

Climate Change Can Destroy World Heritage Sites

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It's not just the marauding Islamic State which poses a great threat to the heritage sites like Palmyra, but climate change too can wreak havoc in cities like Venice, says Mechtild Rossler, Director of the Unesco World Heritage Centre.

Not just that, climate change can also destroy heritage sites like the Statue of Liberty and such other structures that have been part of human history, Rossler said.

"Probably in my lifetime many of the natural and cultural world heritage sites would perish or become marine sites. Florida may sink. In Venice, people might not be able to live as they used to," Rossler told IANS.

The Unesco official was in Delhi this week to award Certificates of Inscription to the Khangchendzonga National Park and the Nalanda Mahavihara, two of the three new World Heritage sites from India chosen at the 40th Unesco World Heritage Committee session in Istanbul on July 20.

The third comprises 17 sites, including the Complexe du Capitole in Chandigarh designed by Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier.

The event was held by the Wildlife Institute of India, which is a Unesco Category-2 centre on world heritage management and training.

Rossler was in Syria recently to see Palmyra, around 30 km from Islamic State territory. "The biggest threat to monuments in the 21st century is the intentional destruction by the terrorists. But globally it's the climate change which will affect our lives."

Unesco recently released the "World Heritage and Tourism report", showing how climate change is quickly becoming one of the most significant risks for natural and cultural heritage sites.

"The impact is enormous. If you think of the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, we have bleaching all over. The places of indigenous people, in the Pacific or in the Andamans, must be prepared for the upcoming risks," Rossler stressed.

The list of vulnerable sites includes Statue of Liberty and several forests in Peru and Brazil. The list also includes the Yellowstone National Park in the USA.

Speaking of the reconstruction attempts in conflict zones, Rossler said: "In Syria, the city of Aleppo is totally destroyed. Last year we held a meeting on its reconstruction."

There are a total of 1,052 World Heritage sites globally. Of these, nearly 50 are listed as World Heritage Endangered Sites. Many of them are in conflict zones.

"There are six vulnerable sites in Syria alone. Others are in Iraq, Yemen, Mali and Congo. We have to restore them all. We had already restored Mali's mausoleums and recovered many manuscripts," she said.

Some sites like Sukur Cultural Heritage in Nigeria are also reeling under threat due to Boko Haram, she said.

"In Syria, both listed and tentative heritage sites are seen as sources for funding. The so-called Islamic State forces the archaeologists to dig at gunpoint so that they can sell the artefacts in the black market."

Unesco is also worried because of the military airstrikes in these areas which may destroy the heritage sites.

"To protect the sites from bombing, we work with the military. We give them the coordinates of the sites which should not be touched at all. I had spoken with the head of NATO generals. I think the military needs to be aware of the cultural heritage and how to protect it better," Rossler said.

The Himachal Times (Dehradun), 14 August 2016