

Sites for Sustainable Development:

Realizing the Potential of UNESCO Designated Sites to Advance Agenda 2030



Executive Summary

This document is the executive summary of the report: Sites for Sustainable Development: Realizing the Potential of UNESCO Designated Sites to Advance Agenda 2030.

- The main report can be accessed here: https://unesco.org.uk/sites_for_sustainable_development_main_report
- The executive summary (French) is available here: https://unesco.org.uk/sites_for_sustainable_development_executive_summary_French
- The supplementary information for the main report is available here: https://unesco.org.uk/sites_for_sustainable_development_supplementary_information

Authors (in alphabetical order):

Tim Carter, Nixox, London, UK

Eleanor R. Haine, Canadian Commission for UNESCO, Ottawa, Canada

Alexander J. Kent, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK

Matthew Rabagliati, UK National Commission for UNESCO, London, UK

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Canadian Commission for UNESCO
150 Elgin Street
PO Box 1047
Ottawa ON K1P 5V8
Canada

and

UK National Commission for UNESCO
Suite 98
3 Whitehall Court,
London SW1A 2EL
UK

ccunesco@ccunesco.ca
+1-613-566-4414

info@unesco.org.uk
+44(0) 207 766 3492

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Cover photo: Students explore aquatic invertebrates and learn about wetland stewardship at Waterton Biosphere Reserve's Wetland Field Day event / Jen Jenkins
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Introduction

People and communities worldwide are facing unprecedented challenges that are set to accelerate in the coming decades. From catastrophic flooding to ecosystem collapse or extreme poverty, no one will be spared. We urgently need partnerships, resources and activities at the local, national and international levels to tackle, mitigate or adapt to these interconnected challenges. This report outlines how UNESCO's global network of designated sites – World Heritage Sites, global geoparks and biosphere reserves – can help stakeholders carry out sustainable development approaches to do just that.

The report is based on a study that the UK and Canadian National Commissions for UNESCO conducted to explore the value of UNESCO's grouping of its World Heritage Sites, global geoparks and biosphere reserves as “sites for sustainable development.”

The incidence of wildfires is increasing due to worsening heat and drought arising from climate change.
Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks UNESCO World Heritage Site / Miriam / Adobe Stock





Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal UNESCO World Heritage Site (UK) and its surrounding landscape is facing increasing problems with flooding and other climate-related issues. Fountains Abbey cloister floods in June 2007 / The National Trust

The study was guided by four questions:

- What values and tools does the global network of sites possess that site managers could harness to help local communities and stakeholders face sustainable development challenges?
- What interrelated threats and challenges do sites face?
- What threats and challenges do different types of designated sites have in common?
- What financial, human and information challenges do site managers face in implementing a sites for sustainable development approach?

The study relied on:

- a review of the positioning of the designated sites as sites for sustainable development in UNESCO strategies and documents
- other grey literature
- original research with designated site managers

Sustainable development and the need for nexus approaches

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity that sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets that seek to ensure that no one is left behind. These are integrated into the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. UNESCO adds a fourth dimension (culture).

In Doughnut Economics, author Kate Raworth's "doughnut" illustrates the challenge of achieving these goals. The doughnut consists of two concentric rings: a social foundation to ensure no one falls short on life's essentials, and an ecological ceiling to ensure that humanity does not collectively overshoot the planetary boundaries that protect Earth's life-supporting systems. Between these two sets of boundaries lies a doughnut-shaped space that is both ecologically safe and socially just: a space in which humanity can thrive.

Similarly, the Stockholm Resilience Centre expresses the relationship among the three dimensions of sustainable development and the SDGs by illustrating that economies and societies are embedded parts of the biosphere (figure 1).

Agenda 2030 was agreed in 2015. However, there is concern that the world is falling behind in achieving the SDGs:

- In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change highlighted the importance of action at the global, local and individual level to combat the climate crisis in its special report, Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation.
- In 2019, recognizing that action to meet the United Nations Agenda 2030 SDGs was not advancing at the speed or scale needed, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General called on all sectors of society to mobilize for a decade of action on three levels, calling for:

...global action to secure greater leadership, more resources and smarter solutions for the Sustainable Development Goals; local action embedding the needed transitions in the policies, budgets, institutions and regulatory frameworks of governments, cities and local authorities; and people action, including by youth, civil society, the media, the private sector, unions, academia and other stakeholders, to generate an unstoppable movement pushing for the required transformations.

Aerial view of Dudley Castle, Dudley, Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark, UK. / UAV4



- In 2020, a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development found that more than 100 SDG targets will not be reached without the proper engagement of and coordination with local and regional governments. That report outlined a framework to reshape sustainable development policies from the ground up and recommended engaging all civil society actors in defining local and regional development visions and strategies.

The SDGs are meant to address global challenges and threats, but it has become clear that they can only be achieved if all relevant stakeholders and rights holders, including Indigenous Peoples, work together to manage the interconnected threats by adopting nexus approaches – that is, strategies that consider inter-sectoral and inter-regional interactions.

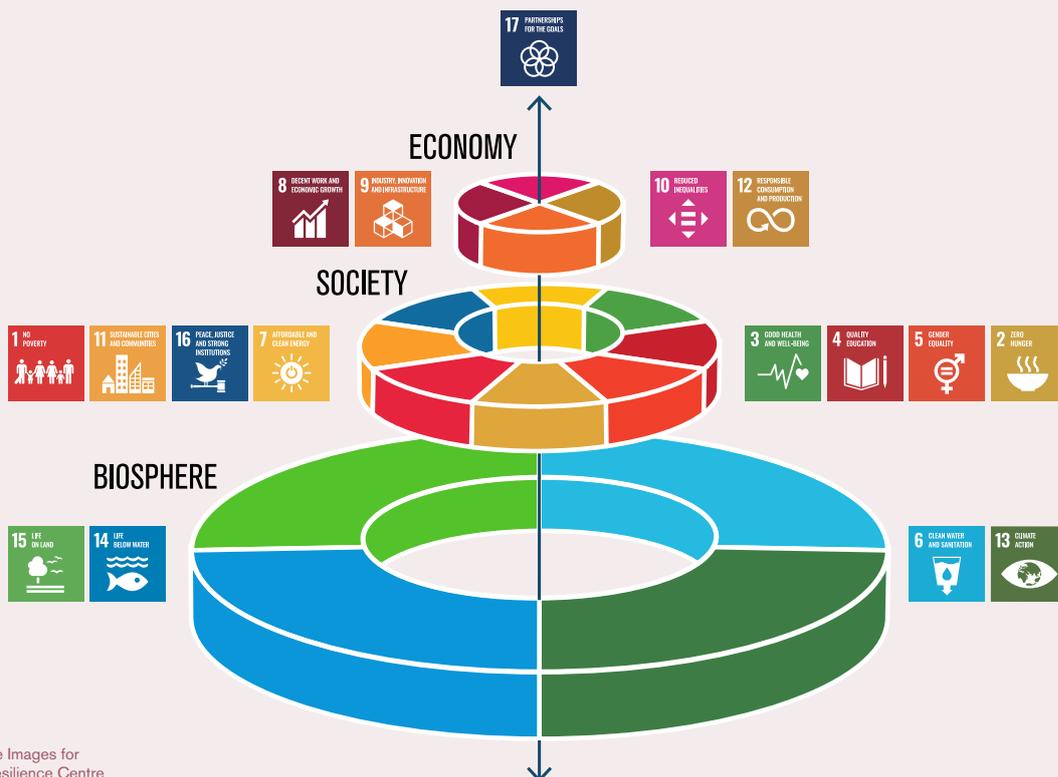
UNESCO has positioned itself as one of the leading UN agencies on such approaches. It contributes to Agenda 2030 by linking the protection of natural and cultural diversity to sustainable development through standard-setting instruments (such as conventions,

recommendations, declarations) and using its international programmes and networks to scale partnerships from the global to local level and vice versa.

At the site level, UNESCO is increasingly positioning biosphere reserves, global geoparks and World Heritage Sites as “sites for sustainable development,” stating they can address global challenges through a nexus approach that combines scientific and local knowledge and participatory and inclusive adaptive governance to:

- reduce biodiversity loss
- conserve geodiversity
- improve livelihoods in local communities
- improve people’s social, economic and cultural conditions

Figure 1. Economies and societies are embedded parts of the biosphere.



Source: Azote Images for Stockholm Resilience Centre

Agenda 2030 and UNESCO designated sites

Individually and collectively, UNESCO designated sites are at the nexus of Agenda 2030's core elements (economic development, social inclusion and environmental protection) and actions (global, local and individual action).

Biosphere reserves

Biosphere reserves are areas of terrestrial, marine and coastal ecosystems that promote solutions aimed at reconciling biodiversity conservation with sustainable use by people. They are “learning places for sustainable development” – special places for testing interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and managing changes and interactions between social and ecological systems. This work includes preventing conflicts and managing biodiversity.

These model regions meet the goals of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme to:

- conserve biodiversity, restore and enhance ecosystem services, and foster the sustainable use of natural resources
- contribute to building sustainable, healthy and equitable societies, economies and thriving human settlements in harmony with the biosphere
- facilitate biodiversity and sustainability science, education for sustainable development, and capacity building
- support mitigation and adaptation to climate change and other aspects of global environmental change

Hišinq'iif Regional Gathering, Clayoquot Sound Biosphere Region, Canada / Melody Charlie





The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh UNESCO World Heritage Site, in partnership with World Heritage cities across Europe, is working through the Atlas.WH project to work on common sustainability challenges to break the barriers between heritage and sustainability / RodrigoVA

Geoparks

At UNESCO global geoparks, sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed holistically to include protection, education and sustainable development. This approach combines conservation with sustainable development.

Geoparks meet the objectives of the UNESCO International Geoscience and Geopark Programme to:

- protect the geosites within the geopark territory
- encourage sustainable (geo)tourism
- enhance awareness and understanding among youth and visitors of the areas' geological heritage and history
- promote earth sciences research

Geoparks also conserve and promote tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Like biosphere reserves, they are promoted as “laboratories for sustainable development” by UNESCO. Although there is no current action plan for UNESCO global geoparks, their actual and potential contributions to the SDGs are well documented.

World Heritage Sites

A World Heritage Site is a landmark or area that benefits from legal protection through the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (commonly referred to as the World Heritage Convention). To be considered for designation, sites must be of Outstanding Universal Value and meet at least one of 10 selection criteria, and the host country should demonstrate its full commitment to preserving the heritage concerned. World Heritage Sites include ancient ruins or archaeological sites, historic structures, buildings, cultural landscapes, cultural routes, cities, natural features, important ecosystems, protected areas and monuments. Some well-known examples are the Great Barrier Reef, the Acropolis of Athens, the Galapagos Islands and the Great Wall of China.

Countries are expected to mainstream UNESCO's 2015 Policy Document for the Integration of a Sustainable Development Perspective into the Processes of the World Heritage Convention into programmes and activities that relate to the World Heritage Convention and Sites. The latest version (2021) of the Operational Guidelines states that protecting and conserving natural and cultural heritage constitute “a significant contribution to sustainable development.”

Participatory approaches to managing sites for sustainable development

To work toward sustainable development, site managers and stakeholders must effectively balance environmental, economic, social and cultural concerns and act across local, national and international scales. The key attributes that place all types of UNESCO designated sites at the heart of Agenda 2030 are their individual and collective mandates to:

- operate across sectors
- take a holistic approach to land use and human development
- ensure that a wide range of stakeholders and rights holders participate in, coordinate and manage the sites

Designated site managers are expected to share the lessons they learn during participatory approaches at the local level with other members of the international networks to which they belong. The idea is to reinforce the bridges between global and local that are important for advancing sustainable development.

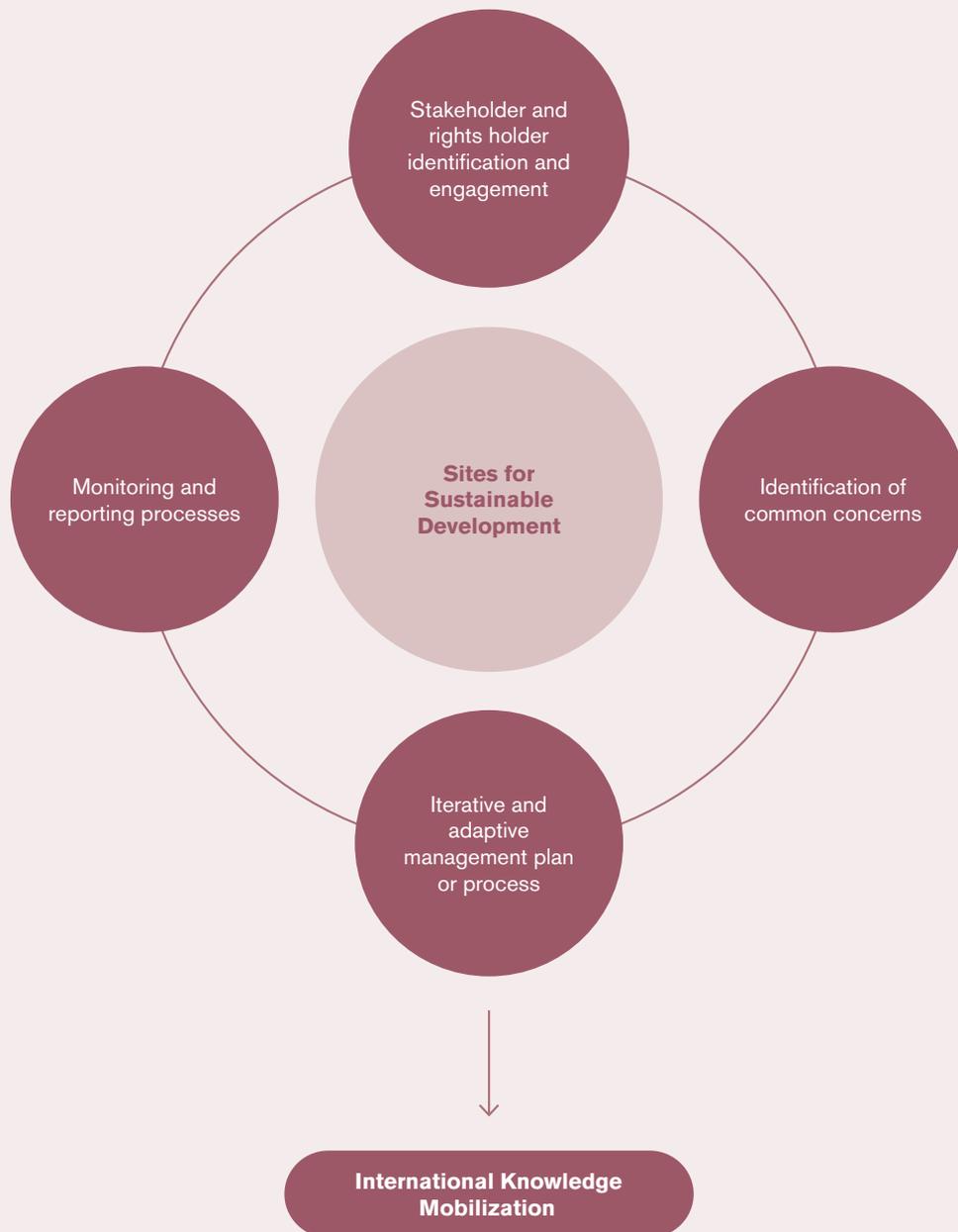
Case studies from the Clayoquot Sound Biosphere Reserve (Canada), Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark (UK) and Studley Royal Park including the Ruins of Fountains Abbey World Heritage Sites (UK) illustrate the attributes that UNESCO designated site managers can use to bring multiple stakeholders and rights holders (such as businesses, communities, government agencies, Indigenous Peoples, heritage and nature groups) together to address sustainable development challenges (figure 2). Examples of international knowledge-sharing illustrate how lessons learned from one site can be applied to other sites within the global networks of all three designations.

The study results also show the value and often untapped potential of these sites to policy-makers, governments, and researchers testing participatory approaches to sustainable development, and demonstrate the need for new interdisciplinary toolkits, methodologies, guidance and research to stakeholders working across sites and landscapes.

River restoration at Threave Estate - National Trust for Scotland with Galloway Glens Landscape Partnership. Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere, UK / The Galloway Glens Landscape Partnership



Figure 2: A key feature of UNESCO designated sites is their membership in international networks that facilitate knowledge mobilization so they can share their experiences and learn from other sites.



Key threats to sustainable development at UNESCO designated sites

The survey of 41 biosphere reserves, global geoparks and World Heritage Sites found that sites face a range of sustainable development threats (figure 3). Those identified most often were:

- financial resources
- impacts of tourism, visitation and recreation
- flooding
- housing
- storms

As shown in the following table, there were some differences in the top three *specific threats* by designation type.

Biosphere reserve
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Invasive/alien species 2. Financial resources 3. Forestry/wood production
Global geopark
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Financial resources 2. Impacts of tourism, visitation and recreation 3. Storms
World Heritage Site
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Housing 2. Flooding 3. Impacts of tourism, visitation and recreation

Effective site management requires three elements:

- management plans
- the involvement of partners, stakeholders and rights holders
- the human and financial resources to carry out the plans

The study's original research – combined with case studies based on interviews with survey respondents and a review of periodic reporting processes – found that UNESCO designated sites are not reaching their full capacity to deliver sustainable development approaches.

The survey results identified significant challenges, especially in terms of management and institutional factors, such as human and financial resources. Many site managers also lacked the data and tools they needed to monitor and report on sustainable development threats.

A cluster analysis found that different types of designated sites in different countries faced similar threats (figure 4). This finding presents opportunities for knowledge exchange between countries and site types.

This innovative approach to analysis could be applied to help UNESCO designated site managers identify other sites facing similar threats so they could share knowledge, pool resources and funding, and plan to work with local stakeholders to address sustainable development challenges.

“Climate change is a big threat to our environment and habitats. In recent years we have experienced more summer and winter flooding. High flows and their associated sediment loads can cause significant ecological damage, e.g. to fish spawning beds.”

Global Geopark, UK

“Urban sprawl is a threat as the region continues to expand outwards rather than upwards.”

Biosphere Reserve, Canada

Figure 3. The full hierarchy of *specific threats* is shown here, colour-coded by the 13 *categories of threat*.¹ Of the 82 possible *specific threats* included in the survey, only five were not mentioned as an issue for any site in either the UK or Canada: air and transport infrastructure; war; civil unrest; desertification; and volcanic eruption.

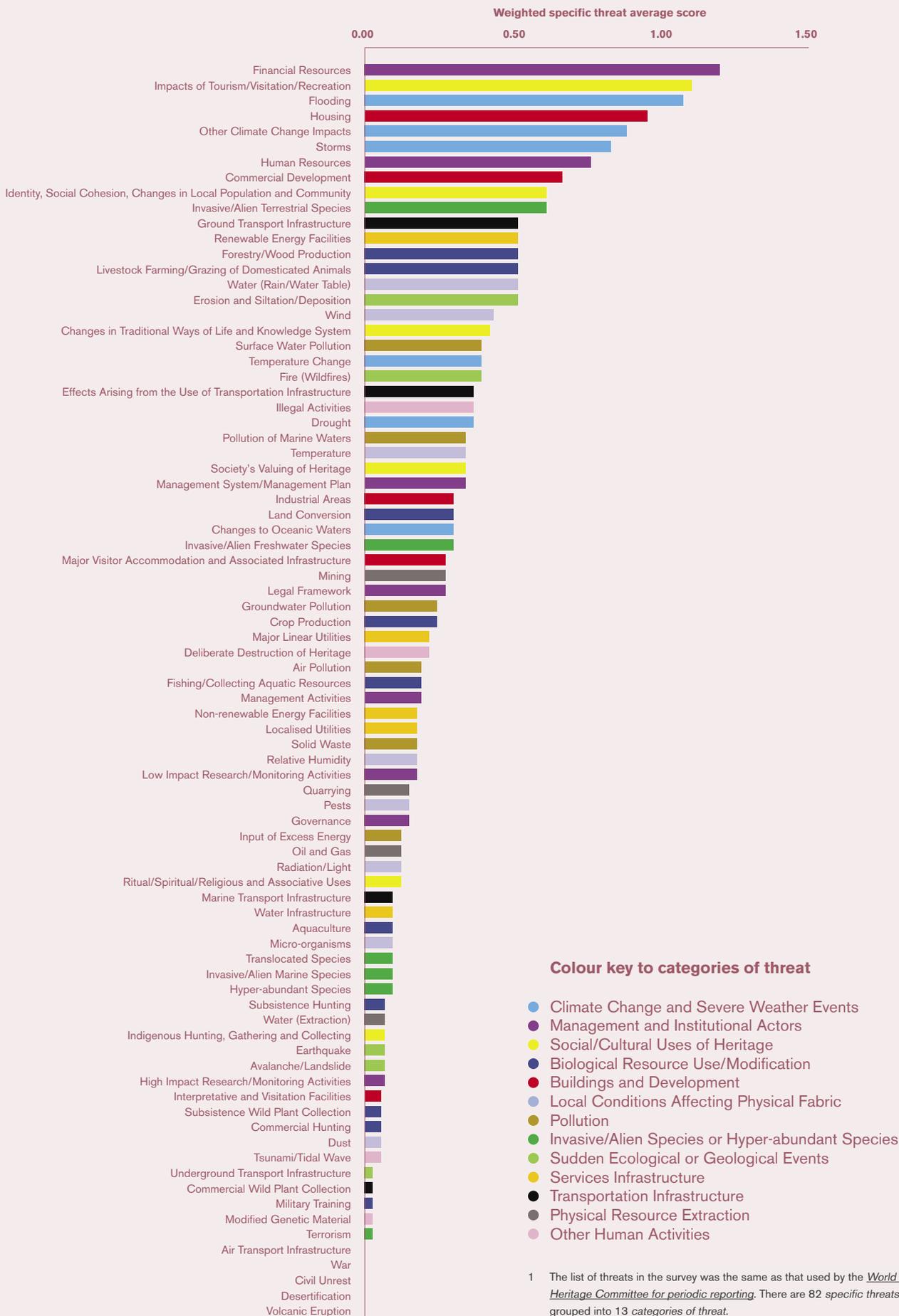


Figure 4. A cluster analysis grouped the designated sites from different countries according to the threats they identified in the survey.



Cluster Threat Level
High
Moderate
Low

Designation Type
Biosphere Reserve
Global Geopark
World Heritage Site



Community planning at the Manicouagan-Uapishka Biosphere Reserve, Canada

Realizing the potential of sites for sustainable development: Recommendations

Our findings led to four recommendations on how to realize the full potential of UNESCO designated sites for sustainable development.

The first two aim to improve opportunities for resource mobilization and knowledge exchange between sites. This would accelerate the world's progress toward Agenda 2030 and build on existing opportunities for knowledge exchange by providing more deliberate and structured opportunities to share innovative approaches to sustainable development.

The second two are aimed at enhancing sites' capacities – individually and collectively – to be sites for sustainable development. These recommendations address financial and human resource needs as well as training and expertise needs.

Recommendation 1: The UNESCO Secretariat, Member States and National Commissions should improve opportunities for knowledge exchange and resource mobilization among UNESCO designated sites in different countries by regularly monitoring the sustainable development challenges they face and making the results available in a searchable global database.

Every site faces a unique range of threats – and each threat will affect the site in a different way. The aim here is to help site managers partner with each other to solve common problems. For example, sites could use a global database to identify other sites that share similar challenges. Managers could identify common stakeholders to help address these threats and challenges, and jointly bid for funding to develop innovative strategies to mitigate them.

Recommendation 2: The UNESCO Secretariat, Member States and National Commissions should develop multi-designation thematic networks of UNESCO designated sites to allow site managers and stakeholders to collaborate.

There are already networks of UNESCO designated sites that mobilize knowledge, share best practices and develop partnerships. However, these regional and thematic networks contain members of only one type of UNESCO designated site – and, as demonstrated in this study, different types of designated sites in different countries share similar sustainable development challenges. There is a case to be made for developing multi-designation thematic networks whose membership comes from different types of designated sites.

Recommendation 3: The UNESCO Secretariat, Member States, UNESCO designated site managers, universities and international data science organizations should provide training for UNESCO designated sites on data collection, analysis, management and sharing.

Data, especially spatial data, are important for all aspects of site management, including monitoring and community engagement. Data are also important for designing and monitoring innovative approaches to sustainable development and for sharing these approaches beyond individual sites. Yet many site

managers report that a lack of training or specialist skills limits their capacity to work with geospatial and other data. Basic training in data literacy and GIS (geographical information systems)/geospatial data processing would benefit staff at designated sites.

Recommendation 4: Member States and sub-national authorities, National Commissions, other UNESCO programmes, and UNESCO designated site managers should build the human and financial resource capacity of UNESCO designated sites.

Sites that are under-resourced are trapped in a vicious cycle of having to prove they can fulfill their roles as sites for sustainable development to justify to governments that they deserve funding. Experience from many countries shows that it can take five or 10 years to establish fully functional sustainable development models. Shorter-term project funding severely curtails sites' abilities to fulfill their mandates and manage landscapes effectively. Investments in the organizations that manage designated sites have the potential to turn many of the challenges identified in the survey into concerted actions toward sustainable development at local, regional and national levels.

“At its simplest, a GIS helps us to understand our space. Before this project, we had reams of data about the Wall, but they were held in hundreds of different places and some of the data were inaccessible. We’ll now have accessible data in one place, but we need to communicate its value and get the right people adding to it and making use of it.”

John Scott, World Heritage Site Co-ordinator for Hadrian’s Wall

“A new management plan has been written but without the needed financial and human resources needed, the work identified to protect, conserve and promote the WHS will be unachievable and the management plan will not be fully implemented.”

World Heritage Site, UK

Conclusion

UNESCO designated sites for sustainable development are at the cutting edge of Agenda 2030. Fully realizing their tremendous potential requires systems and infrastructure for knowledge exchange and training, human and financial resources, and data. UNESCO designated site managers need to be enabled and empowered as key actors for advancing sustainable development, and policymakers at local, national and international levels need to provide them with the appropriate support to fulfill their roles.

“That’s the thing that gets you through the day. If you really struggle and you need to go somewhere and get some advice: we’ve got other people [in geoparks] that we can talk to right across the world. So whatever challenge it is that you’re facing somebody else has probably dealt with something similar”

Dr Laura Hamlet, North West Highlands UNESCO Geopark Manager.

Local communities taking part in a Bioblitz at the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region, Canada / Monica Shore





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