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Upstream Process Request – The Ringed Seal Archipelagos of Lake Saimaa

Dear Ambassador,

Further to my letter of 23 June 2021, I am pleased to herewith inform you of the outcomes of the Upstream Process Request for the Ringed Seal Archipelagos of Lake Saimaa. Above all, I wish to sincerely thank your authorities and national experts involved for the excellent support provided to the upstream process.

The IUCN World Heritage Panel has reviewed the draft report provided by the consultant Ms Josephine Langley as well as all information provided, including through the field mission. Based on this information, the IUCN World Heritage Panel provides the following comments:

The IUCN World Heritage Panel welcomes the submission of the upstream process request “Ringed Seal Archipelagos of Lake Saima”. The Panel commends all experts involved from the nomination team for the provision of very detailed information and for the in-depths exchanges with the consultant. The Panel also highly appreciates the work conducted by WCPA member Josephine Langley and the draft report provided. The Panel is highly grateful to the State Party of Finland for the very effective collaboration. Based on the draft report and on the data currently available, the Panel reaches the following conclusions:

The Panel notes that criteria (vii) and (viii) have not been considered as relevant.

Regarding criterion (x), the Panel considers with a high level in confidence that there does not appear to be a case for a nomination of the Ringed-Seal Archipelago of Lake Saima under this criterion. Focusing on one subspecies alone would not be acceptable as a case under this criterion. Broadening the approach however has not revealed a species and habitat diversity that would suggest potential for global significance under criterion (x).

Regarding criterion (ix), the Panel considers that it is unlikely that a sufficiently strong case could be made for a nomination of the Ringed-Seal Archipelago of Lake Saima under this criterion, but has not been able to completely determine that this would not be possible. Thus, the Panel has a low level of confidence that that OUV could be demonstrated in relation to this criterion. It appears to be unlikely that a global comparative analysis could make a case for the ecological and evolutionary processes of Lake Saima to stand out compared to similar lakes in the wider region as well as globally, and compared to lakes already inscribed on the World Heritage List. A significant investment into a strong and detailed framework for a global comparative analysis and the implementation of this analysis, both based on an independent and international peer review, would be required as a prerequisite to demonstrate a potential case for Lake Saima. This would entail a high level of risk that this comparative analysis conclude Lake Saima is not globally significant under criterion (ix). Another fundamental issue concerns the integrity of the site in respect to criterion (ix). Given the high degree of modifications, it is very difficult to identify boundaries that would provide for a complete representation of the lake ecosystem, whilst ensuring that the areas included within the boundaries are intact.

In conclusion, the Panel does not recommend the State Party to proceed to a nomination of the “Ringed-Seal Archipelago of Lake Saima”. However, the Panel strongly encourages the State Party to continue prioritizing the conservation of the Ringed-Seal, its habitats as well as the wider lake ecosystem through measures other than a World Heritage nomination.

In addition to this conclusion by the IUCN World Heritage Panel, we will continue the communication with your authorities' focal point regarding the finalization of the consultant's full report. We will also be pleased to stay engaged in the follow-up to this upstream process, if your authorities wish.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Badman', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Tim Badman
Head, Heritage and Culture

cc. Finnish National Commission for UNESCO
Ministry of Environment
Parks and Wildlife Finland
UNESCO World Heritage Centre
IUCN European Regional Office