Introduction: Sacred Natural Sites the Foundations of Conservation

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Uluru (Ayers Rock), Mato Tipila (Devil’s Tower), Mt Kilimanjaro, Mt Kailash, Sagarmatha/Chomolongma (Mt Everest), Lake Titicaca, Lake Baikal, the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers are but a few of the sacred natural sites that include some of the most iconic places on the planet. Among such sacred natural sites are thousands more that remain little known and unsung, such as the Dai Holy Hills, the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, the Golden Mountains of Altai, the sacred groves of the Western Ghats, the sacred lakes of the Niger delta and the numerous sacred islands, groves, and springs found throughout the world. The list is very long, uncounted and in a sense uncountable.

In these places nature and humanity meet, and people’s deeper motives and aspirations are expressed through what is called ‘the sacred’. Many of these places are virtually ignored, some receive pilgrims by the million, and yet others are the closely guarded secrets of their custodians. People of faith or religion, or of no particular faith, find inspiration in these places, and they resonate across a wide spectrum of humanity.

With habitats and ecosystems degrading and the extinction of animal and plant species increasing, sacred natural sites have drawn attention from the conservation movement as reservoirs of biodiversity. It is being proposed that the effective conservation of sacred natural sites will help to protect diverse human cultures and a substantial portion of increasingly vulnerable nature. Sacred natural sites, therefore, concern the well-being of both nature and humans and encompass the complex intangible and spiritual relationships between people and our originating web of life. This book speaks, then, of places that matter at the depths of human emotions.

Sacred natural sites: An overview

For the purpose of this book, sacred natural sites are ‘areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities’ (Oviedo and Jeanrenaud, 2007). This working definition is deliberately broad and open and recognizes the limitations of each of the words ‘sacred’, ‘natural’ and ‘site’. Other terms are used in this book in recognition of this openness and it is important that the concept remains open to further articulation.

Each term ‘sacred’, ‘natural’ and ‘site’ has its limitations. ‘Sacred’ has different meanings to different communities. At the basic level it denotes deep respect and ‘set aside’ for purposes of the spiritual or religious. The original term had an aspect of ‘fear’ that is now less current. The word ‘natural’ is used in this context to contrast areas with little or no nature (e.g. mosques, churches or temples), this being the
common understanding of sacred site in much of the developed world. Thus natural denotes that a site contains ‘nature’ of some kind that is often valuable. What exactly ‘natural’ means or should mean has long been debated within the conservation world. In the context of sacred natural sites, it does not mean an absence of human connection, influence or interaction. In the context of sacred natural sites, the term ‘site’ is a broad concept which includes areas and places of all kinds and encompasses complete territories, extensive landscapes and can also be as small as a single rock or tree. The term sacred natural sites therefore needs to remain an open concept with an evolving articulation.

Sacred natural sites are part of a broader set of cultural values that different social groups, traditions, beliefs or value systems attach to places and which ‘fulfil humankind’s need to understand, and connect in meaningful ways, to the environment of its origin and to nature’ (Putney, 2005, p132).

Sacred natural sites consist of all types of natural features including mountains, hills, forests, groves, rivers, lakes, lagoons, caves, islands and springs. They can vary in size from the very small: an individual tree, small spring or a single rock formation, to whole landscapes and mountain ranges. They consist of geological formations, distinct landforms, specific ecosystems and natural habitats. They are predominantly terrestrial but are also found in inshore marine areas, islands and archipelagos. They may also be the location of temples, shrines, mosques and churches, and they can incorporate other features such as pilgrimage trails. In some sites nature is itself sacred, while in others sanctity is conferred by connections with spiritual heroes, religious structures or sacred histories.

The interest in sacred natural sites from the perspective of nature conservation lies in the components of biological diversity that they harbour, such as the species of animals and plants, the habitats and ecosystems, as well the ecological dynamics and functions that support life within and outside the places. Linked to such biological diversity is the array of distinct human cultures that care for them and hold them sacred. Many sacred sites are primarily built places, such as temples, and while being supportive of their conservation, such archaeological or architectural elements are not specifically addressed in this book.

Sacred natural sites and religion

The term ‘sacred natural sites’ implies that these areas are in some way holy, venerated or consecrated and so connected with religion or belief systems, or set aside for a spiritual purpose. The word ‘spiritual’, which relates to the human spirit, as opposed to material or physical things, does not imply a religious institution and many people who experience spiritual emotions about nature (including secular scientists) do not belong to a formal religion. But sacred sites associated with living cultures always have institutions and rules associated with them. These institutions are usually religious or spiritual in nature and may be distinct from other parts of society, while in some communities of indigenous and traditional peoples, sacred site institutions are closely integrated within society with little distinction between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the civil.

The vast majority of sacred natural sites were arguably founded by indigenous or folk religions and spiritualities, but many were subsequently adopted or co-opted by mainstream religions. There is consequently a considerable ‘layering’ and mixing of religious and other spiritual or belief systems. Within the larger mainstream religions there are many if not more autonomous or semi-autonomous sub-groups. While 50 per cent of the world’s population profess to belong to either Christianity or Islam (see Figure 1.1), and many others are Hindus or Buddhists, 80 per cent of all people ascribe to a mainstream religion, a large part of which continue to adhere to at least some traditional or folk religion (O’Brien and Palmer, 1997). Sacred natural sites are thus connected to a wide range of socio-cultural systems and institutions, some more complex than others, and to different dynamics of change and cultural interaction.

Sacred natural sites are just one of many domains where religions or belief systems interact with nature. Most if not all religions have mythology, cosmology, theology or ethics related to earth, nature and land. Contemporarily, such connections are being revived or rearticulated through ethical positions expressed for example in statements that many of the mainstream faiths have produced, setting out their relationship to the
natural world and their responsibility towards the planet (O’Brien and Palmer, 1997).

Establishing a duality between ‘indigenous’, in the sense of being native or belonging to a place, and ‘mainstream’, while pragmatic for discussion, does present some problems. Several mainstream faiths can be considered indigenous in much of their range, e.g. Daoism, Shinto, Hinduism and Jainism, while Zoroastrianism now has very few followers and is essentially no longer ‘mainstream’. More problematic is that this duality renders invisible the many merged or syncretic faiths and folk variants of mainstream religions where elements of the preceding indigenous beliefs are still practiced. These folk religions can have much stronger nature ethics than the more symbolic orthodox form (see Figure 1.2 and Byrne, Chapter 5; Studley, Chapter 10). Within human history, religion has been used (or abused) as a tool of domination. These issues, although much reduced, have not gone away and some faiths still seek converts from other faiths. The destruction of sacred sites has been part of that domination and still continues today.

Conversely, most faiths over long periods of time have peaceably co-existed and shared sacred sites. Mutual respect and accommodation have often been reached. Further, compassion and peace-building lie at the heart of many religious traditions and belief systems.

There are important elements to take into account regarding indigenous or traditional spirituality. The growing recognition of the political status of indigenous peoples provided in 2007 by the United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) has significantly increased awareness of the deeper dimensions of oppression and also of resilience. Centuries of religious colonialism in various degrees extirpated traditional spiritual beliefs and practices. The many different situations and histories gave rise to a large diversity of
Sacred Natural Sites

Some scholars would associate sacred sites of indigenous peoples with animism, understood in anthropology as the belief in the existence of ‘spiritual beings’ embodied in natural elements – plants, animals, or inanimate constituents of nature, as classically described by Taylor in 1871, or more contemporarily as ‘a relational ontology in which the world is found to be, and treated as, a community of persons not all of whom are human’ (Bird, 2002). In ‘animist’ spirituality there is an intrinsic sacramental dimension in natural sites themselves.

For most mainstream religions, primarily in monotheist traditions, a fundamental feature of belief is the purely non-material nature of divinity; de-sacralization of nature has been the norm for them rather than the exception. In the case of Christianity, this was closely connected with the Platonic doctrine about the soul as an entity essentially separated from nature, a doctrine that would become the foundation of many philosophical and theological formulations, including rationalism, centred on the separation between soul and body and between spirit and nature. Although some trends in theological thinking promote new embodiment of beliefs in nature, the distance between animism-based spirituality and mainstream faiths remains wide and probably inevitably at the roots of theology.

Sacred natural sites are, with the exception of Antarctica, found on every continent and probably in every country. Some of them are surely among the oldest venerated places on Earth and at the same time new sacred natural sites are still being established, in some cases by migrants to new countries (Dudley et al, 2005; Verschuuren, Chapter 6). Paleo-anthropological evidence indicates that earlier humans such as Neanderthals practised the cult of ancestors in burial sites over 60,000 years ago, which is arguably one of the origins of sacred sites. Ancestor worship and veneration of burial grounds seem to be a common trait of every culture of modern humans, as well as the adoration of natural features of great significance such as high mountains or large rivers. Australian sacred sites may go back at least 50,000 years; rock art considered of a sacred nature dates to 20,000 years ago and some of the Neolithic henges date from 5000 years ago.

At a landscape level, anthropologists have long recognized the sacred status that cultures have given to nature not only in specific sacred sites (e.g. Frazer, 1890) but also in larger areas of cultural significance and entire landscapes. Interest on the importance of sacred sites for living cultures has seen an upsurge since the mid 1990s, which has contributed to the exploration of new paradigms and multidisciplinary views to the advantage of both the understanding and the conservation of sacred sites (Berkes, 2008; Carmichael et al, 1994; Posey, 1999).

Because of their diversity, origins, and different and varying degrees of sacrality of their elements, it is not really possible to have full knowledge about

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Figure 1.2 The goddess Jomo Miyo Lang Samba from Pangbuche Monastery who lives on Mount Everest

She provides ‘norbu’ (wealth) for the Sherpa people. In the past, norbu included food and other necessities and now also encompasses tourism. Mountain climbers and their family members worship the mountain deities to produce safe passage on ascents and descents.

Source: Jeremy Spoon
the number of sacred sites existing in the world today. Registering and recording sacred natural sites has been initiated at the request, and with FPIC, of custodian communities. However, estimates have been made for some countries, notably India, where at least 13,720 sacred groves have been reported and experts estimate that the total number for the country may be in the range of 100,000 to 150,000 (Malhotra et al, 2001). India may be exceptional because of its size, cultural diversity and widespread practices about sacred groves, but it would not be unrealistic to estimate that sacred natural sites must exist in the hundreds of thousands.

**Why are they important for the conservation of nature and culture?**

Many sacred natural sites have been well protected over long time periods and have seen low levels of disturbance. Many are demonstrably high in biodiversity and represent a strong biodiversity conservation opportunity (see Chapter 2). Sacred natural sites also represent ancient and profound cultural values. The roles of sacred sites’ custodians from indigenous, local community and mainstream religions are expressions of dedicated efforts that cultures that have specifically, if not always consciously, cared for nature in various ways.

While sacred natural sites are connected to the human spirit and intangible heritage they also have strong material components. In addition to being places where animals and plant species survive, they provide resources such as water and medicines and other ecosystem services, they are the location of events and ceremonies, and traditionally are sites of education. They link to livelihoods in many ways and the concepts of cultural services and human well-being are associated with them (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). They support pilgrimages and tourism, both of which have large associated service sectors and generate significant economic activity.

Despite their many values and functions, sacred natural sites were not on the agenda of nature conservation worldwide until recently. Apart from some pioneering work of documenting sacred groves for example in India, the literature that highlights the conservation value of sacred sites only started to emerge in the late 1990s. Scholars interested in specific ecosystems such as mountains, forests or rivers, or in the new trends of disciplines like ethnobiology and ecological anthropology, had for some time been actively promoting the integration of cultural concerns in ecology and conservation; but sacred sites as such became a subject of consideration in conservation circles only about a dozen years ago. Following a series of seminal workshops organized by UNESCO in 1998 (Lee and Schaaf, 2003; Schaaf and Lee, 2006), international conservation organizations like WWF and IUCN, working with indigenous groups and networks such as the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation, started to explore ways to integrate sacred natural sites in their conservation work. A number of international events and processes followed, and case studies and scientific and practitioner articles started to appear in books and journals. These events marked the urgency for protection of sacred natural sites and for bridging the knowledge gap that persists with many conservation managers and agencies. The 2003 Fifth World Parks Congress, held in Durban, South Africa, was the first global venue where sacred natural sites entered the formal protected areas agenda of the world. It was also a turning point in the work of IUCN on the non-material values of protected areas (Harmon and Putney, 2003).

After the 2003 Congress, IUCN’s Specialist Group on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) that had formed in 1998 continued the work on guidelines for the management of sacred natural sites (Wild and McLeod, 2008). CSVPA has since advanced a significant amount of work on sacred natural sites and species including this volume, Mallarach and Papayannis, 2007; Papayannis and Mallarach, 2009 and Pungetti et al in press.

**International importance of sacred natural sites**

The urge for the protection of sacred natural sites have also been recognized by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The CBD in 2004 developed the Akwe Kon voluntary guidelines for the conduct of cultural, environmental and
social impact assessments regarding proposed developments that may affect sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2004).

At the political level, as described before, the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is an important benchmark. Article 12 in particular provides significant political leverage for developing appropriate policies for the protection and recognition of sacred natural sites at the national level. It states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains. (UNDRIP, 2008)

Among international conservation NGOs, The Nature Conservancy has developed a planning tool for the conservation of sacred sites and cultural heritage in protected areas and tested it across countries in Central America such as Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico and Guatemala (Secaira and Molina, 2005). The WWF, in Dudley et al. (2005), studied sacred sites in 100 protected areas. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) adopted the concept of cultural services (including spiritual) as one of the four kinds of ecosystem services (the others being protecting, provisioning, and regulating). In the ‘Conditions and Trends Assessment’ (deGroot et al, 2005) and ‘Policy responses’ (Ghosh et al, 2005) developed under the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment sacred sites are recognized as areas of key interest for the conservation of biodiversity and culture but it is also concluded that more research is needed to understand how they further contribute to human well-being.
The aim of this book

This book underscores humanity’s deepest response to the biosphere – the sacred values of nature as exemplified by sacred natural sites. By applying a multidisciplinary socio-ecological approach and including ways of knowing from many different worldviews and sciences, this book examines where this approach may help and where it is falling short. In remaining true to traditional knowledge holders, the book also employs perspectives that reflect custodian interpretations and realities that manifest in these special places and, this way, the book also aims to carry their voice.

Building on over a decade of work by nature conservationists and increasing engagement with their custodians over sacred natural sites the aims of the book are to:

• bring to the attention of a wider audience an improved understanding of natural sites that are held to be sacred to different societies;
• make the case that sacred natural sites support high biodiversity values;
• document the losses of sacred natural sites and draw attention the threats and pressures that many still face;
• highlight the multi-faceted and often complex cultural dimensions of sacred natural sites;
• present case studies exemplifying both the differences and the commonalities of sacred sites;
• exemplify how sacred site custodians, ecologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, social scientists and others are collaborating on understanding and protecting these special places;
• make recommendations to decision makers at local, national and international levels in support of conserving sacred sites.

A conceptual framework for the analysis of sacred natural sites

This book brings together critical analysis and experience of sacred natural sites in different ecological, cultural and economic contexts. It relates these disciplines to the loss of biological and cultural diversity and the issue of equity in natural resource management. It adopts complex multidisciplinary perspectives across various geographical scales and governance levels (see Figure 1.4), without assuming that any particular perspective is necessarily valid in all settings. The book presents a wide diversity of opinions. But these diverse views are united by their respect for the sacred in nature and by adopting a framework for conceptualizing its interdisciplinary, multi-level and multi-scale approach (see Figure 1.4).

Sacred natural sites are central to this book and under the framework presented in Figure 1.4 they are placed central to localized cultural, spiritual and socio-economic values in order to elicit their importance to human well-being. Essentially humanity is a part of nature and clearly these human value domains also need to be viewed as a part of nature. The framework does not want to suggest that sacred values are exclusively found where the cultural, spiritual and socio-economic value domains intersect but instead seeks to clarify the contribution of sacred natural sites to human well-being and are so depicted centrally. It is recognized that sacred sites exist which share only one or two of these value domains and in some cases sacred natural sites have existed without proximate or contemporary communities attributing sacredness to them for periods of time because they were used for seasonal celebrations or because their custodians had disappeared. In such cases they have usually retained a cultural element.

Description of the components of the framework for conservation of sacred natural sites

Value domains central to human well-being

The conceptual framework (see Figure 1.4) differentiates three human value domains that constitute human well-being as a part of nature:

1. cultural values;
2. spiritual values;
3. socio-economic values.

For example, cultural values typically include inspirational value, and sense of place all of which
may be central to sacred natural sites. Spirituality is a unique value domain attached to sacred natural sites – irrespective of the actual belief system. Spirituality for much of mainstream religion has itself become isolated or abstracted from nature but in animistic traditions and folk religions spirituality is typically invoked by and experienced in relationship with nature. Spirituality is also experienced in nature and at sacred natural sites by people from modern societies without any specific religious background. Similarly, the socio-economic values domain is based on the (material) ecosystem services derived from sacred natural sites. This underlines human spiritual dependence on nature and at its simplest refers to meeting basic human needs and lifeways. As such socio-economic values are linked to a) lifeways which refer to indigenous ways of life, b) livelihoods which refer to different occupations in a more differentiated community and c) economy which links to indigenous, local and global economies. The three cultural, spiritual and socio-economic value domains depicted in this model are of course interdependent and play a crucial role to people’s well-being and the relationships they develop with nature.

**Geographical scales and governance levels**

The conceptual framework identifies three mains scales of operation: 1) individual and local ways, 2) national and 3) international, while recognizing there are finer gradations between them; sub-national, continental and so on.

Many individuals recognize a ‘spiritual’ dimension to their lives, and this book focuses especially on those spiritual values in relation to nature and sacred natural sites. For many however, these are expressed in a local community either with a religious grouping or an indigenous community, these may or may not have collectively identified sacred natural sites.

The framework suggests that sacred natural sites are local phenomena that can also be viewed as an international network, the conservation of which requires action at various geographical scales. Conserving local sites requires different actions...
and from different actors than supporting actions that help conserve single sites or a regional or national network of such sites. Recognizing sacred natural sites as a network derives as much from the indigenous custodians who strongly recognize this (Dobson and Manyev, Chapter 23) as from conservation biology and ecological connectivity theory. Because sacred natural sites require working with multi stakeholder networks these networks ideally interact across various geographical scales and intersect with respective levels of governance. For example, the international level is inhabited with various institutions, agreements, conventions and processes where sacred natural sites are gaining increasing recognition. This way specific tools and guidance developed at this level, such as the IUCN-UNESCO and the CBD Guidelines, can be applied at other levels with respect to national and traditional governance structures. At the national level this is critical because this is where national policies are set as well as laws and state actions and it is at this level that sacred natural sites are the least recognized.

Applying interdisciplinary approaches to key areas of work
As the cultural, spiritual and socio-economic domains are increasingly understood as interrelated and mutually dependent aspects of human well-being, interdisciplinary approaches need to be developed across all governance levels and geographical scales. Interdisciplinary approaches should therefore also be inclusive and give equal weight to different ways of knowing, wisdom and sciences across different cultural worldviews. Because of the complexity of this, it is indicated that these integrated approaches should be applied to key areas for working with sacred natural sites:

- resources and funding: the conservation of sacred natural sites needs funding from a wide range of sources;
- policy and law: policies and legal frameworks are essential for the protection of sacred natural sites;
- knowledge and awareness: increased knowledge of all kinds is necessary for the proper management of sacred natural sites and in addition there needs to be broad public awareness to garner support for their conservation;
- planning and management: appropriate inclusion of and tools for taking into account sacred natural sites in management and planning processes are of critical importance to business, industry, government and nongovernmental organizations;
- site action: effective conservation of sacred sites essentially happens in the field where sacred sites need to be safeguarded and their existence secured.

Taking into account that multidisciplinary approaches need not only be applied across these key areas but also across the cultural worldview, the contours of the effort for conserving sacred natural sites begin to draw out more clearly.

Whom is the book meant for?
The book is aimed at a wide audience including decision and policy-makers, protected area planners and managers, faith groups, local communities, scholars, students and those working in the private sectors who wish to learn about how their interests may intersect with sacred natural sites. The book may also be valuable as a comprehensive introduction to a general audience interested in learning more about the subject. More generally, the book aims to encourage and inspire people to support the communities that are custodians of these sites to continue to defend them, often in the face of considerable challenges.

Structure and scope of the book
The chapters of the book are structured into four parts:

- Section 1: Towards the science and spirituality of sacred natural sites.
- Section 2: Sacred natural sites: mutual learning, analysis, planning and management.
- Section 3: Sacred natural sites: international recognition, global governance and field action.
- Section 4: In our own hands: living culture and equity at sacred natural sites.

Each separate part of the book starts with a short introduction describing the main content of the
2. Asia and Africa - A review of over 100 scientific articles.
3. Ecuador (Mt. Cotocachi), Nepal, Tibet (Mt. Kailas), American Southwest (San Francisco Peaks) and Egypt (Mt. Sinai) - Impacts and responses to global change on mountains.
4. United Kingdom (dressed trees and church gardens), Kenya (Kayas) and India (sacred groves) and many more - Stewardship for sacred trees and groves.
5. Europe (Syncretism of sacred sites and Christianity) and Thailand (Buddhist temple forests and ecological management).
6. Himalayas (Mt. Kailash), Australia (Uluru and Kakadu) and Guatemala (Tikal) - Biocultural conservation approaches for sacred natural sites.
7. United Kingdom (Lindisfarne Holy Island) - Ancient values in a modern economy.
8. Nepal (Jomolangma/Sagarmatha/Mount Everest) - Place-based spiritual values.
9. China (Yunnan Province, Holy Hills) - Bio-cultural values of forests.
10. Tibet & China (Eastern Kham) - Intangible values of earth care.
11. Cameroon (Bandjoun) - Sacred areas.
13. Suriname - Winti beliefs helps to protect forests.
14. Jamaica (Rio Grande) - Sacred natural sites among the Windward Maroons.
15. Ghana (Northern), Kenya (Kayas) and Kyrgyzstan (Mt. Suleiman) - UNESCO’s action on sacred natural sites.
16. South Pacific; Vanuatu (Efate, Eretoka Island), Samoa (Faga’alu Bay, Te‘o‘o) - Legal Protection of Sacred Natural Sites.
17. Egypt (The Nile) and Spain (Doñana National Park & El Rocío Pilgrimage) - The Ramsar convention and sacred natural sites in wetlands.
18. Guatemala (Ruins of Petén), Bolivia (Incaraqay Ruins at Santa Vera Cruz), Chile (Guillatun ritual), Peru (Tata Auzangati mountain), Zimbabwe (Marange sacred grove) and Uganda, Ghana (Tansharu wetland) - Sacred sites in endangered development.
19. Estonia (national inventory of 2500 sacred natural sites), Spain (El Rocío Pilgrimage), Northern America (sacred mountains) and Romania (monastic lands) - Sacred natural sites in technologically developed countries.
20. Mexico, Isla Tiburon (Serri), San Luis Potosi (Wirikuta Huichola) - A methodology for the inventory of sacred natural sites.
21. India (North Western Ghats, Maharashtra) - Recovery of sacred groves.
22. Ghana, (Tafo Atome, Sacred Monkey Sanctuary) - Community-based ecotourism.
23. Altai Republic (Russia) - Uch Enemek Indigenous Nature Park.
24. Philippines (Palawan’s Coron Island Ancestral Domain) - Sacred Marine Areas.
25. India (Biligiri Ranganaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary) - Mapping Soliga Sacred Natural Sites.
26. India (East-Central) - Reclaiming the Role of Sacred Natural Sites.

** Underlined chapter numbers indicate that this chapter solely focuses on this location.

Figure 1.5 World map and legend linking the approximate location of sacred natural sites to the chapters in this book

Source: Bas Verschuuren
The scope of the book is primarily that of sacred natural sites, the communities associated with them and their natural values. Within that scope the book portrays a broad coverage of many different contexts. The book has a broad geographical scope and includes examples of many types of religion faith and spirituality. It does not, unfortunately, have chapters focusing on Islam or Shinto, although these do form part of the body of experience from which the case studies learn (see Figure 1.1). Although the book refers to the private sector, it does not include chapters that discuss sacred natural sites in relation to the mining, forestry and transportation sectors or producers of commodities. While it does recognize that 50 per cent of humanity live in urban and suburban environments, urban sacred natural sites do exist but are not specifically covered here.

**Cross cutting themes related to sacred natural sites**

The conservation of sacred natural sites presents challenges and opportunities that set the stage for the individual chapters. Some cross cutting themes emerge from this that are introduced here.

**Values, threats and urgency**

Two of the key lessons of nearly two decades of work is that sacred natural sites have high biodiversity and cultural values and that many have already been destroyed while the remainder are under severe threat. Despite having survived hundreds and in some cases thousands of years, human-induced global change is fast diminishing them. Sacred natural sites provide a unique conservation opportunity but demand an urgency of action.

**Towards understanding faith and science**

Social and cultural values are explained by Jepson and Canney (2003) to be ‘sets of ideals and beliefs to which people individually and collectively aspire and to which they desire to uphold. They structure the traditions, institutions and laws that underpin society.’ This suggests that people believe certain things, not because they are necessarily logically evident, but because they live in a group where these ideas are supported and confirmed (Stark, 1996). The recent financial history indicates that this is evident as much in the beliefs about the behaviours of economic markets as it is in the realm of religion (Akerlof and Shiller, 2009). Reductionist science is being re-considered, leading to an increasing movement toward holism in science, not only understanding the individual parts but also how the whole functions. Blind faith in reductionist science and technology (scientism) is also being challenged (Harding, 2009). This does not mean a rejection of rationality or scientific method but a greater openness to different ways of knowing (Goodwin, 2007; see also Chapters 5 and 6). At the same time some indigenous groups are willing to put their ‘indigenous sciences’ under the spotlight of contemporary scientific enquiry (see for example Chapter 23). For many scientists all phenomena must come within the natural laws of the universe, whereas for many religionists certain action is attributable to supernatural forces, and this presents a fundamental difference in views. Commonality is reached, however, over a shared concern for conserving nature and culture at sacred natural sites, and shared inspiration by these biocultural icons.

**Sacred natural sites and the ethics of research and inventory**

It is particularly important to raise the concept of free prior, informed consent (FPIC), which has emerged as a standard for engaging with indigenous people and local communities. This is particularly important with regard to sacred natural sites. For many custodians of sacred natural sites secrecy is of the utmost importance and needs serious consideration and respect (Wild and McLeod, 2008). At the same time it needs to be recognized that research and inventory can be powerful tools for the communication and conservation of sacred natural sites.

**Sacred natural sites and global change**

Within the chapters of the book significant global changes have been identified, many of which
affect sacred natural sites and their custodian communities. These include:

- global human population increase;
- modernity and erosion of traditional culture;
- biodiversity loss, habitat and species decline, species extinction and ecosystem damage;
- industrialization of agriculture, forestry, fisheries or other types of land and sea use;
- extractive and energy industries;
- growth of cities, urbanization and transport networks;
- increased conflict over resources;
- weakened livelihood systems and poverty;
- social and political changes and conflicts in the geopolitical realm;
- globalization of the dominant economic model based on continual growth, detached from ecological realities;
- decline in spiritual values;
- climate change.

Many of the drivers of these global changes are mutually reinforcing and affect cultural and biological diversity and the many services that sacred natural sites provide to human well-being.

Generating a greater recognition of the sacred dimensions of nature focused on sacred natural sites is expected to be an important means of building public support for the policies that conserve biodiversity, ecosystem services and the diversity of human adaptations to a changing environment. It is hoped that within its pages this book can serve as a stimulus toward that end.

References


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