

For Immediate Release

WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER THREATS TO SOME OF AFRICA'S MOST ICONIC PROTECTED AREAS

Thursday 15 July 2021 – The extended 44th session of the World Heritage Committee is scheduled to commence on Friday 16 July and run until 31 July. This intergovernmental body is responsible for making decisions regarding implementation of the World Heritage Convention. The outcomes of its sessions hold particular relevance for Africa at a time when some of the continent's most iconic sites are threatened by unsustainable developments.

World Heritage status provides significant value to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity of global significance. Not only do World Heritage Sites aim to conserve and protect the most significant natural and cultural heritage globally, but they also contribute significantly to sustainable socio-economic development, such as eco-tourism, and provide critical ecosystem services for numerous communities. Indeed, measures to address global biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation are crucially important in securing the basis for sustainable development in Africa, and achieving the goals and objectives articulated in the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the Southern African Development Community's Industrialisation Strategy and Roadmap 2015-2063, and indeed Africa's Agenda 2063.

Unfortunately, however, there is an increasing trend of large infrastructure development projects and extractive industry projects (including mining, and oil and gas exploration) in and around some of Africa's most iconic protected areas and World Heritage Sites. When such activities threaten a World Heritage Site's Outstanding Universal Value, they can result in the site being placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger and, in extreme cases, losing its World Heritage status. A worrying example of the latter is the current proposal for the World Heritage Committee to remove the Selous Game Reserve in the Republic of Tanzania from the World Heritage List. This would be only the third delisted site in World Heritage Convention history. The proposed delisting responds to a series of deliberate actions by the Tanzanian government to, amongst other things, permit and proceed with the Julius Nyerere Hydropower Project, introduce legal changes to permit hydrocarbon and uranium prospecting and extraction inside game reserves, and excise land from the World Heritage property to accommodate a uranium mine. These have already caused irreversible damage to the site and pose significant threats to its remaining values.

Of further concern are the extractive industry and largescale development activities that may potentially significantly impact the Okavango Delta and Tsodilo Hills World Heritage Sites in Botswana, the Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls World Heritage Site in Zambia and Zimbabwe, and the Mana Pools National Park, Sapi and Chewore Safari Areas World Heritage Site in Zimbabwe (details of which are provided in the box below). Encouragingly, all of these threats have been highlighted in the World Heritage Centre and IUCN assessments preceding this month's World Heritage Committee meeting. The Committee is also being requested to adopt decisions which urge the relevant States Parties to take various measures to adequately assess and address these threats. States' adherence to such decisions is crucial if the value of these iconic sites is to be preserved for present and future generations.

African World Heritage Sites at Risk

Okavango Delta and Tsodilo Hills: Threatened by oil and gas exploration by ReconAfrica

Canadian-based company, ReconAfrica, has been granted petroleum exploration licences in the 'Kavango Basin' in Namibia and Botswana. It has commenced with the drilling of test wells in Namibia, but has not yet undertaken the requisite Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in Botswana. Various gaps and concerns have been identified in respect of the EIAs underlying ReconAfrica's current exploration efforts in Namibia, and the company has been criticised for its failure to implement appropriate impact mitigation measures. Although this project is only at the exploration stage, it is nevertheless occurring in environmentally sensitive areas and is potentially the first step towards resource extraction activities that would pose significant risks to World Heritage Sites in Botswana – including the interconnected water system of the Okavango Delta. Notably, the World Heritage Committee has expressed many times that oil and gas exploration and exploitation are incompatible with World Heritage status, and has called upon States Parties to make every effort to ensure that extractive companies located in their territory cause no damage to World Heritage properties.

Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls: Threatened by the proposed Batoka Dam Hydro Electric Scheme

The proposed Batoka Gorge Hydro Electric Scheme would be constructed on the Zambezi River, downstream of Victoria Falls. There are numerous concerns associated with this project. Amongst these are that its reservoir would inundate part of the Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls World Heritage Site, resulting in the permanent submergence of a rare and unique habitat; and that it would constrain breeding opportunities for cliff-nesting raptors for which Batoka Gorge is an important breeding site. The Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) for this project have failed to adequately assess its potential impact on the site's Outstanding Universal Value and have disregarded a previous decision of the World Heritage Committee that "construction of dams with large reservoirs within the boundaries of World Heritage Properties is incompatible with their World Heritage status".

Mana Pools National Park, Sapi and Chewore Safari Areas: Threatened by the proposed Kangaluwi Copper Mine

The proposed site for the Kangaluwi opencast copper mine falls entirely within Zambia's Lower Zambezi National Park. In addition to the devastating impacts that the mine would have on this park itself, conservationists are deeply concerned about its potential negative impacts on Mana Pools National Park – a World Heritage Site located approximately 30 kilometres away in Zimbabwe. Any failure of the mine's tailing storage facility or abnormal discharge of effluence would be expected to negatively impact the World Heritage Site. The Zambian Environmental Management Agency's initial decision to reject this project was reversed on appeal in 2014. The most recent legal challenge to this decision was dismissed on procedural grounds in early 2021 and the project's ESIA approval has been extended, opening the way for mining to commence. The World Heritage Committee has previously urged Zambia not to proceed with this project and is expected to reiterate this call at its upcoming meeting.

Quotes

Ken Mwathe, Policy and Communications Coordinator, BirdLife Africa

“BirdLife International in Africa supports development as evidenced by our work to empower local communities economically in 25 African countries. However, development must proceed in a manner that does not harm the most iconic sites the continent has. Protected areas should be out of bounds for oil and gas and other major developments. I call upon governments to take action to protect them”.

Motshereganyi Virat Kootsositse, Director, BirdLife Botswana

“BirdLife Botswana is concerned about the pending development of proposed prospecting of oil drilling in the vicinity of the Okavango Delta by ReconAfrica. It is now public knowledge that the government of Botswana has accorded ReconAfrica an oil prospecting licence in the North-western part of the country in the Kavango Basin near the Tsodilo Hills. It seems many of the communities on the ground are not fully aware of the pending happenings. It is the position of BirdLife Botswana that if this prospecting is to occur there must be a thorough EIA undertaken to ascertain the extent to which this prospecting will affect biodiversity and most importantly the integrity of the Tsodilo Hills as one of the World Heritage Sites. Without EIA, we run the risk of having irreversible socio-economic and environmental repercussions.”

Julia Pierini, CEO, BirdLife Zimbabwe

Lower Zambezi National Park/Mana Pools National Park, Sapi and Chewore Safari Area WHS

“Across the planet, governments are working on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework that augments the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 which is an ambitious plan to implement broad-based action to bring about a transformation in society’s relationship with biodiversity and to ensure that, by 2050, the shared vision of living in harmony with nature is fulfilled.

Permitting mining in the Zambezi Valley which comprises the Lower Zambezi National Park and the Mana Pools National Park, Sapi and Chewore Safari Areas WHS - an intact wilderness and biodiversity hotspot that encompasses the evolutionary and ecological processes that sustain life - is contrary to this vision. The impact of mining in the area will be catastrophic as the resulting air, noise and water pollution, the disturbance from infrastructure development are totally incompatible with any efforts to conserve this significant biodiversity. This decision that favours short term gain through single use destructive abstraction over conserving vital ecological processes that have evolved over millennia is fundamentally flawed and consequently the decision to allow mining in the area should be reversed with immediate effect.”

Batoka Gorge

“The United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021- 2030) is a global rallying cry to heal our planet – preventing, halting and reversing the degradation of ecosystems that support all life on Earth – including ours as humans.

The Batoka Gorge is a deeply incised canyon formed through erosion of fault lines in ancient basalt by the Zambezi River. At its head are the world renowned Victoria Falls or Mosi-oa-Tunya (the smoke that thunders) and below contains a unique intact ecosystem that is home to aquatic biodiversity that is yet

*to be quantified or described, and species whose ecology is still poorly understood. It is this ecosystem that supports more tangible biodiversity particularly in the form of a suite of cliff-nesting raptors, including the enigmatic Taita Falcon (*Falco fasciinucha*). There are less damaging alternatives to sustainable power generation than that of building a dam that will permanently and irreversibly alter this ecosystem, and some of its touristic and heritage value. The technology is out there! It is possible to conserve our unique biodiversity and service the needs of a sustainable economy. This project needs to be halted until such time that the full impacts of construction and all raised objections are evaluated and assessed.”*

Imakando Crispin Sinyama, Chairperson, BirdWatch Zambia

“BirdWatch Zambia alongside BirdLife Zimbabwe and BirdLife South Africa has been committed to try and reverse the decision for the development of the Batoka Gorge project downstream of the Victoria Falls. There are currently another two planned Hydro Electric Power Stations in the planning and development stages on the Zambezi River – one at the source of the Zambezi and the other at Ngonye Falls. Additionally, tourism activities contribute to pollution of the ecosystem potentially threatening livelihoods of local communities.

The further destruction to the natural flow of the river and its surrounding habitat needs to be avoided at all costs. Kangaluwi Copper Mine is situated in Lower Zambezi National Park in Zambia across the river from Mana Pools in Zimbabwe. Although the proposed mine is set back from the river, the problem with effluent runoff still remains as well as disturbance to the National Park where it is situated. BirdWatch is very concerned that political and financial pressures have and will erode the effective supervision of this mining operation which is not just near but is actually within the boundary of a National Park. This will make it very difficult to ensure that the mine does not cause degradation to the Zambezi Valley and River below the site.”

Dr Melissa Lewis, Policy & Advocacy Programme Manager, BirdLife South Africa

“BirdLife South Africa is collaborating closely with other members of the BirdLife partnership to monitor and respond to the development threats to some of southern Africa’s most iconic World Heritage Sites. We are deeply concerned by the apparent trend in Africa of development applications being prepared and approved with little or no consideration of potential negative impacts on these sites’ Outstanding Universal Value. We therefore welcome the draft decisions currently before the World Heritage Committee, and we strongly urge all African States Parties to fully comply with their obligations towards the protection and sustained conservation of the world’s natural and cultural heritage.”

Notes to Editor

About BirdLife

BirdLife is the world's largest conservation partnership with over 10 million members and supporters. The partnership strives to conserve birds, their habitats, and global biodiversity, working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. <https://www.birdlife.org/>

About BirdLife Botswana

BirdLife Botswana is a conservation organization focusing on promoting conservation of birds, biodiversity, protection of the environment through environmental education, community outreach, awareness, research and monitoring in addition to community empowerment. <http://www.birdlifebotswana.org.bw/>

About BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa strives to conserve birds, their habitats and biodiversity, both in South Africa and regionally. It endeavours to achieve this mission through scientifically based programmes, through supporting the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources, and through encouraging people to enjoy and value nature. <https://www.birdlife.org.za>

About BirdWatch Zambia

BirdWatch Zambia (BWZ) promotes the conservation of birds and their habitats in Zambia. BWZ main activities are based on four focal areas namely species, sites, habitats and people. <https://www.birdwatchzambia.org/>

About BirdLife Zimbabwe

BirdLife Zimbabwe promotes the survival of birds and biodiversity in Zimbabwe and elsewhere for both their intrinsic value and for the enjoyment of future generations. Biodiversity, ecosystems and ecosystem services – our natural capital – must be preserved as the foundations for a sustainable future for us all. <https://www.birdlifezimbabwe.org/>

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