

NATURAL HERITAGE

Monuments of nature, sites and zones of exceptional natural value subject to legal protection.

The legal term proposed in the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage adopted in Paris on 16 November 1972, ratified by Poland on 30 September 1976.

Natural heritage includes: 1) natural features consisting of physical and biological formations or groups of such formations, which are of outstanding universal value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view; 2) geological and physiographical formations and precisely delineated areas which constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation; 3) natural sites or precisely delineated natural areas of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty (OJ 1976 No. 32 Item 190). Provisions concerning natural heritage formulated in the Paris Convention were consulted with an advisory body – the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Objects or sites considered world natural heritage of exceptional value are entered by the World Heritage Committee in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Currently, it includes 206 entries. Objects, sites or landscapes of "exceptional universal value" are entered in the UNESCO list if they meet at least one of the following criteria: 1) contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance; 2) constitute outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features; 3) are outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals; 4) contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation. At present, the world heritage list contains 15 endangered natural heritage sites.

The main impetus for the adoption of the Paris Convention was a breakthrough in the study of human impact on the environment. In 1962, the American researcher Rachel Carson published the book "Silent spring", in which she demonstrated the negative effects of pesticide use. The research carried out by Carson, as well as the first environmental disaster in Japan that occurred in the same year, increased environmental awareness and led to a gradual implementation of the doctrine of sustainable development and the ecological approach. The natural heritage protection measures listed in the Paris Convention are based on the then promoted doctrine of sustainable development, mutual cooperation and public participation. The impact of the Paris Convention on the format of natural heritage protection can be seen in international legislation (Harrison). The guidelines presented at the Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, are maintained in the same spirit. In order to achieve sustainable development of ecosystems, four protection areas (protection of air, land resources, freshwater resources and seas, oceans and coastal areas) and five synergistic strategies to improve the natural environment (preservation of biodiversity, environmentally sound use of

biotechnology, prevention of illegal transport of toxic products, improvement of quality of life and human health, eradication of poverty and stopping environmental degradation) have been identified (Kozłowski). Biodiversity has become a key concept for the Convention and for the participants of the Earth Summit, which means the diversity of life at all levels of its organisation (diversity of genes, species and ecosystems). Biodiversity is protected due to its utilitarian dimension (biodiversity allows human use of the environment), ecological (human well-being depends on ecosystem services), aesthetic (man admires nature and enjoys contact with it), responsibility (man, using the Earth's resources, is responsible for its condition), ethical (man, causing damage to ecosystems, is obliged to restore them to the state known before its impact). (cf. Wilson).

At present, the concept of natural heritage is being criticised on the grounds that it points to the decoupling of nature and culture. (Descola, Harrison, MacNamara).

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