UNESCO responds to our concerns

UNESCO's World Heritage Centre has acknowledged the many messages received from citizens and non-governmental organisations about the Stonehenge tunnel proposal and has given an assurance that the relevant UK Government departments and bodies (which include Historic England (formerly English Heritage)) are also aware of our concerns.

We thank our supporters for writing to UNESCO, eliciting this response which we warmly welcome. We hope that supporters, like us, will feel encouraged that the project is being monitored according to UNESCO's Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention.

We believe that paragraphs 96–119 of the Operational Guidelines are particularly relevant, in view of the current threat of road engineering affecting the Stonehenge landscape. These paragraphs set out guidelines for the protection and management of World Heritage Sites (WHS). They explain that:

> *"All properties inscribed on the World Heritage List must have adequate long-term legislative, regulatory, institutional and/or traditional protection and management to ensure their safeguarding." (Para.97)*

> *"Each nominated property should have an appropriate management plan or other documented management system which must specify how the Outstanding Universal Value of a property should be preserved, preferably through participatory means." (Para 108)*

> *"The purpose of a management system is to ensure the effective protection of the nominated property for present and future generations." (Para.109)*

The key point made here – and in the World Heritage Convention – is that it is the *whole* WHS or "property" that is to be safeguarded, not just parts of it.

The first Stonehenge Management Plan was published by English Heritage in 2000 and revised in 2009. This week sees the launch of the first combined management plan for Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites WHS.

The Plan, in its "Vision" commits its supporters and users to

> *". . . work together to care for and safeguard this special area and provide a tranquil, rural and ecologically diverse setting for it and its archaeology. This will allow present and future generations to explore and enjoy the monuments and their landscape setting more fully."*

We hope that the Government and its advisers will consider carefully its commitments under the World Heritage Convention, and UNESCO's Operational Guidelines which provided relevant advice for the new WHS Management Plan. Re-examination of these three documents ought to lead the Government to a change of heart and a better outcome for the Stonehenge WHS than that currently proposed.



To view UNESCO's response of 19 May 2015 please click on image.

Could Stonehenge tunnel be ‘sacred version’ of Twyford Down?

John Whittingdale MP, newly appointed Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, is known to be a supporter of archaeology and our cultural heritage. He has in the past been critical of the low priority the Government has traditionally given to our historic environment. With this record in mind, we hope that he will wish to ensure that proposed ‘improvements’ to the A303 will not give rise to further damage to the Stonehenge World Heritage Site.

The editor of thePipeLine’s blog *Whittingdale ‘gets’ heritage shock* wonders whether David Cameron and George Osborne know what they are getting with a Secretary of State who actually understands heritage and archaeology and the legal and financial resources the sector requires.

thePipeline predicts that, in the context of austerity and the non ring-fenced Department for Culture, Media and Sport budget, the proposed Stonehenge tunnel will be one of three major cultural headaches for the new Secretary of State:

> *‘Mr Whittingdale may well find his knowledge of what the sector needs coming hard up against the neo-liberal, economics his Government espouses . . .*
>
> *‘Along with all Mr Cameron’s other Ministers, Mr Whittingdale will also have an eye to predicting and avoiding the kind of issue which can come out of nowhere to blindside a Government with some sudden and unfortunate PR disaster which would exercise back bench MP’s and the Conservative Press . . .*

‘The Government appears to favour a shorter and consequently cheaper tunneling option, which now appears to have been supported by both the National Trust and English Heritage in spite of the fact it would damage the landscape of the World Heritage Site [WHS]; whereas the Stonehenge Alliance, supported by the Campaign to Protect Rural England and RESCUE advocated a position which would protect the entire land take of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site in December 2014.

“A 4.5km tunnel, starting within the already dualled eastern section of the A303 and passing south of the Stones, would avoid a new road on the surface within the WHS and need not damage the site further. Ideally, we would advocate a considerably longer tunnel of at least 6km, to allow restoration of the whole WHS and its setting.”

‘Given Stonehenge is both a World Heritage Site and a focus for contemporary counter culture and mysticism any potential clash brought about by perceived damage to the “sacred” landscape of the World Heritage site could easily take on the iconic role of the Twyford Down protests which all but destroyed the Government road building policy in the 1990’s. The political price of further development was just too high and Twyford Down was not an international icon of Great Britain.’

The Stonehenge Alliance firmly hopes that John Whittingdale will remind Government of its World Heritage Convention commitments and introduce a proper understanding of what would be right for our most famous World Heritage Site.

If you object to the road proposal through the Stonehenge World Heritage Site you can take three quick actions: sign the petition, write to UNESCO and write to the National Trust.



Modern Druids crowd round Stonehenge Alliance banner at sunrise during the celebrations of the Spring Equinox, 2015.

The above extracts are published with permission of the author of thePipeLine blog *Whittingdale 'gets' heritage shock 12 May 2015*

Take action and stand up for Stonehenge



David Cameron announces a £15bn investment in

Britain's roads including the disastrous proposal that would cause irreversible damage to the Stonehenge landscape. Photo credit: Daily Mail, 1 Dec 2014

The Conservative majority in the House of Commons raises increased concern about the fate of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS). Before the project gains momentum, David Cameron's support for a disastrous road proposal that would cause irreversible damage to the Stonehenge landscape and its archaeology needs to be reconsidered.

The budget has been ring fenced but there is still no scheme on the table. Three actions can be taken straight away to help get the proposal reversed:

First, please ask UNESCO to intervene on behalf of the WHS using our email facility here.

Second, please ask the National Trust to stand up for Stonehenge and withdraw its support for the 2.9km (1.8miles) tunnel on the A303 past Stonehenge via our contact form here.

Third, sign and share our petition.

Voters want to hear more about the environment

No one could fail to know that we're in the middle of a General Election campaign, with promises of spending more money being sprinkled around like confetti at a wedding.

What is almost certain, unless something dramatic happens, is that we will either have another coalition or a minority Government. In a sense, that has fuelled this desperation by the main parties, as they see their historically dominant positions undermined by the rise of the smaller parties and the increasing diversity in people's voting habits.

But the electorate is not amused. It is fed up with hearing what politicians have decided they want talk about: Scotland. The polling organisation YouGov recently asked people whether they had heard too little or too much about a variety of different topics during the election campaign. The top answer came back with the interesting statistic that 40% of people want to hear more about the environment (tied with education). Yet we've barely heard a whisper about this or related subjects such as road building. After all, the coalition secured a budget of £1.2m for a short bored tunnel on the A303 past Stonehenge with much fanfare last December. Both coalition leaders claimed this as their own a success to woo business interests in the South West, – and, presumably, voters – provoking historian Tom Holland famously to complain that "Britain's most celebrated archaeological site should not be offered up as a sacrifice on the altar of electioneering," and a rush of petitioners against the proposal.





Left: Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg announces that 'the money is not only there but we are going to legislate on it." Salisbury Journal
Right: Prime Minister David Cameron visits Stonehenge to welcome the £15bn investment in Britain's roads. Daily Mail. Separate visits made on 1 December 2014

Despite the controversy the silence has been puzzling. Is this because:

- the parties have nothing major to say on the issue?
- they think the electorate isn't interested?
- they don't understand the issues?
- they cannot square their love of big new infrastructure projects with their impact on the environment?

The situation at Stonehenge exemplifies the problem that focussing on big new roads creates. We are a small island with a lot of people and a long history. There is someone or something that will always get in the way. That doesn't mean you don't change anything, but do politicians really think that damaging one of the most iconic World Heritage Sites is really the right (and electorally popular) way forward? The problem with their approach is that if they back down over this then they are concerned that they then risk being seen as weak.

Yet a bit of honesty would not go amiss. "We got it wrong" or "We will find another way that doesn't jeopardise our history and our tourist economy" are statements that would be welcomed by many. At a time when we are condemning such wanton vandalism to ancient monuments in Iraq and Syria, to continue unaccountably on their highly damaging path looks nothing more than a mixture of stubbornness and arrogance. Let's hope that whatever Government is formed, we get a more sensible approach

to transport planning and that our politicians learn to appreciate that our environment and our heritage are not an inconvenience but a major asset.

If you are opposed to the short bored tunnel in Stonehenge World Heritage Site please sign the petition here.

World Heritage Day challenge

On World Heritage Day this Saturday (18 April), the Stonehenge Alliance is calling on political leaders to pledge their support for safeguarding the Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS).

Current proposals to widen the A303 with a short tunnel threaten the future of this landscape. With only a few weeks before the General Election, the Alliance is asking politicians for a commitment to protecting the whole of the WHS, in line with the UK's obligation under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the body set up to promote the protection, conservation, and enhancement of monuments and sites. It comes at a time when globally a number of World Heritage Sites are under significant threat. ICOMOS has already written to the UK Government expressing its concern about the A303 proposals for Stonehenge.

Kate Fielden, archaeologist and Hon Secretary to the Stonehenge Alliance, said:

"At a time when we are condemning the wanton destruction of

World Heritage Sites in the Middle East it is hypocritical to propose damage to one of our own. What's worse is that destroying our archaeological past at Stonehenge is both avoidable and unnecessary.

"People all over the world are signing our petition. They are shocked at what the Government is proposing. Just as we are starting to understand the wider landscape and to discover more of its ancient past, road construction works could lead to huge damage and permanent loss of archaeological evidence as well as tranquillity.

"We hope the General Election will focus politicians' minds on this enduring icon of our past and elicit pledges from all parties to safeguard the future of this unparalleled landscape. Far more than a major tourist attraction, Stonehenge and its surroundings should provide to the world an exemplar of how we regard and intend to care for our own World Heritage Sites both now and in the future.

Chris Todd from Campaign for Better Transport said:

"Any future Government must uphold its international duty to safeguard the future of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site which is threatened by the current plans for bigger roads to the South West."