

## **BirdLife Africa Partners' Joint Statement on the Development Threats to and Management of World Heritage Sites**

**16 November 2022** - We, the undersigned BirdLife International Partner organisations from across Africa, congratulate the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Heritage Committee and its Advisory Bodies, and the 194 States Parties to the World Heritage Convention on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Convention's adoption. Over the past half century, the World Heritage Convention has played a crucial role in conserving some of the world's most unique and irreplaceable sites, whose Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) makes them important for the entire global community. However, as we reflect on the Convention's past successes and its role into the future, we are deeply concerned about the large-scale development projects and mismanagement that threaten a growing number of World Heritage Sites in Africa.

As nature conservation organisations, we recognise the value that World Heritage status provides to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity of global significance. We also note that natural World Heritage Sites provide a variety of social and economic benefits to the countries in which they occur – including revenue from ecotourism, and the protection of important ecosystem services that support lives, livelihoods, and sustainable socio-economic development. Indeed, there are several ways in which these sites contribute towards achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

We note, however, the increasing trend of large infrastructural development and extractive industry projects being proposed and approved in and around Africa's natural World Heritage Sites, with apparent disregard for impacts on these sites' Outstanding Universal Value. We note further that ineffective management threatens the integrity of various World Heritage Sites in Africa. This, despite governments' obligations under the World Heritage Convention to protect and conserve natural heritage, and to present and transmit such heritage to future generations. Examples include:

- The decision to permit and proceed with the Julius Nyerere Hydropower Project (Republic of Tanzania), despite the World Heritage Committee's warnings of a high likelihood of serious and irreversible damage to the Outstanding Universal Value of Selous Game Reserve - with potential serious impacts also on communities living downstream.
- The decision to approve the Kangaluwi and Chisawa opencast copper mine (Zambia), despite the World Heritage Committee having repeatedly urged that this project should not go ahead due to the serious impacts it could have on the Outstanding Universal Value of the Mana Pools National Park, Sapi and Chewore Safari Areas (Zimbabwe).

- The proposed Batoka Gorge Hydro-electric Scheme (Zambia and Zimbabwe), the reservoir of which (per the current proposal) would inundate part of Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls. The World Heritage Committee has clearly stated its position that “the construction of dams with large reservoirs within the boundaries of World Heritage properties is incompatible with their World Heritage status”.
- The granting of oil exploration licences in environmentally sensitive areas within the Okavango River basin (Botswana and Namibia), which could be the first step towards extractive activities that would pose significant risks to the interconnected water system of the Okavango Delta.
- The neglect of Ichkeul National Park (Tunisia) - in particular, the failure to ensure the sustainable hydrological management of this site or to effectively address other potential threats to its values, such as illegal hunting and grazing.

We, BirdLife International Partners in Africa, are firmly of the position that:

- Governments and developers should prioritise the complete avoidance of potentially negative impacts on World Heritage Sites, in accordance with the mitigation hierarchy.
- Loss of or damage to Outstanding Universal Value is not acceptable and cannot be offset. If a proposed project’s negative impacts on a World Heritage Site cannot be minimised to an acceptable level (through effective, evidence-based measures), the proposal must therefore be **rejected**.
- Extractive industry projects are incompatible with World Heritage status and should not be undertaken within World Heritage Sites. This has been recognised by both the World Heritage Committee and the ‘No Go’ commitment undertaken by numerous industry stakeholders.
- Governments must ensure that natural World Heritage Sites are managed in a manner that prevents the erosion of the values for which they were established and that, where degradation has occurred, restoration measures are implemented expeditiously.

We also strongly support the World Heritage Impact Assessment Principles identified by the IUCN and emphasise the need for Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA)/Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) processes to be transparent and participatory and for stakeholders’ inputs to be meaningfully considered and responded to. We are collectively opposed to the approval of

development applications that do not incorporate robust ESIAs/EIAs, and to decision-making that fails to ensure the preservation of World Heritage Sites' Outstanding Universal Value. We also collectively call for governments to mobilise the necessary funding to effectively manage natural World Heritage Sites occurring in their territories and to involve civil society actors (especially scientists, non-governmental organisations, and local people) in the planning and implementation of such efforts, including in restoration measures and follow-up monitoring.

We urge African States Parties to the World Heritage Convention to fully comply with and respect their obligations towards the protection and sustained conservation of the world's natural heritage, as well as their commitments towards the conservation, sustainable use, and mainstreaming of biodiversity in terms of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Sustainable Development Goals, and a wealth of other regional and global environmental instruments. To this end we strongly urge governments of countries in which projects are proposed that would negatively impact World Heritage Sites to reconsider those projects. We further urge States Parties, international funding bodies, and the private sector to adopt and respect the 'No Go' commitment, especially in Africa.

### **List of Signatories**

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