



TÉLÉCOPIE • FACSIMILE TRANSMISSION

DATE: 28 April 2020

A/TO: Ms. Audrey Azoulay  
Director-General  
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Dr. Mechtild Rössler  
Director  
UNESCO World Heritage Centre

Mr. Peter Shadie  
Director  
IUCN World Heritage Programme

Prof. Toshiyuki Kono  
President  
International Council on Monuments and Sites

Mr. Joseph King  
Director, Sites Unit  
International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and  
Restoration of Cultural Property

E-MAIL [a.azoulay@unesco.org](mailto:a.azoulay@unesco.org); [m.rossler@unesco.org](mailto:m.rossler@unesco.org); [peter.shadie@iucn.org](mailto:peter.shadie@iucn.org);  
[secretariat@icomos.org](mailto:secretariat@icomos.org); [jk@iccrom.org](mailto:jk@iccrom.org)

DE/FROM: Beatriz Balbin  
Chief  
Special Procedures Branch

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Beatriz Balbin".

FAX: +41 22 917 90 08

TEL: +41 22 917 98 67

E-MAIL: [srenvironment@ohchr.org](mailto:srenvironment@ohchr.org); [registry@ohchr.org](mailto:registry@ohchr.org)

PAGES: 5 (Y COMPRIS CETTE PAGE/INCLUDING THIS PAGE)

COPIES: [geneva@unesco.org](mailto:geneva@unesco.org)

OBJET/SUBJECT: **Letter from the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment**

**Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment**

28 April 2020

**Subject: The imperative of a uniform and concerted effort to protect World Heritage Sites by prioritizing rights-based climate action**

Dear Mesdames,  
Dear Sirs,

I am writing to you in my role as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights obligations related to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. As all of you are well aware, we are living in an unprecedented global environmental emergency, comprised of the climate crisis, the catastrophic decline in biodiversity, pollution that kills millions of people annually, and production/consumption patterns that exceed planetary boundaries.

World Heritage Sites, and their Outstanding Universal Values, are not immune to these threats. Every single World Heritage Site is in danger because of climate change, from the melting of thousands of glaciers found in World Heritage Sites to the bleaching of corals in the Great Barrier Reef and twenty-eight other World Heritage coral reefs.<sup>1</sup>

The recent reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change make it abundantly clear that urgent, systemic and transformative action must be taken in the short term in order to prevent genuinely catastrophic impacts on human health, life and well-being as well as ecosystem health.<sup>2</sup> To cite but one example, the IPCC warned that there is a high probability that coral reef ecosystems will virtually disappear unless States manage to meet the objective set forth in the Paris Agreement of limiting the average global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees.

Other United Nations organizations are increasingly speaking with a common voice and a consistent message about the urgent importance of incorporating climate action into all relevant activities and policies of individual States. For example, last fall the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights, the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Heron et al, *Impacts of climate change on World Heritage coral reefs: a first global scientific assessment* (2017). J. Bosson et al, *Disappearing World Heritage glaciers as a keystone of nature conservation in a changing climate*, *Earth's Future*, 7, 469–479 (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* (2018).

Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities issued a powerful joint statement. The five human rights treaty bodies noted that “[f]ailure to take measures to prevent foreseeable human rights harm caused by climate change, or to regulate activities contributing to such harm, could constitute a violation of States’ human rights obligations.”<sup>3</sup>

The time has passed for vague exhortations to take actions to mitigate climate change. As other United Nations organizations have recognized, the requisite actions to protect human rights and the planet from foreseeable Climate impacts, to achieve the commitments set forth in the Paris Agreement, achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, and protect human rights from foreseeable climate-related impacts are well known. In my recent report to the UN General Assembly on a safe climate (UN Doc. A/74/161) I describe a range of the most important actions that States must take, including:

- stop building new coal-fired electricity plants immediately and phase out existing coal-fired electricity plants (by 2030 in high-income States, 2040 in middle-income States, and 2050 in low-income States);
- ending exploration for additional fossil fuel resources (in light of the scientific consensus that we cannot burn existing fossil fuel resources if we are to have any chance of limiting climate change to 1.5°C or 2°C degrees of global temperature increase);
- eliminating the most high-impact methods of extracting oil and gas, such as hydraulic fracturing, oil sands, deep-water and Arctic;
- accelerating investment in renewable energy sources and energy storage solutions;
- redirecting all fossil fuel subsidies toward energy efficiency, renewable energy sources and energy storage solutions; and
- enacting laws that phase in zero-emission transportation and phase out internal combustion vehicles.

In light of this, I urge you to use your roles and authorities as the Secretariat to the World Heritage Committee and associated advisory bodies to clearly and consistently recommend actions that individual State parties should take to protect the Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage Sites within their jurisdiction by reducing their contributions to climate change in order to ensure that society is on track to fulfil the 1.5°C (or below) objective. These recommendations should be included in all state of conservation reports, draft decisions for sites under review, and in requests to State Parties seeking explanations of how their domestic actions are consistent with their international commitments under the World Heritage Convention to safeguard World Heritage Sites and fulfil their obligations under the Paris Agreement. This is entirely consistent with the World Heritage Convention, which requires State Parties to “do all [they] can ... to the utmost of [their] own resources” to protect and conserve World Heritage Sites. Parties must also ensure that the Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage Sites in their territories is “sustained or enhanced over time,” including by addressing existing and potential threats, whatever their source. These obligations under the World Heritage Convention exist independently of the commitments made by States under the Paris Agreement, and certainly, nothing in the Paris Agreement

---

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, Five UN human rights treaty bodies issue a joint statement on human rights and climate change (Sep. 16, 2019).

prevents states from taking action separate from or beyond what that agreement requires.

Given the magnitude of the environmental and climate change challenges, we face, it is essential to have all hands on deck, including all of you and the institutions you guide.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to all of you for your dedicated efforts to safeguard these irreplaceable treasures for both present and future generations

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Boyd". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "D." and the last name "Boyd" clearly distinguishable.

David Boyd

Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment