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CLIMATE: U.N. panel says global warming threatens parks, but decides against action

Dan Berman, Greenwire senior reporter

The U.N. World Heritage Committee yesterday officially recognized global warming as a threat to natural and cultural heritage sites, but rejected attempts to endorse emissions cuts or add parks such as Mount Everest and Montana's Glacier National Park to its "danger list."

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Meeting this week in Vilnius, Lithuania, the 21-nation committee also formally removed Germany's Cologne Cathedral, Senegal's Djoudj National Bird Sanctuary and India's Group of Monuments at Hampi and Tunisia from the danger list.

While the committee adopted a report listing recommendations on ways to respond to the threat of global warming and said it would consider listing sites affected by climate change on the danger list, it rejected an attempt to include a provision saying the best way to protect such sites was through greenhouse gas emission reductions.

"The Committee decided to adopt a climate change and White House strategy that focused on adaptation," said Peter Roderick, co-director of the Climate Justice Programme, via e-mail from Vilnius. "Most Committee members were not prepared to stand up to the U.S. and Canadian governments. They have a responsibility to the world to protect the best parts of our planet from its biggest threat, and they flunked it."

But committee spokeswoman Gina Doubleday said the report is a momentous step for future recognition of the at-risk sites.

"Climate change has been recognized as a threat to World Heritage sites, and is now a reason for inscribing a site on the List of World Heritage in Danger," Doubleday said. "This is important because, as the World Heritage Convention has been adopted by 182 countries, it means that climate change is officially recognized as a problem."

The climate resolution was based on an agreement reached in March by a World Heritage Committee working group that determined the proper role of the panel is to study, adapt, research and continue to consult with other bodies on the issue.

Paul Hoffman, deputy assistant secretary at the Interior Department and the U.S. representative to the conference, said then the resolution's finding is in-line with the U.S. position that the proper role of the committee is to provide information on the effects of climate change but not to direct policy. The United States believes the U.N. Framework on Climate Change is the proper vehicle for policy determinations (Greenwire , March 21).

'Danger list' petitions not considered

While recognizing that climate change is a threat to certain resources, the committee took no action on petitions by environmentalists to add five sites, including Mount Everest and Glacier National Park to its danger list.

The danger list traditionally has been used to call attention to areas threatened by development, neglect or war. A finding that irreversible harm from global warming could force the United States to commit to mandatory greenhouse gas reductions, the groups suggest.

Climate change is causing glaciers to melt at Glacier National Park and the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park on the U.S.-Canada border, Nepal's Sagarmatha National Park, and Peru's Huascarán National Park, the groups say. For instance, Glacier National Park in Montana has seen more than 80 percent of its glaciers disappear due to climate change, causing damage to the park's plants and animals, according to a petition filed in February by the Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife and several other groups. Australia's Great Barrier Reef and Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System are also being damaged by rising temperatures, environmentalists contend (Greenwire , March 21).

The petitions were not considered because the committee was not prepared in advance to discuss the proposals as part of its regular listing process during this session. "The World Heritage

Committee takes petitions seriously along with information provided by the country concerned, the advisory bodies and other international experts," Doubleday said.

The environmentalists' petitions were not officially dismissed, and groups are now asking the panel to support sending qualified missions to investigate the sites, Roderick said.