Biosphere Reserves or World Heritage Sites – Which is Which?

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Editor's Note: *Following is a January 9, 1985 memorandum from Wauer to all superintendents of Biosphere Reserves.*

Two very significant concepts for protecting natural and cultural resources – Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites – were designed in the mid-1970s and implemented by the international community as part of a progressive and worldwide conservation strategy.

These two concepts have many similarities, because both are designated for preserving significant resources throughout the world. Both attempt to bring greater international visibility to the sites, and to use public support as a means to safeguard the important natural and cultural resources therein.

The creation of World Heritage Sites evolved from the idea that certain natural and cultural sites have universal value and are worthy of international recognition, respect and protection. This program has authority through the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, ratified by the United States Senate on October 26, 1973, and the Natural Heritage Protection Act Amendment of 1980.

Criteria for World Heritage Site selection include those truly unique sites that had an impact upon history, illustrate significant geological processes, may be crucial to the survival of threatened plants and animals, or contain features of superlative natural beauty. The natural sites "ensure the maintenance of the natural diversity upon which all mankind depends."

The World Heritage program includes a World Heritage Fund that is designated to support individual efforts of countries to preserve their cultural and natural heritage, and to meet emergency conservation needs to save a property that is in imminent danger of destruction.

A World Heritage Committee acts to further the goals of the program, which include: (1) developing and maintaining a site list; (2) preparing a list of World Heritage in Danger (both lists are updated every two years); (3) establishing a fund to assist participating countries in identifying, preserving, and protecting World Heritage designated properties; (4) providing technical assistance upon request; and (5) promotion and enhancement of public knowledge and understanding of the importance of heritage conservation at the international level.

The creation of Biosphere Reserves evolved from the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) program, a product of UNESCO, as a method of protecting animal and plant resources in a coordinated worldwide network of designated areas. Participation in the Biosphere Reserve program is strictly voluntary. There is no international convention or legal basis for designation or methods of operations. Authority relates to Agency establishment acts and other land protection legislation.

Criteria for Biosphere Reserves include: (1) areas that can form a network of international understanding of purpose, standards and exchange of scientific information; (2) representative examples of natural biomes, communities or areas with unusual features of exceptional interest, examples of harmonious landscapes resulting from traditional patterns of land-use, and/or examples of modified or degraded ecosystems that are capable of being restored to more-or-less natural conditions; (4) areas large enough to be an effective conservation unit, and to accommodate different uses without conflict; (5) opportunities for ecological research, education, and training; (6) areas with adequate long-term legal protection; and (7) areas to coincide with, or incorporate, existing or proposed protected areas.

The primary goals of Biosphere Reserves are to (1) conserve for present and future use the diversity and integrity of biotic communities of plants and animals within natural ecosystems and to safeguard the genetic diversity of species upon which their continued evolution depends; (2) provide areas for ecological and environmental research, including baseline studies, both within and adjacent to such reserves; and (3) provide facilities for education and training. The Biosphere Reserve program is designed to place heavy emphasis on conservation, research, monitoring education and cooperation.

The present total is 165 World Heritage Sites in 43 countries; eleven of the 165 sites are located in the United States (June 1984). There are 226 Biosphere Reserves in 62 countries; 40 of the 226 sites are located in the United States (October 1984).