

International Hydrological Programme

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PRELIMINARY CONCEPT PAPER FOR A UNESCO-IHP INITIATIVE ON “WORLD WATER SITES (WWS)”

Item 9 of the provisional agenda

SUMMARY

Members of the newly constituted Steering Committee of the Ecohydrology Programme have developed a short, preliminary concept paper for “UNESCO World Water Sites”, by which international recognition is given to sites that emphasize innovation in interdisciplinary and participatory management of watersheds. Such recognition is intended to not simply highlight sites but management structures, and facilitate knowledge-sharing and experiences between sites. The Steering Committee proposes that such a scheme of recognizing innovation and facilitating knowledge-sharing could be a major communication and public relations tool for the UNESCO-IHP.

Decision required: paragraph 12.

INTRODUCTION:

1. Water is the resource that limits the achievement of sustainable livelihoods across local, regional and global scales. We acknowledge that water is essential for people and nature, and its interdisciplinary management is a shared responsibility for all people and nations. As the UN International Decade for Action “Water for Life” (2005 - 2015) draws to its mid point, we confidently put forward concepts such as “Integrated Water Resources Management”, “Ecohydrology”, “Adaptive decision making” and “Environmental flows” as essential elements of sustainable water management. Agencies world-wide have developed programmes to advance the cause of better water management, and UNESCO leads with programmes such as the IHP and WWAP. While these all advance the cause, the reality is that the state of the world’s water resources is steadily declining, despite all our efforts.

2. In recent years, a number of countries have recognised the need for innovative approaches to water management and have revised their policies to incorporate these ideas. Implementation of such policies, however, is proving to be exceptionally difficult, especially in developing countries where global pressures to protect the environment clash with improvement of local livelihoods and well-being. Furthermore, whenever change is initiated, the inertia of old ways of doing business threatens to drown the fresh voices. The water sector is no exception and notions such as: water lost to the sea is a waste; technology will provide the solutions; water is the state’s prerogative; top-down command and control will keep things in order; and so on linger to impede furtherance of the cause.

PRECIPITATING CHANGE:

3. We are in dire need of a change in attitudes so that we can move towards more equitable, efficient and sustainable water use. To achieve this, we must precipitate a fundamental shift in mindset at global, and national, scales, while growing “wise practice” at local scales where the rewards will not only have immediate benefit but will also feedback to consolidate the new thinking. But, how do we effectively integrate the philosophical and practical arenas across such a wide range of scales, and still achieve real change? We, members of the Steering Committee of UNESCO-IHP’s Ecohydrology Programme, believe that the concept of UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites holds exciting potential in the water context because its universal applicability clearly offers both States and local managers the incentive and recognition that galvanises action.

4. Our proposal is that UNESCO-IHP develop an analogous initiative, tentatively called “World Water Sites (WWS)”, where States work with local communities and their water managers to seek the benefits of international recognition. These Sites would emphasise innovation in interdisciplinary management of watersheds (or other geographically defined areas) as integrated social and ecological systems. As such, they would not compete with World Heritage Sites, although WWS recognition may complement them in some instances. This proposal, however, does not imply that WWS be a permanent list of “best practices”; the emphasis is on recognition, of innovation in interdisciplinary and participatory management of watersheds.

A TOOL FOR FACILITATING COMMUNICATION AND INCREASING VISIBILITY:

5. There is currently no generally accepted model for water management that effectively embraces the physical, biological, technological and human dimensions of real world problems. Although there are some good examples of integrated and participatory water management, in most cases the people involved are still grappling with the complexities it brings to the decision and implementation tables. The task is daunting and progress is inevitably slow and frustrating, to the implementors and others who might follow the same path.

6. Recognition of their efforts, even if from an international body such as UNESCO, may therefore be not enough on its own. We also need to provide them with support to learn, grow in confidence and innovate further. What that support entails still needs much deliberation but it could include: exchange of people, experiences and knowledge between sites; offering innovative interdisciplinary courses through UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education and having a tiered system of recognition across a range from those sites that show promise to those accepted as “world leaders”. Those showing promise could be encouraged to learn from others and attend courses at UNESCO-IHE to expand their understanding, and those recognized as “world leaders” can interact to advance management to the new heights needed if we are to reverse the steady decline in global water resource quality.

7. Thus, this proposed scheme of recognition of innovation and facilitating knowledge-sharing could be a major communication and public relations tool, not only for the UNESCO-IHP but also for the wider water community as a whole.

NEXT STEPS:

8. Judging the potential and merit of candidate countries and Sites would need a carefully thought-through set of criteria and effective process.

9. A preliminary list of criteria might include:

- Demonstration of the integration of hydrology, ecology, engineering and social sciences to provide an effective knowledge base;
- Policy compatible with various international treaties and agreements, in particular the UN Millennium Development Goals;
- A focus on improvement of local livelihoods and well-being, and improved sustainability of the social and ecological systems;
- A sound financial system and equity or transformation in employment policies;
- Transparent, participatory and adaptive decision making processes that integrate scientific, technological and indigenous knowledge systems;
- Consideration of the linkages between land and water systems and between different water systems (river, lake, floodplain, wetland);
- Demonstrable programmes for monitoring, learning and advancement to achieve best practice.

10. We would then require a carefully thought-through protocol for using the criteria to select different categories of sites, and make proposals on how they can improve if they wish to move up the rankings. The selection committee might include representatives of other UNESCO-IHP programmes and initiatives (such as HELP and FRIEND); WWAP; the UNESCO-IHE; and the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD: 2005-2014). The recognition could be given in conjunction with other international water-related events, such as the World Water Forum, Stockholm Water Week or the Brisbane River Symposium.

11. We envisage that WWS sites could become a flagship of the IHP and would also be an effective way of bringing a wide range of other global water initiatives closer together to once and for all put water on the global agenda.

DECISION REQUIRED:

12. The Bureau may wish to invite the Steering Committee of the Ecohydrology Programme to further develop this initiative. This should involve further development of the concept of WWS, including elaboration of the process and criteria for selecting Sites, the mode of recognition (e.g., an award of limited duration or a permanent list of recognition), and legal framework. The Steering Committee may also involve in this process internal programmes such as WWAP, HELP and FRIEND, as well as external partners such as MAB Programme and the Ramsar Convention Secretariat. The Bureau may wish to ask for a progress report of the development of this initiative at the 43rd session of the IHP Bureau.