

Committee: Environmental and Cultural Committee

Issue: The role of the UN in protecting areas of outstanding beauty

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Introduction

There are numerous areas of outstanding natural beauty throughout the world; these areas are unique due to their natural, cultural and environmental value.

A number of sites and areas of outstanding beauty are legally protected but the system of protection varies. Due to the environmental importance of areas of outstanding beauty in addition to their economical, cultural and spiritual significance, efforts have been made in order to protect and secure them thus the number of protected areas has increased tremendously worldwide; nevertheless many of these areas continue to face serious threats including pollution, irresponsible human behavior, unsustainable tourism, lack of sound management policies, in addition to a number of other factors which constitute major challenges. Therefore, the issue of protecting all of these areas became a major concern for environmentalists, the UN and Member States.

The United Nations tried to tackle this issue and find viable solutions to ensure that areas of outstanding beauty are especially protected as these areas are considered to be also a contributor to the accomplishment and success of the Millennium Development Goals.

Definition of Key-Terms

Protected areas: areas of land or water which are legally protected. These areas contribute to the preservation of the ecological balance. Protected areas conserve biodiversity and protect the natural and cultural value of these areas.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines protected areas as: “a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.” (1)

Deforestation: is the process of converting forested areas to non-forested areas for farming, mining and roads by cutting and destroying forests, logging, or burning which causes carbon dioxide emissions thus global warming, more desertification, soil erosion and the loss of animal habitats and clean air.

Biodiversity: the mixture of life in the world, and the variety of organisms on Earth, it's the totality of genes, species, and ecosystems of a region. It's a crucial factor for sustaining the environment as it is responsible for keeping the environment including the diverse ecosystems safe and healthy.

Ecosystem: natural system made up from living organisms (plants, animals, microorganisms) and nonliving organisms (air, water, soil) functioning together and interacting with the environment.

Climate change: As defined by BBC is "A pattern of change affecting global or regional climate, as measured by yardsticks such as average temperature and rainfall, or an alteration in frequency of extreme weather conditions. This variation may be caused by both natural processes and human activity. Global warming is one aspect of climate change." (17), briefly the term "climate change" refers to continual and significant variations of weather patterns in time periods.

Sequestration: the removal of carbon dioxide (CO₂) out of the earth's atmosphere through capturing and storing CO₂ in underground reservoirs in order to lessen the Greenhouse effect.

Background Information

Environmental importance of areas of outstanding beauty

Areas of outstanding natural beauty provide us with a great variety of environmental goods and services as they play a major role in conserving biodiversity and supply us with pure water and clean air. Furthermore, these areas maintain natural resources including water. Protected areas conserve fish resources, protect natural habitats and consequently facilitate access to essential natural medicines.

All of the aforementioned goods are of vital importance especially to the indigenous people who depend on these natural resources for their survival.

Moreover, areas of outstanding natural beauty do not only act as catalysts in protecting natural ecosystems through preserving watersheds and soils but they also reduce greenhouse emissions through carbon dioxide storage and sequestration hence mitigate climate change.

Protected areas have also great economic benefits; they help in boosting international economy as tourism flourishes due to their scenic beauty.

Additionally, areas of outstanding beauty's spiritual impact is a major but unfortunately unrecognized aspect, as such beautiful places embrace inner peace and bring psychological comfort to people's souls. Last but not least, protected areas are vital for research and education. Therefore we can see that areas of outstanding beauty could be a key factor in sustainable development.

Threats and challenges

However, areas of outstanding beauty continue to face numerous environmental challenges and serious threats that have impact on the principles and standards of natural properties, on the environment, on the economy and on the globe as a whole. Some of these challenges are considered external including air and water pollution and natural disasters such as floods and landslides.

One of the major environmental threats is climate change due to its impact on biodiversity and ecosystems; thus, protected areas such as parks could assist in countering that threat by conserving biodiversity and absorbing green house emissions by acting as carbon sinks; consequently, they can reduce the effect of climate change.

Other threats include grazing, which leads to soil erosion and loss of habitat, and deforestation which occurs as a result of illegal logging and mining.

Inappropriate human behavior, lack of management, lack of awareness, uncontrolled fires, weak enforcement of law, unregulated mass tourism, infrastructure development, pressure on water resources, high and unrestrained immigration caused by urban sprawl and urbanization, all have negative and drastic impact on these areas of outstanding beauty . On top of that there are also some areas of outstanding beauty that unfortunately lack both a legal title and political and financial support.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the world's first international environmental organization that was founded in 1948 as the International Union for the protection of nature. One of its main goals is the maintenance of biodiversity through "science, action, and influence". IUCN is an advisory body on natural heritage to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee. One of the "technical advisory" services provided by IUCN is the evaluation of natural world heritage sites nominated for World Heritage Status.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was founded in 1945 and its constitution entered into force in 1946. UNESCO's World Heritage Convention sets criteria for natural and cultural sites which can be included in the World Heritage List.

The United Nations Environment Program World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) is "collaboration" between the United Nations Environment Program

and WCMC. The center works in order to assist countries in developing and implementing policies related to biodiversity.

The World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) is an IUCN commission that provides advice to governments on protected areas and works with policy makers to ensure proper investment and management of protected areas.

The World Heritage Fund provides immediate financial assistance to sites that are in urgent need; they also provide quick emergency aid (technical/financial) in case of disasters.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is an organization which works in 100 countries and aims at the conservation of nature and biodiversity.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1945	UNESCO was founded.
1948	IUCN was founded as a major international environmental organization.
1972	World Heritage Convention entered into force.
1972	UNEP was established.
1975	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) entered into force.
1979	Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) was signed.
1993	The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) entered into force.

2003	United Nations List of Protected Areas
2004	Program of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA) was adopted

Relevant UN treaties, resolutions and events

World Heritage Convention

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the World Heritage Convention in 1972. The convention is an “international instrument” for protecting the world’s cultural and natural heritage. State parties nominate sites based on their natural, cultural or mixed heritage to be enlisted. These sites need to meet the following criteria:

“There are 10 World Heritage criteria:

4 criteria for natural sites:

(vii) “Contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty...”

(viii) “Contain outstanding examples representing major stages of earth’s history, including the record of life...”

(ix) “Contain outstanding examples representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of ecosystems and communities...”

(x) “Contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view or science or conservation”. (2)

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is a legal international treaty that was adopted in 1992 and entered into force in 1993. It has three main objectives which are: the preservation of biodiversity, sustainable use of biodiversity’s components and the share of the biodiversity’s benefits in a fair and equal way.

The Program of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA) sets goals and targets for countries in order to ensure effective protection and management of protected areas.

(See Appendix I for full documentation of PoWPA action plans of 98 Member States)

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is an international United Nations agreement that came into force in 1994. It aims to conserve the marine environment, to sustain the use of the waters resources and to protect the living creatures in oceans and seas through comprehensive set of rules.

Community Management of Protected Areas for Conservation (COMPACT) is an initiative funded by United Nations Foundation and GEF Small Grants Program (SGP) which aims at working with the locals and the communities to conserve biodiversity in protected areas.

Other conventions include:

- Protection of coral reefs for sustainable livelihoods and development.
- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).
- Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS).
- Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB).

(For a list of global and regional agreements on protected areas, see Appendix ii).

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

There were several attempts to tackle the issue of protecting areas of outstanding beauty through numerous international agreements, conventions and through national legislations adopted by Member States.

UNEP has been working on providing crucial information regarding protected areas through “the Protected Areas Program” since 1981. Furthermore, UNEP works with partners such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Heritage Centre in addition to working with the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC) in order to protect and maintain biodiversity.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is considered to be very important in addressing issues pertaining to protected areas; its significance is highlighted by the fact that it is considered as a legal instrument. Article 2 of CBD defines protected area as “a geographically defined area which is designated or regulated and managed to achieve specific conservation objectives.” and Article 8 encourages Member States to “conserve biological diversity” (3).

The CBD’s Program of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA) is also crucial in addressing protected areas and biodiversity. Countries have submitted their action plans regarding sites of outstanding beauty; currently 98 countries have action plans for implementation.

UNESCO has a leading role regarding the world’s heritage including natural heritage. The World Heritage Convention lists sites of “outstanding natural value” and these sites are given legal protection.

A number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also played key roles in issues related to biodiversity and protecting areas of outstanding beauty including:

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) , Conservation International (CI), Fauna and Flora International (FFI), and The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) .

The World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) has a critical role in ensuring proper management of protected areas through technical assistance for stakeholders and continuous guidance and advice for policy makers.

Several Member States have submitted their action plans regarding sites of outstanding natural beauty; currently 98 countries have action plans for implementation.

Possible Solutions

To find reasonable solutions, all threats need to be identified and addressed. Capacity building regarding management of areas of outstanding beauty is very important in addition to assistance in formulating policies and plans to ensure protection of these sites. Legal protection should be enforced by drafting laws and implementing them. Raising awareness is also essential to ensure responsible tourism and avoid inappropriate human behavior which could have negative impact on these areas.

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