

## NATURAL WORLD HERITAGE

NOVEMBER 2018

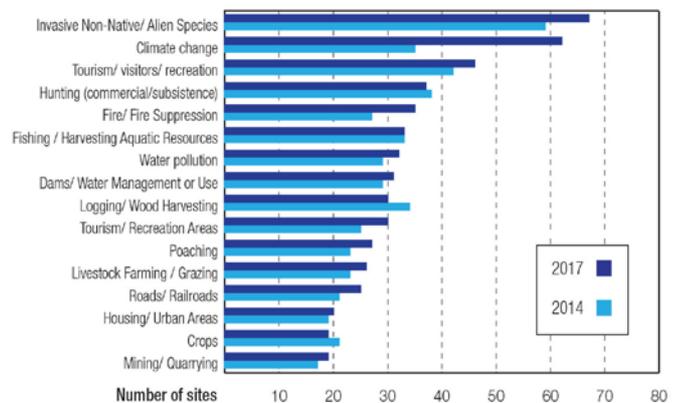
- **Natural World Heritage sites** are globally recognised as the most significant protected areas on Earth.
- These sites provide life-supporting benefits to millions of people – **90% of sites provide jobs, two-thirds are crucial sources of water** and about **half help prevent natural disasters** such as floods or landslides.
- Natural World Heritage sites are **under increasing pressure from climate change, infrastructure development, mining, poaching** and other threats.
- To protect sites from threats, **investment in their protection and management** is urgently needed. **Closely monitoring the status of sites, World Heritage-specific biodiversity targets, and adopting IUCN Green List standards** for site management can also help.
- **These sites are a litmus test** for our ability as a conservation community to protect biodiversity and pass on nature's treasures to the next generation.

### What is the issue?

One in five (23%) sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List are natural sites, most often protected areas such as national parks or nature reserves. Natural World Heritage sites are **globally recognised as the planet's most significant protected areas**. There are 247 natural World Heritage sites around the globe, including iconic places such as Australia's Great Barrier Reef, Yellowstone National Park in the United States, Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or the Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra in Indonesia. Natural World Heritage sites account for 7% of the total surface covered by all 230,000+ protected areas worldwide.

Almost every country has signed the World Heritage Convention, committing to the best level of protection for these sites. Yet **natural World Heritage sites are under increasing pressure. Invasive species, climate change and the negative impacts of tourism are currently the three most significant threats** to natural World Heritage, according to the IUCN World Heritage Outlook, the first ever assessment of all listed natural sites.

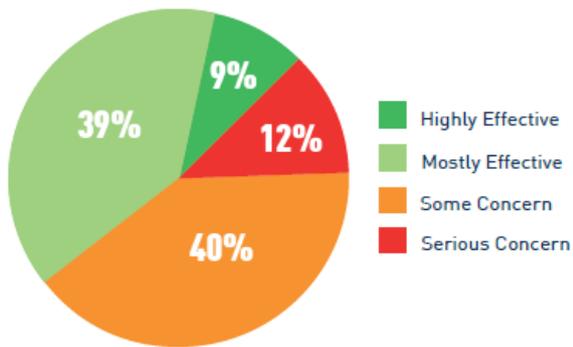
**Climate change is the fastest growing threat to natural World Heritage**, with the number of sites highly threatened by climate change almost doubling in the three years between 2014 and 2017. Coral reefs and glaciers are among the most affected ecosystems. In 2016, up to 85% of all reefs surveyed had been impacted by climate change. The Great Barrier Reef, the largest reef on Earth, has suffered widespread bleaching due to the increase in global sea surface temperature. Retreating glaciers threaten the very reason why Tanzania's Kilimanjaro National Park, home to Africa's highest peak, is on the World Heritage List. Climate change is also by far the largest potential threat to natural World Heritage, meaning more sites will likely suffer impacts in the near future.



Main threats to natural World Heritage sites, with number of sites affected by each type of threat. The number of sites affected by climate change has dramatically increased from 2014 to 2017. © IUCN World Heritage Outlook 2 (2017)

**Pressure on natural World Heritage from planned infrastructure is also increasing.** Major development such as the construction of roads, dams, tourism facilities, mining and oil and gas projects is among the top potential threats. For instance, Bangladesh's Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest home to the royal Bengal tiger, could be severely altered by impacts of the Rampal coal-fired power plant proposed near the site. The proposed Stiegler's Gorge dam could cause irreversible damage to important habitats in Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve, home to the Critically Endangered black rhinoceros.

**The protection and management of natural World Heritage are becoming less effective.** In 2017, fewer than half (48%) of the sites were assessed as having effective protection and management, down from 54% in 2014. Lack of guarantee for long-term finance is the most challenging aspect of protection and management – an issue assessed as being of concern for 118 natural World Heritage sites.



Fewer than half of all natural World Heritage sites were assessed as effectively protected in 2017. © IUCN World Heritage Outlook 2 (2017)

Growing threats and declining protection and management present a worrying combination for natural World Heritage sites. If natural World Heritage sites are not adequately conserved, their unique values could be irreversibly damaged or lost.

## Why is this important?

Natural World Heritage sites provide **crucial habitats to many iconic species**, as well as protect rare ecological processes and stunning landscapes. They also **contribute to economies, climate stability and human well-being**.

Two-thirds of natural sites on the World Heritage List are crucial sources of water, and about half help prevent natural disasters such as floods or landslides. Over 90% of listed natural sites create jobs and provide income from tourism and recreation. Forests found in World Heritage sites across the tropical regions store an estimated 5.7 billion tons of carbon – higher forest biomass carbon density on average than the remaining protected area network.

Natural World Heritage sites have high international visibility and provide insight into conservation successes and challenges. Through the World Heritage Convention, they have the power to mobilise action where it is most needed, and often pioneer management solutions which contribute to sustainable development.

The success of the conservation of World Heritage can act as a **litmus test of the effectiveness of protected areas globally**, and of our ability to protect nature overall.

Many natural World Heritage sites demonstrate that conservation works when efforts are sustained. For instance, Comoé National Park in Côte d'Ivoire came off the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2017 thanks to international support and joint action on the ground, which resulted in species populations rising, including chimpanzees and elephants that were thought to have disappeared from the park.

## What can be done?

To protect the world's natural World Heritage sites from growing threats, investing in their protection and management is key. This is a collective responsibility shared by governments, civil society, local communities and indigenous peoples.

The state of conservation of natural World Heritage sites needs to be closely monitored to identify the most threatened sites, and this is where national and international conservation efforts should focus first. World Heritage sites, as the planet's most significant protected areas, deserve the best quality management if they are to have a positive outlook.

IUCN recommends the adoption of World Heritage-specific targets in the post-2020 agenda of the Convention on Biological Diversity as an effective means to drive biodiversity conservation action. The IUCN World Heritage Outlook also offers a tool for measuring progress over time, as it tracks changes in the sites' protection and management, threats and natural values.

The IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas – the first global standard of practice in area-based conservation – can ensure natural World Heritage sites enjoy internationally benchmarked protection and management. The IUCN Green List can celebrate and share high-quality management and help those World Heritage sites most in need to lift standards.

Quantifying the benefits provided by natural World Heritage sites helps justify investing in and conserving them. Many tools for assessing ecosystem services – the benefits provided by nature – now exist. New IUCN guidance helps to select the most appropriate tool according to objectives and resources.

### Where can I get more information?

IUCN World Heritage Programme  
[www.iucn.org/worldheritage](http://www.iucn.org/worldheritage)

IUCN World Heritage Outlook  
 Report: Osipova, E. et al. (2017). [IUCN World Heritage Outlook 2: A conservation assessment of all natural World Heritage sites](#). Gland, Switzerland: IUCN.

Online World Heritage site assessments:  
[worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org](http://worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org)

Benefits of natural World Heritage  
[worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org/benefits](http://worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org/benefits)

Tools for measuring, modelling, and valuing ecosystem services: [www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/resources/best-practice-guidelines](http://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/resources/best-practice-guidelines)

UNESCO World Heritage Centre [whc.unesco.org](http://whc.unesco.org)