5 cases situations improved or conflict was resolved at least partially in last 3 years (Costa-Rica canceled Diquis Dam, Indonesian court stopped Tampur dam near the Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra, Okavango Delta basin countries cancelled hydro and started cooperation on SEA, Panama promised not to go ahead with the third (!) dam in Talamanca Ridge Amistad Reserve, Zhupanova River Hydro project was cancelled according to the report from State Party of Russia. This adds to 6 “optimistic” cases identified in the “[Heritage Dammed](#)” Report for previous period.

In 23 cases of hydropower-related conflict we lack information to discern specific changes.

If compared to the 2019 “[Heritage Dammed](#)” report 17 hydropower cases were added to our list, from those 8 due to new acute conflicts\problems and the rest 9 were discovered retroactively as additional chronic\historic cases unearthed during our research. Often those are pre-2012 cases for which little or no current information is available in the official World Heritage Center database(which improved dramatically over past decade), but presence of serious problems are evident from old documents.

At least 30 hydropower cases definitely involved international finance and construction by foreign companies. (Selous, Lake Turkana, Los Glaciares, etc.) In 16 of those all or part of finance and\or contractors came from China, whose share is actually slightly lower than expected, since Chinese state-owned companies participate in at least 70% of on-going hydropower projects globally.

Other water infrastructure and World Heritage

In total we know 22 properties affected by non-hydropower water infrastructure\management issues (those which are also affected by hydro are included in statistics on hydro).

In past two years situation in 10 properties changed to worse due to impacts from water management infrastructure, with most concerning cases at Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex , Sundarbans, Landscapes of Dauria, Greater Blue Mountains and Djoudj National Bird Sanctuary In Senegal. For 8 properties information insufficient to discern changes.

At 4 properties in last 2-3 years situation changed to the better: Donana and Everglades improved management and decreased impacts, Kazakhstan stopped bridge construction at Talgar, Countries of trilateral Sangha so far abstained from waterway development.

From 12 new cases (compared to 2019 report) 7 represent new developments at new properties (e.g. iSimangaliso Wetland Park) and 5 added after retrospective review of historic cases (like Pantanal which has been facing multiple threats from water infrastructure for decades).

Table. Snapshot on Heritage and Water Infrastructure (figures reflect number of properties):

	1979-2013 (SoC Review)	2013- 2018 (SoC)	2019 count “ Heritage Dammed ” Report	2021 (RwB Full update)	2019-21 (New Acute Cases)
All Water Infrastructure	21	24-30	51, from those 8-cultural 4-mixed 39 natural	80, from those 14 cultural 5-mixed 61-natural	15
Hydro			42, from those 26 likely irreversible, 6- risk avoided or reduced. 10 info deficient.	59, from those 32-worsening, 4-improving 23- no info.	8
International finance for hydro affecting WH				At least 30 instances.	5
Non hydro			9	22, from those 10-worsening, 4-improving 8- no info.	7

Intervention on item 7 at the 44th Session of the World Heritage Committee:

On Rivers and Increasing Dam Damage.

By Rivers without Boundaries International Coalition, International Rivers, World Heritage Watch, SOSORINOCO, Yayasan HAKA, Citizen Initiative Ohrid SOS, Wilderness Society - Tasmania.

Thank you for allowing us to speak, Mr. Chairman!

We value development of “no go” policies, but feel extreme underappreciated urgency for protection of freshwater ecosystems.

Rivers occupy just 1% of terrestrial Earth surface, but natural and cultural systems of remaining 99% heavily depend on healthy freshwater bodies and their ecosystem services. Due to increasing societal demands for scarce river resources, freshwater biodiversity is much more endangered than that in marine or terrestrial realm, 87% of monitored freshwater species populations are in decline and two thirds of sizeable rivers are already fragmented by dams.

In 2019 we delivered to you the “[Heritage Dammed](#)” Report, demonstrating that only a handful of World Heritage properties offer reliable protection for rivers, while hundreds of other sites are not capable to safeguard rivers running through them². By 2019 up to a quarter of natural properties were degraded or threatened by water infrastructure. Despite decisions to prevent such damage made by the Committee, by now this share has increased to almost 29%. Today we see 80 properties threatened or already degraded by hydro-engineering projects, with shining examples of Rufiji (in *Selous*), Pashur (in *Sundarbans*) and Mekong (in *Luang Prabang*) rivers during this session. In many cases such as Vat Phou (in Laos), Burkhan Khaldun (in Mongolia) or Chitwan (in Nepal) the State of Conservation reports do not mention potential threats from upstream or downstream dams, thus failing to preemptively resolve future problems.

In our Report we presented recommendations how to improve recognition and proactive protection of freshwater ecosystems to ensure that the World Heritage convention does not fail on rivers. We beg you to consider this subject as extreme priority before it is too late.

Thank You, Mr. Chairman.

² “[Heritage Dammed](#)” Water Infrastructure Impacts on world Heritage Sites and Free Flowing Rivers.
<http://www.transrivers.org/pdf/2019HeritageDammedFinal.pdf>

Brief Recommendations:

We recommend that the World Heritage Committee includes in future Decisions the following provisions:

Focus on Identification of Rivers for Protection

- *IUCN and - where applicable - ICOMOS prepare a global thematic study for the identification of rivers, their ecosystems and landscapes, and freshwater ecoregions which should be represented in the World Heritage List. The study should review opportunities to nominate new WH properties and to expand existing one to include free flowing river values. This study should include guidelines for the engagement of other relevant mechanisms, and the role of local and indigenous communities in the safeguarding of these areas;*
- *World Heritage Centre in its Periodic Reporting to include information on riverine values in and around existing properties, and mainstream this theme in its deliberations with other international bodies as other conventions' secretariats, World Bank, UNISDR and UN Habitat;*
- *States Parties to identify free-flowing rivers, their ecosystems, landscapes and watersheds, provide measures for the safeguarding of these areas and collaborate with neighboring States Parties to declare them as trans-boundary protected areas;*

Early Impact Assessments to Avoid Harm to OUVs

- *Request that IUCN and ICOMOS in their evaluation of such relevant nominations and in the State of Conservation reporting of listed properties and draft Decisions prepared (prescribe) to apply pro-active tools as the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and comprehensive re-active tools through Impact Assessment (IA) and include the watersheds of these free flowing rivers;*
- *Requests that IUCN should expedited development of Guidelines of SEA application to World Heritage and develop specific criteria for SEA assessments and specify requirements on the contents and process of specific types of assessment (e.g. basin-wide assessment of cumulative impacts from water infrastructure). The Assessment Reports should be public and made available at UNESCO web-site (except for sensitive information protected by relevant laws on national secrets).*
- *Recognizing the importance of sustainable development, requests IUCN to provide guidelines to determine practicable technological alternatives and the limits of alteration in watersheds containing World Heritage properties allowing for renewable energies at a scale in support of the local communities and preventing adverse impacts on World Heritage properties;*

- *Requests that State Parties in cooperation with Advisory Bodies identify and assess all properties which may be impacted by water infrastructure located in the same basins. Impacts already exerted by water infrastructure should be measured and mitigated. Already existing hydropower and other water infrastructure should be aligned with requirements for World Heritage protection or decommissioned. The opportunities for infrastructure decommissioning should be identified by the States Parties as soon as possible to remove additional undue pressure affecting wilderness areas and cultural landscapes.*
- *Commissioning development of SEA Handbook with case studies on well-implemented SEAs to inform States Parties about best available practices.*
- *Experts doing the assessments should be qualified independent specialists and (the key responsible leaders) should not be citizens of the State Party doing the assessment.*
- *Environmental Assessment Reports submitted by States Parties according to the Committee decisions should be public and made available at UNESCO WH Center web-site (except for sensitive information protected by relevant laws on national secrets).*
- *Urge parties to use **Article 6** to act pre-emptively rather than reactively, seeking to assess potential transboundary impacts on World Heritage routinely while doing basin management planning and other large-scale development planning.*

Protect Sites from Tentative List

- *In addition to the requirement on the incompatibility of large dams with existing World Heritage sites prescribed by Decision 40 COM 7), recognizing the necessity to avoid conflict between dams and properties on the Tentative List of candidate the WH Committee requests that no dams and other large infrastructure be built in the respective river basins without proper assessments and a review of assessment results by the Convention bodies. NO flooding by reservoirs of the sites placed on the Tentative List should be allowed.*

Prevent Investment into Destruction of Rivers

- *Information on intended infrastructure which may have impact on the OUVs of World Heritage properties which is to be provided according to §172 Operational Guidelines should also include a complete list of the institutions financing and executing the project.*
- *The Committee should adopt a decision addressing financial institutions and companies established by convention parties, recommending that they use the wording of the Decision 40 COM 7 and Decision 42 COM 7 as minimal requirements for safeguarding heritage sites from impacts of hydropower dams and other large infrastructure.*

Improve Identification and Notification on Potential impacts

- *Recommends that any State Party planning or permitting large project investments in a basin where a World Heritage Site is located, should, at the earliest stage of planning, notify the World Heritage Center on the nature of the planned investment and whether, in the Party's opinion, it may affect OUVs and thus require an EIA/SEA.*
- *To prevent massive non-compliance the World Heritage Committee rules that where the Committee finds that its decisions and guidelines have not been followed (repeatedly) the WH sites should be automatically placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger after a specified period on inaction by the State Party. The Lake Turkana case provides overwhelming evidence in favor of such regulations.*
- *For inscribed and proposed World Heritage properties the opportunities for infrastructure decommissioning should be identified by the Convention bodies and the States Parties as soon as possible to remove additional undue pressure affecting wilderness areas and cultural landscapes.*

Coordinate Efforts with Other Conventions

- *Requests the World Heritage Center to engage into consultations with secretariats of other biodiversity conventions and the UNFCCC to mainstream nature-based solutions into climate change mitigation and adaptation, and to avoid measures that may cause irreversible negative impacts on the World Heritage properties, biodiversity and protected areas.*

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