# UNESCO raises the stakes over Stonehenge

**Stonehenge Alliance Press statement: Tuesday, 25 June, 2024**



The World Heritage Committee repeatedly requested that the cuttings be removed from within the inscribed property because they would have major negative impact on the overall prehistoric landscape, and compromise the physical intactness of the "highly significant ancient cultural landscape."
Photo © Stonehenge Dronescapes

The Stonehenge Alliance (SA) [1] welcomes UNESCO's recommendation that the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site be placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger due to the threat from the A303 road scheme. The recommendation is contained in a report to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee

that will be meeting in July in India [2].

The report reveals that National Highways and the UK Government have proposed changes to the scheme to try and disguise the deep cutting through the Bronze Age landscape on the western side of the site. These include 'cantilevered sides' and another 'green bridge' adding £50m to the scheme costs [3]. However, these do not appear to have addressed UNESCO's concerns.

Also revealed is the level of frustration with the UK Government's attitude towards its obligations under the World Heritage Convention. Also, with its failure to respect UNESCO's request to pause all work to allow further discussion [4]. This was seen earlier in the year when National Highways pressed ahead with closure of the A360 (to much local concern) to carry out preparatory works for the scheme [4].

All eyes will now be on the incoming (most likely) Labour Government as it will inherit the scheme and will have to decide on its future.

John Adams, chair of the Stonehenge Alliance and one of the 3 directors of SSWHS [5], said:

> *"This is a damming verdict on National Highways' plans. Its minor tweaks have quite rightly cut no ice with UNESCO. You can put lipstick on a pig, but it is still a pig. Whichever way you look at it, this scheme will be hugely damaging and should be scrapped. The money should be spent instead on improving public transport links to and around the South West. That would be the best way of reducing pressure on the A303, while still retaining the view of the Stones for passing travellers."*

Tom Holland, president of the Stonehenge Alliance:

> *"When in a hole, stop digging – and when the hole is one that*

*has been dug by your political opponents, definitely stop digging. The new Government will have the perfect opportunity to reverse a road scheme that is not only ludicrously expensive, but risks huge damage to the country's international reputation. We hope that whoever comes to power next week will seize it."*

**– ENDS –**

**Contact us by email SaveStonehenge (at) gmail.com**

**Notes to editors:**

[1] The Stonehenge Alliance supporter-organisations are: Ancient Sacred Landscape Network; Campaign to Protect Rural England; Friends of the Earth; Rescue, the British Archaeological Trust; and Transport Action Network.

[2] UNESCO's World Heritage Committee is holding its 46th meeting in New Delhi, India, from 21 – 31 July, 2024, which will be live streamed.

[3] This additional work would all be permitted within the existing DCO, which further suggests its limited impact, given the UK Government had previously stated that longer tunnels would require a new DCO. UNESCO is of this opinion (extracts from page 13, item 7B of the provisional agenda):

*"The proposals for changes to the consented Scheme put forward by the State Party would have only very modest visual benefits. The two bridges would allow access across the four-lane highway, but would not minimise, or even reduce the impact on archaeological resources or the integrity of the landscape. The current main road through the landscape is undesirable, but the proposed cuttings represent a more serious and irreversible threat to the OUV of the property. Furthermore, these changes do not comply with the 'minimum' requirements previously determined by the Committee, nor do*

*they align with the recommendations of the 2022 Advisory mission, and they do not offer what was sought in the request for corrective measures set out in Decision 45 COM 7B.62, which provided an explicit indication that:*

*"the minimum change required must include an extension of the underground section of the western approach (in tunnel and/or cut-and-cover) to at least the western boundary of the property, with the western portal relocated as far west as reasonably practical, thereby reducing the length of the cut-and-cover section and minimising the extent of archaeological resources which must be removed";"*

The report also states:

*"Although the State Party considers that the consented Scheme provides 'best available outcome for the OUV of the property', that is within the limits that the State Party itself has set for this project."*

[4] UNESCO's frustration is revealed here (top of page 13, item 7B of the provisional agenda):

*"Moreover, contracts for the construction of the DCO Scheme have been awarded (subject to necessary approvals) and preliminary works are taking place in 2024, with substantial construction to proceed in 2025. While the preliminary works are outside the property and not subject to the DCO, they do not comply with the request of the Committee in Decision 45 COM 7B.62 that 'all further decisions or actions to implement the Scheme in its current approved state are halted until the Committee has reviewed the comprehensive information package of proposed modifications at its 46th session.'"*

[5] Save Stonehenge World Heritage Site (SSWHS) is the organisation set up by the Stonehenge Alliance that has been granted permission to appeal the judgement on the latest

Government approval of the A303 Stonehenge Development Consent Order.

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# Are National Highways' provisions for the rare stone-curlew on the Salisbury Plain secure?



A pair of fledgling goggle-eyed stone-curlew on the Salisbury Plain Special Protection Area.  Image copyright: Stonehenge Alliance

Stonehenge Alliance comments on National Highways' planning application for a replacement stone-curlew, prompted journalist, Gareth Huw Davies, to ask in this guest article:

> *“At a time of declining biodiversity, should we deliberately risk degrading a complex mesh of natural life in favour of a road scheme?”*

The first casualty of National Highways’ multi-billion-pound scheme to plunge the A303 in a tunnel under the Stonehenge World Heritage site is likely to be a strange, rare bird of the night, as insignificant and retiring in the historic landscape as the stones are massive and dominant.

Few people will ever see the stone-curlew, crow-sized with a large head, yellow legs, and a haunting call. It sits perfectly camouflaged on the rolling downland by day, and probes for invertebrates in the short grass with its sharp eyes by night.

Confined to a few sites in East Anglia and Southern England, the bird is listed under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, an elite list of rare birds ‘protected by special penalties’. One of its strongholds is near Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain thanks to a conservation programme involving farmers and the RSPB over the past 20 years. [1]

The problem for the stone-curlew (unrelated to the curlew, predominantly a shore bird) is that one of its nesting sites in Winterbourne Stoke just happens to lie within the construction zone of the A303 scheme.

National Highways does not gloss over the damage the road will do to the stone-curlew breeding sites on Salisbury Plain. But the message on its website is reassuring. ‘We found stone-curlews breeding in the area as part of our environmental surveys, so because it’s (sic) protected we need to make special provision for them. The creation of an area of new chalk grassland will establish new habitats for wildflowers, bats, butterflies and birds, including the rare Stone-curlew.’ [2]

So far, so optimistic. National Highways has applied to Wiltshire Council for permission to create a replacement breeding plot, on Parsonage Down National Nature Reserve. This would be a one hectare ‘land scrape’, where turf would be removed to expose the chalk. The hope is that the migrating stone-curlews returning in the spring would, of their own volition, find this an attractive breeding habitat.

In addition, National Highways has even held out the prospect of ‘net enhancement’ by creating a further breeding plot on the RSPB’s reserve at Winterbourne Downs, eleven kilometres east of Stonehenge.

But are National Highways and their RSPB advisers being too blasé about the potential of stone-curlew finding a new safe nesting spot? Is the road promoter not being overly optimistic that it will achieve ‘net enhancement’ on new plots eleven kilometres away? These site-faithful birds will surely look closer to home. It is surprising that Natural England and the RSPB both support the application. Neither has objected to the threat of disturbance, from the A303 road scheme, to the population successfully established by the RSPB near Stonehenge where they have created the perfect habitat over many years. [3]

After all, attracting stone-curlew to new plots is not the same as introducing red kites in Southern England in the 1990s, untroubled as they boldly soar over town and countryside. Stone-curlews are known to be easily disturbed, and even if the new site were quickly colonised, the bird would face an immediate adverse factor.

Land close to the new nesting site is to be the place where contractors will dump ‘arisings’, 400,000 $m^3$ of chalk excavated from the tunnel and road cuttings. Objectors to the road scheme, the Stonehenge Alliance, question whether the stone-curlew could tolerate years of heavy vehicle movements and human activity close to the new plot. [4, 5]

Some might see a huge imbalance here: the fate of a rare, retiring bird which most people will never see, and may not even have heard of, set against the, so its proponents claim, benefits of a new road created to make life easier for the public and business.

But look at it another way. In a world of severely declining biodiversity, should we risk deliberately degrading yet another piece of the complex mesh of natural life we revere so much in TV programmes, in favour of a transient, polluting form of transport which itself could become obsolete in not too many generations from now?

## References and further reading

[1] RSPB (27 February 2017), The return of the stone-curlew

[2] National Highways (25 January 2024), Planning application for stone-curlew breeding plot

[3] Irvin Times (15 May 2024), The National Trust, RSPB and WWF unveiled guidance on Wednesday designed to help workers encourage their businesses to put the climate and nature crisis at the heart of decision-making.

[4] Taylor et al (2007), Work on disturbance factors to Stone Curlew on Salisbury Plain quoted in Sharp et al (2008), The effect of housing development and roads on the distribution of stone curlews in the Brecks: Evidence to support the Appropriate Assessment of development plans and projects in Breckland

[5] Comments by the stone-curlew specialist advising Stonehenge Alliance can be found on p9 Appendix 2 **here**. At the time of publication, National Highways' application had not been determined by Wiltshire Council.

## Listen to the stone-curlew

Stone curlews have been nicknamed Goggle-eyed plovers, Thick

knee and Wailing heath chickens. Listen to their call at dusk and dawn here: BBC Radio 4 (30 April 2014), Tweet of the day



Charles J. Sharp – Own work, from Sharp Photography, sharpphotography.co.uk Wikimedia Commons

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# Sacrilege! An archaeologist speaks out on centenary of Stonehenge gift



Lady Chubb with her husband Sir Cecil Chubb, donors of Stonehenge to the nation in 1918. Image source here

## Expressway legacy threat mars centenary of Stonehenge donation

Today is the centenary of the gift of Stonehenge to the nation by Sir Cecil and Lady Chubb. This weekend, English Heritage is marking the occasion with a specially commissioned tea party designed by Jeremy Deller and an installation of his work, *"Sacrilege"*, an almost life-sized inflatable Stonehenge.

**A joyous public celebration for some, but for many others it could mark impending sacrilege for the nation's most famous World Heritage Site.**

Highways England applied only a week ago to the Planning Inspectorate for a Development Consent Order to build the A303 tunnel and Expressway, disregarding all pleas to afford the World Heritage Site the respect it deserves. Many specialists and thousands of people from around the world loudly condemn the scheme.

## A distinguished archaeologist condemns the Stonehenge tunnel

Professor Mike Parker Pearson, leading expert in British

Neolithic archaeology, speaks out about the Stonehenge tunnel in a newly released video ***"Stonehenge tunnel sets a bad precedent"*** to share his profound concerns.  At barely 3km long the tunnel would be too short within a World Heritage Site that is more than 5km across, full of prehistoric monuments. Mike reminds us that the UNESCO World Heritage Site is

> *"a designation of an entire landscape. It's one of the few places, not just in Britain but in the World, where you can see a special, sacred landscape developed over thousands of years."*

Will the UK Government finally come to its senses and re-consider the A303 road-widening scheme and the damage it would do to our World Heritage Site? **It isn't too late to call a halt and heed the advice of UNESCO and other internationally acknowledged experts.**

A less damaging solution would properly and rightly protect the remarkable surroundings of Stonehenge about which we now know so much more than we did a hundred years ago.

**For more information**, please see our comprehensive briefing about the A303 Stonehenge scheme.