# Panama Landmarks in Danger of Losing Their Status as World Heritage Sites

Published on:

Friday, March 05, 2010

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*Two historic landmarks in Panama are in danger of losing their status as World Heritage Sites, due to concerns about the governments’ conflict of interest in protecting the sites. The government appears willing to sacrifice the tourist attractions in order to modernize Panama with large scale infrastructure developments. See the following article from The Panama Report for more on this.*



Two historic neighborhoods in the Republic of Panama are in danger of losing their status of World Heritage Site as recognized by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Paired together, the ruins of Panama Viejo as well as the historic district of Casco Antiguo will be the subject of a visit this month from UNESCO representatives who will seek resolution to various hazards expressed on a visit last year to determine Panama's future as world heritage hosts.

According to UNESCO on their last evaluative trip to Panama, there existed several important threats to the sanctity of Panama Viejo and Casco Antiguo. Those threats included, but were not limited to, severe deterioration of historic buildings, conflicting interests with regards to conservation, deficiencies in legal framework, demolitions of urban buildings, as well as forced displacement of occupants and squatters. The report also revealed that, "inappropriate interventions were undertaken at some historic buildings" and cited the extensive interventions at the Hotel Central having "significantly affected an emblematic building."

Upon returning this coming March, it is speculated that many of the aforementioned hurdles to preservation will prove to have gone unaddressed.

From seriously delayed infrastructure issues (sewage, garbage, electricity...etc.) to unnecessary demolitions (in many cases of buildings under the most important category) Panama's government appears to lack the legal framework to preserve its patrimony.

What it boils down to says Patrizia Pinzon, President of AVACA, a lobbyist group for Casco Antiguo, is a separate and authoritative entity that has not only a sturdy budget, but more importantly independence from political waves. "Everything comes down to continuity," Pinzon says. "That is to say, we already have laws in place, which, even if they are not perfect, are certainly of international standards.

"But without an entity that has the responsibility, the authority, the independence, the budget, and the qualified staff we are not going to get too far. Every program depends on it. From social housing to commercial development." If, as some experts are speculating, Panama's progress is not approved, Panama's UNESCO status would be demoted to that of World Heritage in Danger, a precursor to removal from the organization as a whole.

Concerns regarding the state's role in cultural preservation have come not only come from outside groups, but also from inside sources such as Maria Eugenia Herrera de Victoria, Director of Panama's National Culture Institute (INAC) who worries there's no policy in place to recover, restore, or conserve Panama's rich past. "The absence of cultural politics has marked a major part of Panama's political history," Herrera said in an email interview, citing little interest on behalf of the government for the conservation and appreciation of Panama's heritage.

This would not be the first time sanctity of a World Heritage Site has been threatened. In 1995, the Giza Pyramids of Egypt were endangered by a highway project that would extend eight lanes of high-speed traffic within two miles of its base. Experts and lobbyists from both the United Nations and Egypt knew full well the effects of such a project, both physically (the pyramid's limestone would crumble further from air pollution and erosion) and in terms of historical value (highways beside historic landmarks are sacrilegious). They rallied against the project for roughly six months before an agreement was reached and the nearly completed highway was rerouted in its entirety. At a press conference, UN and Egyptian representatives said that the decision was made irrespective of the vast costs associated with moving an eight-lane highway. The act of preserving a UNESCO World Heritage Site, they explained, was quite simply priceless.

Similar accounts such as illegal logging in Mount Kenya National Park, and plans for an aluminum plant construction near Delphi in Greece show not only that government’s do occasionally overlook threats to heritage and patrimony but also that they are, with the help of such important organizations, able to address and tackle obstacles to patrimony with full force.

According to UNESCO themselves, "often the World Heritage Committee and the States Parties, with the assistance of UNESCO experts and other partners, find solutions before a given situation deteriorates to an extent that would damage the site.

“Such would hopefully be the case with Panama where a strong new tourism and investment sector has come to attract the very same foreigners who value such accolades.

"We came to Panama because we are trying to visit all the World Heritage Sites before we die," said Mimi Lichtman who, with her husband Paul, were touring Casco Antiguo with cameras in hand. "All the guidebooks said we had to visit this place." When asked if Casco Antiguo lived up to its reputation, the Lichtmans said words couldn't describe their excitement.

According to statistics provided from Panama's tourism authority (ATP), roughly 60,000-70,000 tourists visit the country's capital each month, a large majority of which engages in City tours, which visit both of Panama's UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It would seem counterproductive therefore, if not downright ignorant, for the newly minted Martinelli administration to ignore such hazards to the wellbeing of growth.

In a press conference this week, Panama's Ministry of Finance proudly announced, amidst other large-scale projects, its new metro system that is estimated to cost around $1.5B. However according to authorities like Herrera of INAC, "building Panama's future is just as important as offering tourists and Panamanians a legacy of its past."