

World Heritage at 50 Looking Back, Looking Forward



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Half a century after the adoption of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention, our planet faces multiple crises that threaten the very survival of the world's cultural and natural heritage. Urgent action is needed to protect these special places from conflicts, disasters, untamed development and the climate emergency. Governments alone cannot do it. To fulfil the promise of this 50-year-old landmark treaty, citizens and civil society around the world need to answer the call.

Fifty years ago on 16 November 1972, UNESCO's General Conference adopted the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, commonly known as the [World Heritage Convention](#).

This international treaty was the culmination of lengthy discussions among experts and advocates in the separate fields of cultural and natural heritage conservation. First conceived as a World Heritage Trust at the 1965 White House Conference on International Cooperation, and later endorsed by the 1972 United Nations Summit on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the Convention landed at UNESCO for final negotiation and implementation within the UN system.



UNESCO Director-General René Maheu signs the World Heritage Convention on 23 November 1972. Photo: © UNESCO.

The initiative gained momentum as a response to changing social and economic conditions that were destroying places of cultural and natural significance. As an intergovernmental treaty, the primary responsibility for identifying, protecting, conserving and presenting these irreplaceable properties fall to national governments. Because many countries found the challenge beyond their financial, scientific and technological capacity, the Convention set out to establish an effective system of collective protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value, rooted in the belief that the loss of such places impoverished all peoples of the world.

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