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U.N. takes up proposal to declare Glacier Park in danger

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Associated Press

HELENA -- A proposal for the United Nations to declare Glacier National Park and Canada's adjacent Waterton Lakes National Park in danger from climate change signals a need for greater study of the climate issue, a U.N. committee says.

The World Heritage Committee meeting in Lithuania this week took up the proposal to declare the parks, together known as Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, endangered. The U.S. Geological Survey has said Glacier park has 27 glaciers, down from about 150 in 1850, and over the past century the mean summer temperature there has risen by about 3 degrees Fahrenheit.

The committee neither accepted nor rejected the call for a finding of endangerment but "basically said, 'We acknowledge we have a problem. Let's study it to death,'" said Kassie Siegel of the Center for Biological Diversity. It is one of a dozen groups that last winter petitioned the U.N. to declare Waterton-Glacier in danger.

It is a World Heritage Site, a U.N. designation for some of the globe's places where the cultural or natural heritage is of "outstanding value to humanity."

The World Heritage Committee must "do whatever we can to protect World Heritage" and "this is what we are trying to do by initiating more studies and sharing experience," Chairman Ina Marciulionyte said in a news release.

Besides the Waterton-Glacier petition, proposals to declare four other World Heritage sites around the world in danger also were before the committee.

In answer to all, it invited a study of alternatives to listing and said it is possible that on a case-by-case basis, sites eventually could be put on an endangered list, according to the release. The panel also adopted some recommendations on ways to respond to climate change at World Heritage locations.

The recommendations "recognize that climate change has measurable affects" on the sites, committee press officer Gina Doubleday said Wednesday.

Oregon law professor Erica Thorsen wrote the Waterton-Glacier petition and said earlier this year that listing would require the World Heritage Committee to identify ways of mitigating effects from climate change.

Other sites that were proposed for listing are Belize Barrier Reef in the Caribbean; Great Barrier Reef off the northeast coast of Australia; Huarascan National Park in Peru; and Nepal's Sagarmatha National Park, best known for Mount Everest.