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Message from Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of African World Heritage Day, 5 May 2017

African World Heritage Day is an opportunity to celebrate the cultural and natural wealth of the continent, the cradle of humanity. It is also a fitting time to raise the alarm for the protection of our common heritage. Today 23 African sites are on the List of World Heritage in Danger – the Old Town of Ghadamès, Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Mount Nimba Strict Nature Reserve – all are threatened and are at risk of disappearing if we do not act quickly. We each have a role to play.

Acting now to protect Africa's outstanding heritage means shaping the future. Supporting local communities – and especially young people – to promote and develop the abundant cultural and natural resources means paving the way for long-term, inclusive and socially cohesive development. African sites are better protected by the communities that live alongside them every day and draw their identity and earn their living from them. Their management is more sustainable when led by young people who are aware of their importance. The Ngorongoro Declaration, adopted in 2016, encourages promoting the role of local communities, especially of young people and women, in the management of world heritage sites. This message continues to be relevant today.

Successful protection requires education, information and research. That is why UNESCO's mission to protect African heritage is inherent in its mission to educate and to transmit the values of tolerance, respect and understanding of cultures. In Africa, UNESCO works to better integrate site management into university programmes and training.

Today, I call upon all African stakeholders, States, civil society and local communities to take responsibility for the protection of the Continent's incomparable riches. I wish to pay tribute to all those who fight on a daily basis, sometimes even risking their lives, to protect and share this unique heritage of humanity. It bears the traces of our common past and represents a solid foundation of values, benchmarks and confidence to better shape the future. Africa is rich with it, and the African Renaissance depends on the promotion of African world heritage.

UNESCO
7, Place de Fontenoy
75007 Paris
France

Website:
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