At the eve of the 40th anniversary of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 2012, the presentation focuses on the implementation of the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention. This Convention has its origins in the United States with the 100th anniversary of Yellowstone National Park in 1972 and the idea of a Fund which came through the 1965 “White House Conference”. Today 911 sites are included in UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 151 countries. The Convention became the most universal of all conservation instruments in the field of cultural and natural heritage, as it has been signed by 187 countries. The cultural and natural sites demonstrate the diversity of this world. They range from the latest inscription in 2010, Papahānaumokuākea, a cluster of small islands and atolls, with their surrounding ocean northwest of the main Hawaiian Archipelago to Yellowstone and Mesa Verde National Parks, both included as early as 1978. These sites are icons of the world’s heritage. They are shared with the Taj Mahal (India), Machu Picchu (Peru), the Serengeti (Tanzania) or Uluru Kata Tjuta (Australia) among all of humanity as a gift of the past for the future. The key issue of the Convention is preservation, which is a shared task of site managers, local communities and authorities as well as all nations which have ratified the Convention. The presentation further explores the economic impacts of these sites: The cultural and natural values of World Heritage places provide in principle for a resource to meet human needs while preserving both culture and the environment. At the same time they have to support not only present but also future generations, which is the essence of long-term sustainable development and the basic philosophy of the World Heritage Convention.

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