

7. THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF PROTECTED AREAS: OVERLOOKED AND UNDERVALUED

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7.1 INTRODUCTION

The spiritual dimension of protected areas comes in many shapes, forms, and sizes. In hundreds, probably even thousands, of the world's 'official' protected areas, sacred sites exist. From the water sources inhabited by ancestor spirits of Madagascar's parks and reserves; to the myriad of Christian monasteries in Romania's protected areas; to the pilgrimage routes walked by millions of Hindus and Buddhists in India and Nepal; to the mounts, holy for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. In so many ways and in so many places, sacred sites, faith groups, and protected areas meet. What this means is that millions of people have a special regard for and relationship with hundreds, or thousands, of protected areas not because of their importance to biodiversity but because of their spiritual values. The unfortunate fact is that many of these millions do not know much about protected areas and many protected area authorities do not know much about the sacred dimension of their parks. This is what we might call a missed opportunity.

This paper considers the spiritual argument that is rarely raised in discussions about protected areas and calls on protected area managers, administrators, and policy-makers to acknowledge these important values and their potential to contribute to the targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

7.2 SPIRITUAL VALUES IN PROTECTED AREAS

In the WWF/ARC report *Beyond Belief: Linking faiths and protected areas to support biodiversity conservation* (Dudley et al 2005), the authors explored many different ways in which faiths and biodiversity conservation, in particular protected areas, interact. The two principal ways identified were 1) through the direct protection of species and areas in sacred natural sites and semi-natural areas surrounding religious buildings and 2) by the influence of faiths on followers' beliefs and attitudes towards the protection of nature.

The report concentrated mainly on the first point and included a survey of one hundred protected areas around the world which contain important values to one or more faiths. This, we believe, is a very small but indicative sample of protected areas with a variety of spiritual dimensions. WWF now has a database of around three hundred such areas. The following table¹ provides a few examples of the interaction of spirit and protected areas:

¹ Some of the table entries are taken directly from the one hundred sites listed in *Beyond Belief: linking faiths and protected areas to support biodiversity conservation*. The others are sourced from elsewhere. All are housed in the WWF database.

TABLE 1. How spiritual elements, faith groups, and protected areas interact

COUNTRY, PA NAME AND DATA	INTERACTION OF SPIRIT AND PROTECTED AREAS
Australia , Kakadu National Park. Declared: 1991; size 1,980,400 ha, IUCN category II and World Heritage Site	Kakadu National Park is the Northern Territory heartland of the Aboriginal "Dream-time", the origin of the creator beings who sanctified the earth with its landforms and people, and who are now immortalised in some of the most prolific rock art on the whole continent. There are over 200 sacred sites within the lease area, including burial sites, creation sites, living areas and art sites (Gillespie 1983).
China : Autonomous Region of Tibet, Parsa Wildlife Reserve (specifically Mt Kailash). Declared: 1984; size: 49,900 ha; IUCN Category II	Mount Kailash is an important pilgrimage site for followers of many faiths, including Buddhism, Bön, Jainism, and Hinduism. Most pilgrims walk a holy 'kora' or circuit of the mountain, (a distance of 56 kilometres which ascends to over 5,700 metres above sea level). Those who complete 108 circuits gain instant enlightenment (Gray).
Indonesia , West Timor: Gunung Mutis Nature Reserve (<i>Cagar Alam Gunung Mutis</i>). Declared: 1983, size: 90,000 ha	For the Meto, the indigenous people of Gunung Mutis, the spiritual relationship with nature is of great significance to daily life. Nature is believed to be reflected in humans, and vice versa. Rituals are centred on ancestor worship. In Meto beliefs soil is considered the "source of life". This means that agricultural crops are the embodiment of ancestors and ceremonies are held throughout different cultivation phases. The concept of <i>le'u</i> which means holy or sacred is a force that can be either dangerous or favourable. Anything can transform to <i>le'u</i> as a result of a ceremony (Narve Rio 2005).
Japan : The Sacred Forest of Kashima. Declared: 1956; size: 1500 ha	Important for the Shinto faith. Kashima (Deer Island) in Lake Kitakata, near the mouth of southern Ishikawa's Daishoji River, is joined to the mainland only by a thin neck of land. At 30 meters high and 600 metres around, this gently rounded oval area of land is covered with a remnant of the original primeval forest that, like the sacred shrubbery of the nearby Shrine of Hachiman, remains comparatively well preserved. Kashima Jingu has 800 species of trees and an exceptionally rich bird life; one grove is designated as a Natural Monument (Anon 2005).
Korea : Designated as the first national park on Dec. 29, 1967. Incorporates 3 provinces, 5 cities and counties, 15 towns, and covers an area of 41775.8 ha	In Jirisan National Park there are no less than eight Buddhist temples: Chilbuls Temple, Ssanggyesa Temple, Daewonsa Temple, Naewonsa Temple, Beopyesa Temple, Silsangsa Temple, Yeongwonsa Temple, and Hwaeomsa Temple. The latter is possibly the most famous. Hwaeomsa temple sits in the middle of Nogodan peak. Yeongidaesa, a Buddhist priest, built this temple during the reign of King Jinheung, in the fifth year (544) of Silla. Destroyed during the Japanese invasion, it was subsequently restored by Byeokamseonsa, another esteemed priest, during the reign of King Injo, in the 8th year of Silla (1630). Many cultural treasures are housed here, including four national treasures (e.g. Gakhwangjeon, a three-story stone pagoda propping up four lions, and remarkable Gakhwangjeon seokdeung, one of the largest existing stone lights. ²
Nepal : Shivapuri National Park. Declared: 1958; size: 15,600 ha	The park is spiritually significant for the popular shrines and meditation centres nestled in the natural surroundings. The park consists of several religious and cultural heritage sites for Hindus and Buddhists alike. They include the peaks of Shivapuri, Manichur, Tarkeswor and the source of the Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers. The Budhanilkantha and Sundarimai shrines, and the Nagi monastery attract thousands of pilgrims during festive seasons. ³
Argentina : Lanin National Park. Declared: 1937; size: 379,000 ha (Park: 194,600 ha. Reserve: 184,400 ha); IUCN Category II (National Park) and IV (Managed Reserve)	This is the land of the Mapuche Indians or the "Earth people" (Mapu means Earth and Che means people). The name "Lanin" in Mapuche means "dead rock." It is famous for its monkey puzzle tree (<i>Araucaria araucana</i>) which is sacred to the Mapuche. Lanin contains a dormant volcano. Its legend, according to the Mapuche, relates to Pillán, the evil god, who also happens to be the god of nature.
Bolivia : RB-EB del Beni (Beni Biosphere Reserve and Biological Station)	The Reserve is home to an Ethnic Group, the "Chimane", who keep and practice their ancestral rites and customs. The Chimane Indians live principally along the shores of the Maniqui River. Their economy is based on agriculture, on which they are knowledgeable. They cultivate more than 80 species of plants, including perennials, medical, fibre and others. In addition, they hunt, fish, gather and produce crafts (Chiccon, 1992). About 30,000 ha of the station are part of the Chimane Indigenous Territory. ⁴

2 <http://jiri.knps.or.kr/Jirisan%5Feng/info/history.html>

3 Sources: Rappam Data http://www.nepaltourismdirectory.com/nepal_travel_destination.php?id=7&did=39&title=Nepal+National+parks, <http://www.nepalnature.com/nepalnature.asp?natureid=snpark>

4 Sources: WWF RAPPAM Data, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001123/112392eo.pdf>, http://www.enjoybolivia.com/english/actividades/naturaleza/BENI_IN.shtml

COUNTRY, PA NAME AND DATA	INTERACTION OF SPIRIT AND PROTECTED AREAS
Ecuador: Cayapas Mataje (mangroves). Declared: 1995; Size: 51,300 ha; IUCN Category VI	A number of figures are part of the local mythology: "Animas" are guardians of natural resources but are believed to be bad spirits; "Tunda" protects the mangrove and has the power to convert itself into a human; the "Riviel" is a being from the water who travels between the estuaries, canals and the sea; the mermaid attracts sailors and takes them to the waters' depths. All of these figures have survived new beliefs brought in by the Catholic faith and are still worshipped. A number of different rituals and feasts are celebrated around them (Briones 2002). Witch doctors use a number of local plants to treat anything from myopia to infertility.
Spain: Muntanya de Montserrat. Declared Picturesque Landscape in 1950. In 1987 a Natural Park and a Nature Reserve were established.	Since the beginning of history Montserrat (in Catalan serrated mountain), situated near Barcelona, in Catalonia, has been considered a holy mountain. Nestled in the rocky mountain, there are around twelve hermitages and two Catholic monasteries, one of which includes a sanctuary devoted to the Holy Virgin Mary, which has been a continuous pilgrimage centre since the 14th century. The Benedictine community has had over the centuries a significant spiritual and cultural influence. Currently, the Natural Park receives almost three million visitors per year, from which the vast majority visit the area of the monastery of Saint Mary. Because of its many spiritual, cultural and natural values, the mountain of Montserrat has become an outstanding identity symbol of Catalonia. ⁵
Turkey: Uludag National Park, 11,338 ha.	Uludağ, the ancient Mysian Olympus, is a mountain in Bursa Province, Turkey, of 2,543 m altitude. Turkish Uludağ means "Great Mountain", but in colloquial Turkish, the mountain is called Keşiş Dağı, "Mountain of Monks". It is said that Homeros used to refer to Mt. Uludağ as Olympos Misios or Bithynik Olymp. According to the legends, it is said that Trojan wars used to have been watched by the Apollon and the other Greek Gods. In the Roman Empire and Hellenic periods, Mt. Uludağ provided a place of seclusion for early Christian monks. ⁶
United States: Coconino National Forest. Size: 747,061 ha; IUCN Category VI	San Francisco Peaks, located within the Coconino National Forest are sacred to 13 Indian tribes, and are among the four most sacred places for the Navajo Indians. They use it to collect medicinal plants, and to greet their spirits and find pathways for their prayers. ⁷
Ghana: Boabeng Fiema-Monkey sanctuary. Size: ca 196 ha	The Boabeng Fiema-Monkey sanctuary in Ghana provides an example of a sacred grove that has not only been protected by customary law, but also by modern legislation under District Council by-laws and is managed as a wildlife sanctuary (Ntiama-Baidu 1987). The grove is considered sacred because it supports populations of black and white colobus monkey (<i>Colobus vellerosus</i>) and Mona monkey (<i>Cercopithecus mona</i>), both of which are revered and strictly protected as sons of the gods of the people of Boabeng and Fiema villages (Akowuah et al 1975). So strong is the belief surrounding these monkeys that in the past, when a monkey died, the corpse was given the same respect and funeral rites as would be accorded to a human being (Fargey). Because of the effectiveness of the protection, this small forest supports the highest density of the two species of monkeys anywhere in Ghana (163 black and white, 347 Mona) according to a 1997 census (Kankam 1997).
Mali: Cliffs of Bandiagara (Land of the Dogons). Declared: 1969; size: 400,000 ha; IUCN Category III	The region is one of the main centres for the Dogon culture, rich in ancient traditions and rituals, art culture and folklore. Village communities are divided into the <i>inneomo</i> and <i>innepuru</i> , living men and dead man respectively, which exist in symbiotic union with each other. Symbolic relationships also exist with respect to the environment, such as with the pale fox and jackal. Semi-domestic crocodiles are kept as sacred protectors of Bandiagara Village and its ancient founder, Nangabanou Tembèly. They are also revered in ritual rain dances.

5 Sourced from the Delos Initiative: <http://www.med-ina.org/delos/sites.htm>

6 Sources: WWF RAPPAM Data, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uluda%C4%9F>, <http://www.unep-wcmc.org/wdpa/index.htm>

7 <http://www.savethepeaks.org/index.html>

The scattering of examples above show some of the ways in which faith groups, sacred sites, and protected areas meet and interact, many of which at least have the potential to positively impact the protection of biodiversity and increase the support that local communities and others can bring to bear for protected area management.

7.3 A DIFFERENT VIEW OF PROTECTED AREAS

Attempts to work with local communities, indigenous and traditional peoples in the context of protected areas will always be flawed unless conservationists start to view the land or seascape as the local populations do. This will practically always include a spiritual dimension. What this means is that protected areas must be viewed as more than simply safe places for biodiversity. They also have a role to play in upholding cultural and spiritual values that, like biodiversity, are at risk from external pressures and threats. Many times these are places where people live and worship and where this is the case it is critical that sacred elements be treated with utmost care and respect. Failing to do so can often be cause for conflict. Below are some ways in which conflict can arise (Higgins-Zogib 2007):

- There is no common understanding of sacred places. This may be because these special areas are kept so strictly secret that even protected area staff do not know where they are, e.g. Lobeke National Park, Cameroon
- There is no common understanding of protected area objectives. This may be due to a lack of suitable communications and outreach on the part of protected area administration, e.g. the illegal building of a monastery within the special conservation area of Ceahlau National Park in Eastern Romania
- There is no respect for the sacred elements of a site. This may be because of a general lack of understanding or willingness to understand, or due to differences in religious beliefs and tendencies, e.g. Kata Tjuta National Park, Australia
- The effects of one place-view⁸ are damaging to the objectives of the other. This can work both ways. The effects of pilgrimage for example can sometimes prove detrimental to the biodiversity values of a protected area, e.g. Periyar Tiger Reserve, India. Or the effects of tourism to sacred places can be detrimental or offensive to the spiritual values of the place, e.g. Devil's Tower National Monument, USA

7.4 WHAT CAN PROTECTED AREAS DO FOR THE SACRED?

Sacred natural sites are simply the oldest form of habitat protection in the world. In addition to providing a spiritual service for believers sacred natural sites have also played an important conservation role for thousands of years. In spite of this, the right types of protected areas can indeed provide added value to these traditional conservation methods, themselves increasingly threatened.

External pressures exerted on the environment and its resources also threaten the sacredness of an area. Therefore becoming part of the official protected area system means that a site will have the additional protection of legislation and policy. Along with additional management come new management techniques, new partners and more support. If these additions are introduced correctly the traditional management of the custodians may be strengthened, not undermined. Moreover, being part of an official protected area system potentially increases the likelihood of attracting outside funding and support that can help ensure long-term protection. Additional status for the site and the people who hold it in reverence may follow from an increased recognition. None of these additions will come automatically and careful thought is required for each case in question.

The potential disadvantages are also quite clear. By attracting more attention to the site, increased visitation may be experienced, resulting in a loss of spiritual value. Further in some cases there may also be a loss of custodian control – even a loss of access. These ‘costs’ can outweigh the benefits in some cases. Therefore prior

⁸ A place-view is defined as a consistent (to a varying degree) and integral sense of existence in a place, which provides a framework for generating, sustaining and applying knowledge

to gazetting an area, the potential consequences of such official recognition must be thoroughly assessed. If the decision is taken to proceed then the sacred elements of the site must be managed appropriately in collaboration with those to whom they are sacred. Guidelines for managing sacred elements in and outside protected areas are currently being finalised and will provide decision-makers with a good overview of issues to take into consideration.⁹ If sites are established and managed appropriately, then benefits for both biodiversity and the spiritual dimension can be accrued.

Clearly the right kinds of well-managed protected areas have a role to play in protecting the spiritual heritage of a country or region. The advantages and disadvantages of having official protected area status depend on individual circumstances and protected area strategies. For example, according to the IUCN category system, a range of management objectives and governance types are recognised. These need to be further explored in the context of managing sacred sites. Categories I and II (strict protected areas and national parks) can be problematic for sacred sites as people may lose the control and autonomy over their areas of worship. In addition, most protected area managers skilled in traditional conservation science are not trained to deal with the needs of the local people and their sacred places. Other IUCN categories of protected areas, including III, V and VI may be more relevant and successful in managing for both spirit and biodiversity. Community conserved areas for example (Category VI) can provide a sound basis for people to live and worship in their traditional lands, while simultaneously protecting these areas from external threats.

7.5 WHAT CAN THE SACRED DO FOR PROTECTED AREAS?

This is a question that is rarely explored by protected area agencies and authorities but it is one that presents us with a rare opportunity to strengthen both biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage.

First there have been many examples cited in the literature of sacred sites that, due to their reverential value, have been successful in conserving the biodiversity of specific species, sites, or even whole landscapes. More research is required to be able to assert just how effective they have been on a global scale.

In the face of growing threats both to environmental and cultural/spiritual wealth, protected areas and other international designations can be a welcome addition for faith groups to ensure the longevity of their sacred places. From this emerges a wave of support for protected areas, particularly from local communities, that may otherwise have been lacking.

In Madagascar's Ankarana Special Reserve the growing threats of illegal sapphire mining and encroachment are undermining both the biodiversity and the cultural and spiritual elements of the protected area. The communities for whom the area is sacred (for ancestor spirits and burial caves) are calling for stricter protection and surveillance of the protected area.¹⁰

For many local communities, sacred sites are simply *the most compelling argument for protection*. Whether this is protection through official channels or through local customary rites and practices, places of reverence are *the* areas that won't be compromised by local inhabitants.

In Cambodia's Mondulkiri Protected Forest the indigenous people who live there worship the burial and spirit forests, where foreigners are rarely allowed to venture. These are places where ancestors dwell and when offence is made to the ancestors by the wrong use or disrespect of the forests, the result is bad luck for the entire village (bad crops, disease, etc.). These places are still very much part of the villagers' lives and beliefs still remain strong. Worship and offerings are performed regularly.¹¹ When asked, the villagers may be willing

9 IUCN/UNESCO (in progress 2007) Sacred Natural Sites: IUCN/UNESCO Guidelines for Protected Area Management. Consultation version, October 2007

10 Higgins-Zogib L (2006) Personal observations and interview with Prince Tsimiharho II

11 Higgins-Zogib L (2006). Interviews with villagers in Mondulkiri Protected Forest, and personal observations

to sacrifice parts of their forests for material gain – but certainly not the areas of spiritual significance. These no-compromise areas can offer additional protection and support for protection.

7.6 SACRED SITES: A CONTRIBUTION TO CBD PROTECTION TARGETS?

It is worthwhile to consider at this point the many thousands of areas also important for biodiversity conservation that lie outside of the global protected areas system and that are protected, often with great efficacy by the local people who hold them in reverence. These include the thousands of sacred groves in India, the sacred fishing pools in the Mekong and Ze Kong rivers, and the sacred trees and groves all over central Africa. All of these and more contribute to an unofficial network of protected sites and species. Some of them enjoy particularly effective protection. Others, like a great many official protected areas, face a number of external threats. Whether these unofficial sites should be included in national protected area systems or given other forms of legal recognition must be decided on a case-by-case basis and in full collaboration with the faith group or groups in question.

As nations currently struggle to meet their biodiversity protection targets under the CBD, these customary sites may become more attractive to include into official protected area systems. If such a shift does occur the integration must be undertaken in a respectful, sensitive, empowering fashion and only in response to the wishes of the custodians in question. It should also be noted that in many cases official protection would not be desirable at all.

7.7 CONCLUSIONS

Although we are slowly coming to terms with the fact that the ‘human’ aspect of the environment must be taken into consideration in our conservation work, the ‘spirit’ aspect is still largely ignored. Relatively few conservation projects deal adequately with issues of spirit and religion, even in places where these issues take the forefront of peoples’ lives and relations with their natural environment.

We could view this oversight as a problem – but we could also regard it as a great opportunity to build further support for the conservation movement in general and for enhancing the global protected areas system in particular.

Protected areas that do not have the support of the local communities that live in and around them are protected areas in danger. Therefore ignoring spiritual values at best usurps the opportunity to work in collaboration with communities to ensure good protection and management and at worst can lead to hostility and violence.

It is hardly possible to assign a monetary value to the sacred elements of protected areas. It is clear however that the spiritual dimension of indigenous and local communities is a non-negotiable element of overall wellbeing and the notion of ‘wealth’ for many.

The following conclusions serve as a reminder to protected area authorities, governments, policy makers, and others of the importance of managing for spiritual needs and sacred sites in protected areas:

- The spiritual dimension is an important argument for protected areas that is rarely made.
- Faith groups, sacred sites, and protected areas meet and interact in a number of ways – many of which at least have the potential to positively impact the protection of biodiversity.
- Millions of believers have a special regard for sacred and cultural elements in thousands of protected areas around the world. These believers are for the most part untapped supporters of the global protected area network.
- For many local communities, sacred sites are the most compelling argument for protection.

- Attempts to work with local communities and indigenous and traditional peoples will always be flawed unless conservationists start to view the land or seascape as the local populations do. This will practically always include a spiritual dimension.
- The right kinds of well-managed protected areas have a role to play in protecting spiritual heritage.
- When sacred sites do exist within a protected area they must be managed for accordingly. Sacred natural sites occur in all of the six IUCN protected area categories. Management of these areas will therefore vary widely in terms of access, use, pressures, and threats.
- Many more sacred natural sites occur outside official protected area systems and there are other means to support and recognise them depending largely on the desires of custodians.

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