UNESCO committee stand firm against Stonehenge road scheme

15 September 2023: UNESCO's World Heritage Committee (WHC), meeting in Riyadh since 10th September, has stuck to its guns and sent a strong message to the UK Government about its concern for Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS). It remains firmly opposed to the dualling of the A303 through Stonehenge WHS which will cause permanent and irreversible harm. Our colleagues read out our statement welcoming UNESCO's World Heritage Committee in Riyadh position to stand firm. Nevertheless, the situation is precarious, contracts have been let and Stonehenge World Heritage Site could lose its World Heritage Status if the road is constructed. Government needs to report back in February 2024.

> *"Stonehenge World Heritage Site is in danger now."*

UNESCO's World Heritage Committee meeting in Riyadh reinforced their earlier decision which expressed "*profound regret that the Scheme has been granted a DCO [Development Consent Order] without having been modified in accordance with previous Committee decisions and the recommendations of the 2022 mission,*" and reiterates its previous request that "*the State Party (UK Government) not proceed with the implementation of the Scheme for the section between Amesbury and Berwick Down in its current form.*"

The Committee has asked the UK Government to submit "*by **1 February 2024** an updated report on the state of conservation of the property and the implementation of the above, for examination by the World Heritage Committee at its 46th session.*" The Committee reminded the UK Government that the

property might be inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger if the property's Outstanding Universal Value is not preserved.

Only three UNESCO properties have ever had their world heritage status deleted:

- Dresden Elbe Valley in Germany (delisted in2009);
- Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in Oman (delisted in 2007);
- Liverpool Maritime Mercantile City (delisted in 2021).

It would be an international embarrassment and dishonour if the UK were to lose **a second WHS badge** under this government.

Statement by Stonehenge Alliance

> *The Stonehenge Alliance would like to thank UNESCO for its concern over Stonehenge. A concern shared by over 225,000 people from 147 countries around the world.*
>
> *Stonehenge World Heritage Site is in danger NOW, with the legal action challenging the State Party's decision the* ***only****thing keeping the bulldozers off the Site. We can only hope that it succeeds, because placing the site on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2024 could be too late.*
>
> ***Construction contracts have already been signed and it is clear the State Party has no intention of changing its mind.*** *The Committee has given the State Party plenty of opportunities to do so and it has ignored every one of them.*
>
> *We urge the Committee to stand firm in the face of such intransigence and to maintain pressure on the State Party to withdraw the scheme. We will have a new Government within the next 12 months and having a clear and consistent position from UNESCO on the unsuitability of these proposals, should help it come to a better solution and protect the site for future generations.*

RELEVANT LINKS

- UNESCO's World Heritage Committee decision can be found **here**.
- BBC News: Stonehenge tunnel plan 'should not proceed' says Unesco
- SkyNews: A303 Stonehenge tunnel plans: UNESCO warns new road 'should not proceed in current form'
- Forbes: Do Not Proceed With Stonehenge Tunnel In Current Form, UNESCO Tells U.K. Government

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Don't want to see a TUNNEL BORING MACHINE at Stonehenge?

Support the legal challenge by Save Stonehenge World Heritage Site HERE.

Petition presented to UNESCO, Paris



5 September 2023: Stonehenge Alliance delivered the international petition of 225,000 signatories to UNESCO's World Heritage Centre in Paris wrapped up in a scroll.

A Stonehenge Alliance delegation caught an early Eurostar to Paris to make UNESCO aware of the global opposition to the Government's damaging road building plans through the Stonehenge World Heritage Site.

Alliance Chairman, John Adams and Chris Todd, Director of Transport Action Network and committee member, met senior members of staff from UNESCO's World Heritage Centre to present a copy of our international petition with its 225,000 signatures from 147 countries.

John and Chris were cordially welcomed by the Centre's Deputy Director, Jyoti Hosagrahar, who was joined by the Head of Europe and North America Unit, Berta de Sancristobal together with Stefanie Grüssinger, a professional officer for the Unit. They impressed on the Centre that **the only thing standing between the World Heritage Site and the bulldozers was the**

legal challenge. The Alliance welcomed UNESCO's continuing firm line to protect Stonehenge WHS, but explained that the UK Government had **no intention of considering less damaging alternatives** despite the strong advice from the World Heritage Committee, who have threatened the World Heritage status of the site if the scheme were to go ahead in its present form.

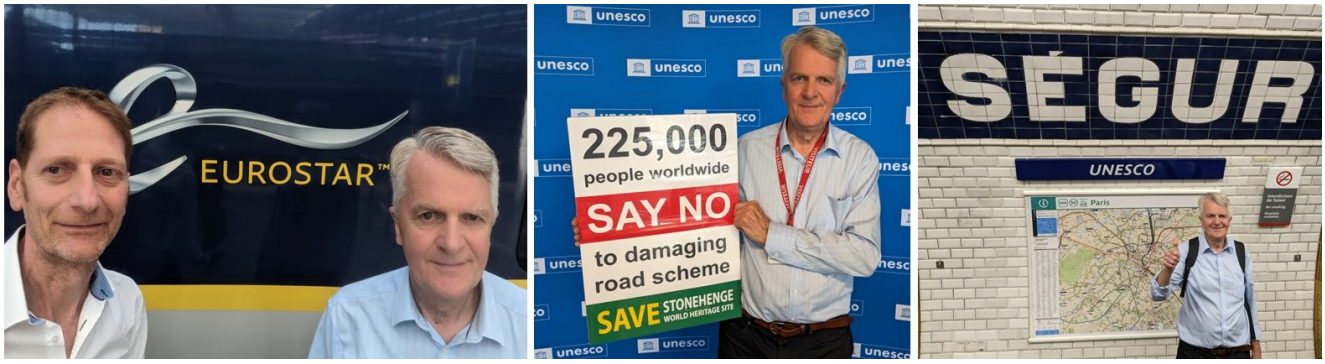
> *"We urge UNESCO to remain strong in the face of the UK Government's indifference to this iconic British heritage site."*

Only three UNESCO properties have ever had their world heritage status deleted:

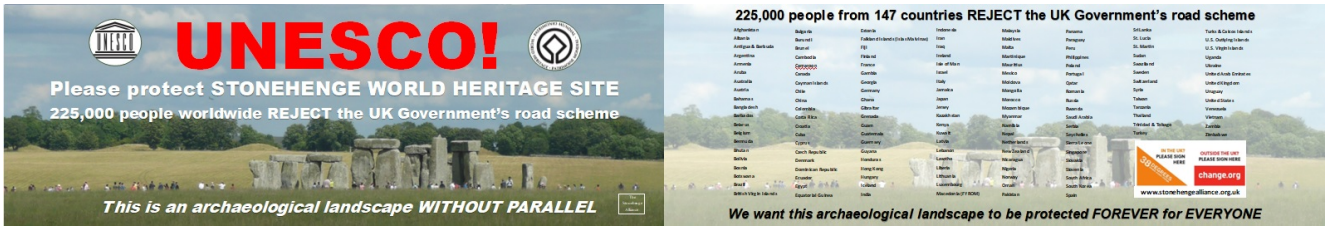
- Dresden Elbe Valley in Germany (delisted in2009);
- Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in Oman (delisted in 2007);
- Liverpool Maritime Mercantile City (delisted in 2021).

It would be an international embarrassment and dishonour if the UK were to lose **a second WHS badge** under this government.

We agreed to keep the Centre informed of any developments. We await the outcome of the World Heritage Committee meeting in Riyadh later this month, where we hope to be allowed to make a statement.



Mission accomplished! L-R: Chris Todd and John Adams set off on their day return; John Adams displays our placard at UNESCO; the delegation returns from Paris.



Above is the unrolled international petition scroll of 225,000 with list of 147 countries (and growing). Click on image to enlarge.

The legal challenge

The legal challenge has been submitted by Save Stonehenge WHS Ltd, but they are not expecting to hear anything from the courts for a month. As soon as we have further news, we will let you know.



Many thanks for your continued support.

The good news is that over £50,000 has been raised thanks to your brilliant support. **Thank you for helping us reach that initial target!**

The appeal, however, is reaching its next stage and needs to raise the full £80,000 in order to bring the action. Please can you continue to help spread the word? Here's the link to the CrowdJustice appeal.

This story has enjoyed good media coverage:

- BBC News online – 'Stonehenge tunnel campaigners take petition to UNESCO'
- Heritage Journal – 'Stonehenge Alliance: New challenge launched'

- New Civil Engineer – ‘Stonehenge campaigners take case against tunnel scheme to Unesco in Paris over World Heritage status delisting concern’
- Planet Radio – ‘Stonehenge tunnel campaigners handing petition to UNESCO’
- Salisbury Journal – ‘Stonehenge: Campaigners present UNESCO with petition opposing tunnel’
- Stonehenge Alliance – Press release 5 September 2023

“FFS!” Outraged supporters pledge powerfully, eloquently, succinctly.

Donors gave so generously to the first appeal in 2021, raising roughly £80,000 to mount the successful court action against a government with abundant legal resources, could supporters rise to a SECOND challenge two years on?



Would they be as generous this time, during a cost of living crisis? With a fresh environmental drama reported almost every day, can we blame people for donor fatigue?

It was seemed so hopeless. But without money the court case couldn't go ahead, and the government would have won. No political action can stop the road now, short of a general election in the next few months. It quickly became clear that we had no right to doubt the depth of the public's concern about a cause of such fundamental importance, and their willingness to contribute to put it right.

In no time – three days actually, Save Stonehenge World Heritage Site (SSWHS) was ready to lay down the gauntlet.

Pledges came flooding in, and not just from the UK – *'Solidarity from across the pond!'* said one donor in the US. Thank you!

Thus, SSWHS submitted their Pre-Application Protocol letter to the Government, which has two weeks in which to respond. SSWHS will then submit its legal challenge, within the six week deadline, towards the end of August. But, more is needed to take the case on, and rebut the Government's defence of the scheme. So on to their next target: £50,000. We gather that the target is likely to stretch to a horrendously ambitious £80,000. We'll let you know!

Strength of feeling

It's been heartening and encouraging to hear how strongly people feel about this issue. A substantial number have added a comment. This is vox pop on a grand scale. Comments left have been powerful, eloquent, outraged, plaintive. And, of course, totally original.

This is a flavour.

'Must be stopped – for the sake of future generations.'

'Of all the infrastructure projects this government is pushing forward to destroy our countryside, this one breaks my heart the most. Our land and our heritage must be preserved.'

'…appalled at our Government's ignoring the tremendous importance of Stonehenge to Great Britain & the rest of the world.'

'It has already been turned down once. Can't they get the message that this is not only a terrible idea but also a waste of money.'

And: *'If we compromise our own heritage, how can we ever lecture other countries? Our Govt's track record on major project management e.g. HS2 with runaway costs, continually changing justifications for it, etc is itself reason to say NO.'*

From the succinct – '*culture not cars!'*, and '*FFS*' (expand

that as you will), to the significance of the importance of UNESCO status:

'This is a sacred place of pilgrimage and one of the most important archaeological sites in the known world. Would the government approve a plan to build a dual carriageway through St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey?'

Some lamented the loss of a familiar landmark: *'Like many others have visited once, but enjoy pointing it out to the grandchildren from the A303.'*

'A World Heritage site that can't be seen by passing motorists is throwing out the baby along with the bathwater. Stonehenge must be as visible as possible, not locked away.'

'Driving past the stones is a great experience and a joy of the A303.'

Others the climate implications – *'More road building madness in the face of climate chaos.'* And *'Invest in railways instead'.*

Not that we seek plaudits, but this was touching – *'Thank you for fighting this for us all.'*

The above are quotes from donors, taken from the Crowdjustice site
– https://www.crowdjustice.com/case/save-stonehenge-world-heritage-site-again

NEWS COVERAGE

- The Guardian, 26 August 2023: Revival of Stonehenge road tunnel plan triggers new legal challenge
- Evening Standard, 26 August 2023: Campaigners launch fresh Stonehenge legal challenge
- BBC, 26 August 2023: Campaigners launch new legal

challenge over Stonehenge tunnel

- The Independent, 26 August 2023: Campaigners launch fresh Stonehenge road legal challenge
- Similar in Swindon Advertiser, Bracknell News, Hampshire Chronicle, Planet Radio.

First steps to legal proceedings taken on Stonehenge road scheme on second anniversary of quashing of development consent

Save Stonehenge World Heritage Site (SSWHS) [1] has taken the first steps towards a legal challenge of the Government's approval of the A303 Stonehenge dual carriageway through the World Heritage Site on 14 July, for a second time [2]. Today, SSWHS is sending the Government a pre-application protocol letter outlining its concerns about the decision [3]. This is the precursor to it filing a claim for judicial review which needs to be made within 6 weeks of the decision date.

This weekend marks the second anniversary of the quashing of the original development consent by the High Court after a successful application for judicial review was made by SSWHS in 2021 [4]. The Government's approval flew in the face of opposition from UNESCO [5] and the recommendation for refusal

of the scheme by five of the Government's own independent planning inspectors [6]. In particular, the Government was criticised for not having properly assessed alternatives to National Highways' damaging proposals.

UNESCO had asked the Government not to approve the scheme ahead of its World Heritage Committee meeting in September. However, the Government rushed out the decision ahead of the Somerset and Frome by-election, ignoring the request and concerns about the site being de-listed.

Chris Todd, one of the 3 directors of SSWHS, said:

"*The Government has stuck two fingers up at UNESCO and all those who care about our British heritage. It has basically approved this highly flawed and damaging proposal for a second time. The same scheme that was thrown out in 2021. We believe there are strong grounds why this approval should also be struck down. We will do everything within our power to safeguard this most iconic of sites for future generations.*"

Suzanne Keene, a member of the Stonehenge Alliance [7], a separate organisation that has campaigned to safeguard the WHS for over 20 years said:

"*Stonehenge WHS is much more than the stones at its centre. It is a complex and hugely rich archaeological landscape without comparison. For the Government to be so dismissive of the huge damage that National Highways scheme will cause is deeply worrying*."

Leigh Day solicitor Rowan Smith said:

"*There is an unfortunate sense of déjà vu. It appears that, yet again, the Government has ignored warnings that this road scheme will put at risk the world heritage status of Stonehenge. Despite calls by the World Heritage Committee for the decision to be delayed until it had met, the Secretary of State went ahead and reinstated development consent, without*

holding another public examination. It will be argued that this unfairness, combined with a failure to properly assess the scheme's climate change impact, rendered the Secretary of State's decision unlawful for a second time. If the Government, following correspondence, refuses to accept that, then our client intends to launch another claim for judicial review."

SSWHS is now awaiting the Government's response, which it should receive within two weeks. It will then have two weeks to file its claim. SSWHS has launched a crowdfunder on the CrowdJustice website to fund the legal action

Notes

[1] Save Stonehenge World Heritage Site is a limited company set up by three individuals closely associated with the Stonehenge Alliance to specifically challenge the original Government decision on 12 November 2020 to approve National Highways' damaging scheme.

[2] The Government published its second decision letter on Friday, 14 July, six days before the Somerset and Frome by-election.

[3] SSWHS is represented by Leigh Day and barristers David Wolfe KC (Matrix), Victoria Hutton and Stephanie David (39 Essex). It is argued that the granting of development consent was unlawful on the following grounds:

- *Given recent developments and key new evidence, it was procedurally unfair for the Secretary of State not to subject the re-determination to a full public re-examination*
- *It was irrational for the Secretary of State to give no weight to the risk that the scheme would result in Stonehenge having its World Heritage Status removed*
- *The Secretary of State failed to consider diverting the road around the Stonehenge site, despite such an*

alternative having a far lower impact in heritage terms

- *The Secretary of State failed to properly assess the scheme's climate change impact, owing to:*
- *applying roads policy which pre-dated the Net Zero target*
- *treating the draft new roads policy as immaterial*
- *ignoring the new national net zero strategy*
- *assessing emissions from this scheme alone, without factoring in the emission from the whole A303/A358 corridor upgrade in the south west peninsular*
- *ignoring climate change adaptation*

[4] The judgement was handed down by Mr Justice Holgate on 30 July 2021.

[5] UNESCO has long expressed its concern about National Highways' proposals. See annexure G in the Final Report on the joint World Heritage Centre / ICOMOS / ICCROM Advisory Mission to Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites (April 2022)

[6] Five planning inspectors oversaw the 6 month public examination from 2 April to 2 October 2019 and gave their recommendation to refuse the application to the Government on 2 January, 2020, over 3 and half years ago.

[7] See Stonehenge Alliance website for more information.

[8] The CrowdJustice page will go live on 01:00 Friday, 28 July, 2023

The Climate Change

Committee’s advice on new road building: will it be ignored?

The CCC’s Report 2023

Briefing journalists at the Glastonbury Festival (Friday 23 June) ahead of publication of the Climate Change Committee’s annual progress report, outgoing chair, Lord Debden, was unequivocal.

> *‘The government should halt all new roads unless there are exceptional circumstances,’ he told the Guardian. ‘New roads inevitably increased traffic and emissions.’*

The actual report from the CCC (an independent, statutory body advising UK governments on emissions targets, and reporting to Parliament on progress made in reducing Co2 emissions), published on 28 June,[1] was more circumspect. And, on first perusal, anyone looking for closely-argued key sections that finally dispatch the Government’s roads programme, and in particular the Stonehenge scheme, might be disappointed.



Above: National Highways’ visualisation

of western Stonehenge tunnel approach cutting

The 437 pages of the report contain a wealth of analysis and scrutiny of progress, or lack of it, and recommendations for action on every possible carbon-related activity, from shipping to farming, from electric batteries to home heating. There are just two short paragraphs on roads, on pages 128 and 420. But the report's message is, potentially, no less transformative for being brief than if we were reading a senior civil servant's argument developed at length.

The report's two paragraphs of advice on new road building

> *'At a UK level, various road-building projects have recently been pushed back due to fiscal headwinds. The Government should launch a more strategic review (similar to the Welsh Roads Review) to assess whether these projects are consistent with its environmental goals (recommendation R2023-148, page 128).*

On page 420, recommendation R2023-148 calls on the Government to:

> 'Conduct a systematic review of current and future road-building projects to assess their consistency with the Government's environmental goals. This should ensure that decisions do not lock in unsustainable levels of traffic growth and develop conditions that permit schemes to be taken forward only if they meaningfully support cost-effective delivery of Net Zero and climate adaptation. (Primary responsibility: DfT).'

The Welsh Roads Review outcome recalled

Referring to the Welsh Roads Review, the report notes: 'The Welsh Government accepted the recommendations of its

independent Roads Review,[2] which included cancelling 31 of 48 road projects reviewed (and reconsidering the merit of a further six) on environmental grounds and introducing stringent tests that will only permit new road projects if they will meaningfully contribute to modal shift, reducing emissions and adapting to the impacts of climate change. This is a welcome step which should contribute to reducing traffic growth.'

Conclusions

So, the 'death knell for the government's road-building programme,' as the *Guardian* surmised? But, as Andrew Boswell and others point out in Twitter conversation, the Government is not obliged to follow the CCC's advice, and, habitually, in the past it has not.

And yet we are at an interesting stage in policy-making. **For the first time in history, since the Romans set their thoroughfares straight and true across the land, those in authority are being advised by their statutory advisers to stop building roads.**

And if, despite all, the government finally signs off the Stonehenge A303 works, any subsequent legal challenge may be strengthened. National Highways, for its part, has already spent more than £200,000 in legal fees on its case for the Stonehenge project, a freedom of information request revealed this week (June 29th).[3]

Notes

1. Progress in reducing UK emissions 2023 Report to Parliament, Climate Change Committee June 2023. https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Progress-in-reducing-UK-emissions-2023-Report-to-Parliament.pdf.
2. Welsh Government response to the Roads Review, February 2023.

https://www.gov.wales/welsh-government-response-roads-review-html.
3. ‘Revealed: National Highways spend on legal fees to defend its RIS2 road schemes’, *New Civil Engineer*, 29 June 2023. https://www.newcivilengineer.com/latest/revealed-national-highways-spend-on-legal-fees-to-defend-its-ris2-road-schemes-29-06-2023/?eea=UEJpTTVTa0t0MEJyampHY0VLQ2h2NHpTZk9qeFl0YW9rdDQ0eWpMTjNaND0%3D&utm_source=acs&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=CONE_NCE_EDI_ALL_MORNING_290623&deliveryName=DM154036.