

UNESCO approves controversial World Heritage Tibet nomination despite concerns

Date : July 7, 2017

Krakow - In a highly charged political environment today a UNESCO committee voted to approve a controversial application by the Chinese government to inscribe a vast Tibetan area as a World Heritage site, although it contravenes values and guidelines of the international cultural body.

Members of the Committee representing different governments spoke up in turn to praise the Chinese government over the nomination, and ICT representative Tenzin Choekyi spoke to the Committee about the dangers and significance of the inscription while Chinese delegates celebrated on the main floor of the meeting.

However, in response to a report that the International Campaign for Tibet had submitted to the Committee members about the threats posed to Tibetan nomads, the Chinese government was forced to respond to UNESCO and come out with a statement stating that it will “fully respect the will of the local herders and their traditional culture, religious beliefs, and lifestyle”.

Kai Mueller, Executive Director of the International Campaign for Tibet in Germany, responded to the decision in Krakow today, saying: “The decision to go forward with this nomination without any amendments or fuller assessment reveals more about the political considerations of members of the Committee than a genuine concern for protecting natural and cultural heritage for the world. China has a long record of relocating Tibetan herders and violating their rights. UNESCO has supported without question this nomination, which emerges from policies that exclude normal Tibetan land use such as nomadic herding, situate the state as the sole agency of control, and encourage mass tourism, despite clear guidelines underpinning the World Heritage Convention.

“The Committee ignored the reality that Tibetans – and nomads in particular – are stewards of the landscape whose role is essential to sustaining the wildlife, the long-term health of the ecosystems, and the water resources that China and Asia depend upon. We will now seek to hold the relevant international bodies to account in order to rigorously scrutinize the consequences and impact on the ground of this decision.”

After the nomination was approved, the Chinese government representatives in Krakow made a statement in which they stated that they would “respect the will of the herders”, an acknowledgement that the Committee and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature should ensure is held to account.

This followed a letter written to the World Heritage Center by Du Yue, the Secretary-General of the PRC Commission for UNESCO, following [ICT's report on the Hoh Xil nomination](#). The letter, which was referenced in a [New York Times article](#) about the nomination, mentioned ‘accusations by a third party’ about the UNESCO bid, likely to refer to ICT’s reporting and other expressions of concern about the implications of the nomination.

In her statement to the Committee following the decision, Tibetan scholar Tenzin Choekyi said that the role of Tibetans in preserving the natural and cultural heritage of their homeland to the degree that has allowed it to be considered as World Heritage in the first place must be noted.

She said: “This was a serious decision before Committee members. They could have decided to help ensure the survival of the nomadic traditions of one of the richest spiritual cultures in the world. China seeks to convince the world that its policies are solely aimed at conservation and protection. But the Chinese government is imposing policies to displace nomadic pastoralists across the plateau. It is a massive social engineering campaign that threatens to eviscerate a sustainable way of life uniquely adapted to the harsh landscape of the high plateau. This is despite a scientific consensus in the PRC and beyond that indigenous stewardship and herd mobility are essential to the health of the rangelands and help to mitigate climate change.”

Both UNESCO World Heritage and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which recommended the inscription goes ahead, have clear guidelines on protecting the rights of local and indigenous people and preservation of their culture. The nomination of Hoh Xil - Achen Gangyap in Tibetan - contravenes fundamental principles and values including the concepts of “FPIC” (free, prior and informed consent) and UNDRIP (UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples)^[1] which are recognised in UNESCO Operational Guidelines.

The full statement by Tenzin Choekyi, who has researched Chinese grasslands policy and Tibetan nomads,

follows below:

41th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Krakow, Poland

I am Tenzin Choekyi representing International Campaign for Tibet

Dear Chairman, dear Committee members,

Tibet is the world's highest and largest plateau, the earth's Third Pole. As the source of most of Asia's major rivers, it is of critical significance not only to the Tibetan people and the state party but to the rest of the globe.

We have heard less acknowledgment in the discussion of the Tibetans themselves - when they should be honoured for preserving the natural and cultural heritage of their homeland to a degree that has allowed it to be considered as World Heritage in the first place.

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China seeks to convince the world that its policies are **solely** aimed at conservation and protection. But the Chinese government is imposing policies to displace nomadic pastoralists across the plateau. It is a massive social engineering campaign that threatens to eviscerate a sustainable way of life uniquely adapted to the harsh landscape of the high plateau.

This is despite a scientific consensus in the PRC and beyond that indigenous stewardship and herd mobility are essential to the health of the rangelands and help to mitigate climate change.

Hoh Xil in Qinghai - Achen Gangyap in Tibetan - is in the middle of three major nature reserves. In nature reserves in the PRC it is policy to exclude Tibetan land use such as nomadic herding.

So this inscription raises serious questions for this Committee. In order not to risk contravening principles enshrined in the Convention including FPIC and UNDRIP, strong steps must be taken. It is essential to ensure that no forced relocation or exclusion of traditional nomadic pastoralism or any other policies that may result in removal or exclusion of the traditional users of the property will be undertaken or pursued, while observing the Convention, its principles, the Operational Guidelines and any other applicable international legal standards.

Unfettered access must be possible for independent observers and UN human rights mechanisms to ensure meaningful impact assessment.

The involvement of Tibetans as stewards is essential to sustaining the wildlife, the long-term health of the ecosystems, and the water resources that China and Asia depend upon.

Thank you.

Footnote:

[1] <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/indigenous-peoples/related-info/undrip/>