

Conclusions: Sustaining Sacred Natural Sites to Conserve Nature and Culture

Robert Wild, Bas Verschuuren and Jeffrey McNeely

This concluding chapter reviews 10 key points that have emerged out of the chapters presented. The overarching conclusion is that sacred natural sites are an important but largely unrecognized, and highly threatened, primary network of conservation sites with the power to make a significant contribution toward protecting and restoring biological and cultural diversity. The 10 conclusions discussed below establish a framework and suggest steps toward supporting sacred natural sites as an important means of conserving nature and culture. These provide the conceptual foundation for the recommendations with which the book concludes. A preliminary action plan generated to inform further steps is included in Annex 2.

10 conclusions on sacred natural sites

- 1 Sacred natural sites have long served as a primary conservation network for conserving nature and culture.
- 2 The rapid degradation and loss of sacred natural sites severely threatens critical biodiversity, ecosystem services, cultural resources and even ways of life.
- 3 Recognizing sacred natural sites supports community autonomy, promotes effective management and gives voice, rights and action to local people.
- 4 Faith, spirituality and science provide different but complementary ways of knowing and understanding human-nature relationships.
- 5 Mainstream, folk and indigenous religions and spiritualities have complex, sometimes conflicting relationships; enhanced mutual respect and in some cases rapprochement is required for collective care of sacred natural sites.
- 6 Successful co-existence of sacred natural sites and modern economic imperatives requires a better understanding of their inter-relationships, and of the broad values and benefits of sacred natural sites for human well-being and development.
- 7 Sacred natural sites as nodes of resilience, restoration and adaptation to climate change offer opportunities for recovering ecologically sound, local ways of life.
- 8 Sacred natural sites need to be consciously included as part of a coherent and coordinated response to global change.
- 9 Local commitment, wide public awareness, supportive national policies and laws, state protection and broad international support are essential for the survival of sacred natural sites.
- 10 A broad strategy for conserving sacred natural sites, defining the priority actions required and building a global coalition to carry out these actions is urgently needed.

1 Sacred natural sites have long served as a primary conservation network for conserving nature and culture

As seen from chapters in this volume, at the time of the founding of the world's first modern national park, some 150 years ago, a widespread network of what have now been termed Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) already existed. They covered almost every biome and habitat type and most parts of the globe. These sites were (and often still are) culturally paramount to the societies that had formed them but they also conserved nature. Not only were these sacred natural sites the world's earliest protected areas, it is probably not an overstatement to say that these sites have provided the backbone of the global network of modern protected areas.

The earliest cultures of our species, *Homo sapiens*, depended directly on the goods and services provided by nature, through hunting, gathering and scavenging. Archaeological evidence, art and the burial practices of Stone Age peoples indicate their strong cultural links to nature (e.g. UNESCO, 2007; Frazer, 2008). It is evident that early human societies recognized that certain sites were of particular importance and these sites – springs, seasonal breeding grounds of prey species, productive trees and so forth – were considered sacred and were protected by cultural practices, restricted hunting seasons and limited access.

Many sacred natural sites, therefore, have ancient origins and even those that do not have a current custodian community have often retained at least some strong cultural values until the present (see Figure 27.1). The cultural phenomenon of sacred natural sites therefore come down to the modern era as a universal heritage. Many of these, as described in the preceding chapters, are contained within modern protected areas, but many others remain on the lands of indigenous peoples and lands owned by major religions.

Sacred natural sites are one reminder that our species still depends on nature, not only for material needs but also for spiritual fulfilment. This dependence is, however, no longer so obvious in modern societies, especially for the 50 per cent of



Figure 27.1 Rock art in the Karakol valley in the Altai Republic, Russian Federation

Source: Joanna Dobson

people who live in cities. But as climate change, earthquakes, floods, droughts and other extreme events bring dramatic illustrations of human vulnerability, sacred natural sites prove their value as part of the natural fabric of the planet and as places central to knowledge on cultural adaptation and resilience. In the words of their custodians, they provide 'a network of planetary healing points', inspiring a more balanced relationship between people and the rest of nature (see Annex 1, Custodian Statement).

Only fairly recently, however, have conservation biologists realized that sacred natural sites are also extremely valuable in conserving biological diversity, and that this conservation is intimately linked to culture and cultural heritage (Carmichael et al, 1994; Ramakrishnan et al, 1998; Harmon and Putney, 2003; UNESCO, 2003; UN, 2007; Dudley et al, 2005; Pumarejo and Berges, 2005; Mallarach and Papayannis, 2007; Papayannis and Mallarach, 2009; see also Chapter 2). Sacred natural sites are, therefore, a primary conservation network. They often overlap with other conservation networks such as government protected areas, non-sacred indigenous and community conserved

areas (e.g. grazing and other community resource use areas) and private protected areas.

Despite the wide distribution of sacred natural sites, this primary conservation network has gone unrecognized by many conservationists, developers, managers and policy-makers. Highlighting sacred natural sites as a primary conservation network will lead to a better analysis and understanding of their role in conserving biodiversity, and providing ecosystem services, such as provisioning (e.g. food and medicinal plants), regulating (e.g. water and climate), supporting (nutrient cycling and soil formation) and the more obvious cultural services (e.g. spiritual, religious and sense of place). This may also allow the economic valuation of sacred natural sites (see point 6 below) based on holistic approaches to valuation that include broad measures of human well-being (see for example Chapter 18).

2 The rapid degradation and loss of sacred natural sites severely threatens valuable biodiversity, ecosystem services, cultural resources and even ways of life

Despite their multiple values sacred natural sites are being lost in many parts of the world. Key causes include:

- destruction due to land-use change and conversion promoted by government economic policies;
- damage and deterioration from insensitive nature conservation and archaeological policies and practices;
- erosion due to cultural change, modernity and broad 'progressive' development contexts;
- damage and sometimes destruction from religious absorption, adoption, competition and impositions;
- pressures from population increase, resources shortages and material poverty.

Examples of direct land-use change include the loss of 90 per cent of sacred forest area in parts

of Yunnan, China (see Chapter 9) and 35 per cent loss of sacred groves from 1985 to 1990 in Sindhudurg District, India (see Chapter 21). In both of these cases much of the losses were due to government industrial forestry policies driven by economic imperatives. Plantation forestry, industrial agriculture, road and railway construction, urban development, mineral extraction and oil and gas pipelines are some of the causes of sacred natural site loss. These developments are also more widely disrupting natural ecosystems and the services they deliver to people (MA, 2005), as material interests have increasingly disrupted the balance between resource harvesting and spiritual values.

The progressive exclusion of local communities and indigenous peoples from their traditional lands and from access to their sacred sites due to government nature conservation policies can cause losses of biodiversity and ecological changes when traditional management ceases (see Chapter 25). In some cases the research and conservation of archaeological work damages the sites to the deep concern of traditional custodians who view this as desecration (UNESCO, 2007; Carmichael et al, 1994; see also Chapters 6 and 23; Figure 27.2).

The erosion of sacred groves in Cameroon (see Chapter 11) well illustrates how areas that have long received special attention by local people are now under pressure from changing values but within a national development context that includes population growth, resource shortages, increasing household livelihood demands, poverty, changing social beliefs, modernity and the weakening of traditional beliefs in the face of influence of mainstream faiths (Chapters 11 and 25). The relationships between faiths are further discussed under point 5.

3 Recognizing sacred natural sites supports community autonomy, promotes effective management and gives voice, rights and action to local people

Sacred natural sites need to be part of effective restoration of both ecosystems and community



Figure 27.2 Rogelio Mejia and José de los Santos are Tayrona from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Martha in Colombia

They are presenting the vision of their elders about how their sacred mountains are the 'heart of the world' and central to the Earth's well-being and that of its people.

Source: Bas Verchuuren

institutions, thus enabling sacred natural sites to support biodiversity as well as the improved well-being of growing human communities (see point 7). The wise use and protection of natural resources is best secured at the local level. Recent reports in relation to deforestation and carbon storage indicate that indigenous people and local communities are often better at conserving forests than governments are (Nelson and Chomitz, 2009; Chhatre and Agrawal, 2009). In general the greater the rule-making autonomy at the local level, the higher the amount of carbon stored and greater the benefits to local livelihoods. This is a contemporary confirmation of a growing consensus that biodiversity is often best conserved at the community level, particularly in traditional economies which receive appropriate support from the state (e.g. Berkes, 1999; Ostrom, et al, 2002; Borrini-Feyerabend et al, 2004). Mechanisms that support communities of different types are urgently needed to continue to protect and manage their sacred natural sites as well as their other territories.

In many cases the management of sacred natural sites is linked closely with indigenous and

local community rights, based on the struggle for independence and control over resources. Such political issues play a key role in the policy discussions at the national level that once successfully resolved could enhance the well-being of custodians and their sacred natural sites and, at least indirectly, biodiversity as well. Development projects that aim to improve livelihood security and alleviate poverty through new economic activities may present threats to sacred sites, but this can be avoided by improved integration of cultural and spiritual values. Through such integration in development projects, sacred natural sites can become a locus where integrated conservation and development strategies can earn strong local support, especially where sacred natural sites form a focus of community cohesion.

4 Faith, spirituality and science provide different but complementary ways of knowing and understanding human-nature relationships

For communities to have greater autonomy for managing nature they may benefit from the experience of conservation biologists and other scientists in respectful mutual exchanges, regarding methods of ecosystem management. During the 4th IUCN World Conservation Congress held in Barcelona in 2008, the IUCN Specialist Group on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas convened a dialogue of custodians of sacred natural sites. The custodians came from eight indigenous communities from four continents and produced a statement which underscores the values that sacred natural sites have for indigenous people and local communities. This statement (Annex 1) gives voice to concerns and recommendations of custodians of sacred natural sites, and illustrates some of the different ways of knowing nature.

While recognizing the value of scientific and technical understanding of the biodiversity values of sacred natural sites, this book has also presented the complementary knowledge and wisdom from different cultural realms. This approach is in line with recent developments in the fields of nature conservation, where nature and culture are increasingly recognized as inextricably connected (Posey, 1999), especially within the unifying concept of 'biocultural diversity' (Maffi and Woodley, 2010; see also Chapter 6).

Conservationists must be engaged in the dialogue that brings sound natural science together with traditional wisdom, contributing to a holistic view of human-nature relationships (see Chapter 19). The reality is that nature conservationists are increasingly challenged to deal with social issues and beliefs, for example, when managing cultural heritage sites that are considered sacred, and this approach can bring many mutual benefits (see Chapter 5). Therefore an appropriate balance is needed between the values associated with the fields of biodiversity conservation, cultural heritage management and traditional knowledge

and wisdom (Verschuuren, 2007). In academic terms these have been conceptualized by different sciences such as anthropology, archaeology, biology, ecology, etc. The management of sacred natural sites requires knowledge from these disciplines as well as combining and adjusting planning tools from the various practitioner realms, which often include sacred knowledge. In order to effectively conserve and protect sacred natural sites, interdisciplinary approaches need to be established through negotiating mutually acceptable conservation ethics and agendas. Openness, willingness to engage in dialogue (see Chapter 7) and developing a cross cultural understanding and, where appropriate, brokering (see Chapter 10), will be important. Enhanced sensitivity to this relationship of spiritual and inter-disciplinary differences can help us find new approaches to cultural and natural conservation management (see Chapter 6).

5 Mainstream, folk and indigenous religions and spiritualities have complex, sometimes conflicting, relationships; enhanced mutual respect and in some cases rapprochement is required for collective care of sacred natural sites

Sacred natural sites exist all over the world, contrary to the assumption of some that they are confined to the non-western world. Sacred natural sites are places in which humans at different times have engaged spiritually with their topographic surroundings (see Chapter 5). Mainstream religions have historically had somewhat different interpretations of the sacred from their folk variants and animistic and indigenous traditional spiritualities. Despite these differences, many religions, faiths and spiritualities have often harmoniously shared the same sacred natural sites. This fact needs to be better understood and promoted and specific cases understood (see for example Wickramasinghe, 2003, 2005; Grainger and Gilbert, 2008). In some instances, however, these basic differences in combination with geo-political

factors, primarily colonization and post-colonial power structures, have created conflict, damaged cultures and impaired the conservation of sacred natural sites. For example, Christianity, which has its own sacred natural sites (see Chapters 7 and 19), has been antithetical to sacred natural sites of other faiths. Byrne (Chapter 5) provides early examples of Christianity's strategies for the destruction or assimilation of pre-Christian sacred natural sites and Bernbaum (Chapter 3) provides an example of how Christian priests absorbed the pre-Columbian reverence of mountains in the Bolivian Andes, but are now aiming to remove this belief. While Buddhism is generally more tolerant of earlier religions, the process of Buddhism increasing its influence over previously animistic peoples in Asia is described as Buddhization by Studley (Chapter 10), Spoon (Chapter 8) and Byrne (Chapter 5) who relate the reliance of eco-Buddhist monks on earlier animistic beliefs for conservation purposes. The process of Hinduization (or Sanskritization) is also mentioned by Godbole et al (Chapter 21), Mandal et al (Chapter 25) and Dudley et al (Chapter 2). These chapters indicate a gradual adoption or absorption of sacred natural sites of indigenous groups by mainstream faiths, initially via folk variants, which are later expunged. Further, where some consider that a mainstream faith has an environmental ethic it tends to be more symbolic than the practical applications in the indigenous or folk faiths (see Chapter 10). Sacred natural sites are therefore a stronger practical ethic of care among indigenous groups and folk religions. These instances of conflict are not only restricted to the mainstream faiths mentioned but also are more widely applicable. This historically theological and ideological whirlpool of beliefs and spirituality clearly indicates differences between the established mainstream faiths and the indigenous religions and spiritualities as described in the introduction. Mainstream faiths play a major role in the conversion of traditional spiritualities and folk religions, but some of these folk religions and spiritualities show remarkable resilience and adaptability and inform and enrich the mainstream religion. Not only should indigenous and folk spiritualities be better recognized, but the mainstream religions need in general to show greater respect for other faiths and their sacred

sites. The effective common purpose and mutual respect of sacred natural sites of all religions can be an important part of a major collective effort to conserve nature.

6 Successful co-existence of sacred natural sites and modern economic imperatives require a better understanding of their inter-relationships, and of the broad values and benefits of sacred natural sites for human well-being and development

The dominant global economic system needs to be adapted to recognize and restore the values of sacred natural sites in many contexts. These include those of limited livelihoods and poverty, intensive agriculture, mass tourism and societal 'needs' for extracted minerals. This is particularly important in the light of the potential doubling of the human population over the coming century, and the additional pressures on resources that this will certainly bring. The dominant global economic system based on the premise of endless consumption and growth is 'not fit for purpose' and is seriously threatening the global ecosystem. The human economy needs to be situated in a wider context of a) broader concepts of human well-being and b) deeper meanings in relation to nature. This calls for narrow economic measures to be broadened and also for the relationship between ecology, society, economy and spirituality to be put back into proper balance (Brown and Garver, 2009).

It may well be that the alienation and social breakdown that increasingly characterizes modern industrialized and technologically developed cultures can be counteracted by helping people rediscover individual or collective spirituality, which has connections to nature. While retaining the benefits of rationality, it would seem far better to view the Earth and all its manifest and profoundly interconnected life with deep respect or in the words of faith as essentially sacred so as to

ethically maintain an ecological balance (Thorley and Gunn, 2008).

However, internalizing the full value of the relationships between culture and nature remains a challenge for modern societies. As societies unnecessarily lose sacred ground to mining, forestry, infrastructure and other industries, these sectors appear largely uninformed about the values of sacred natural sites and often seem to lack incentives to engage as partners to conservation strategies. The leaders of today who are shaping these processes can induce a critical change or a 'paradigm shift' when sensitized to the multiple values in the diversity in biological and cultural systems at sacred natural sites (see Chapter 6).

7 Sacred natural sites as nodes of resilience, restoration and adaptation to climate change offer opportunities for recovering ecologically sound, local ways of life

The widespread survival of sacred natural sites amongst many cultures indicates that these sites have had significant value to humans. Those that survived were adaptable and had custodians whose cultural beliefs enabled them to adapt to the changing conditions under which they lived. Hence the traditional cultures which have survived until the present deserve our highest respect, and modern societies may have important lessons to learn from them. Sacred natural sites can be considered nodes of resilience, or even resistance, to global change. In many cases, sacred natural sites offer opportunities for building landscape connectivity networks because they form important refugia for biodiversity and maintain a dynamic cultural fabric in the face of global change. They are remnants of variety, heterogeneity and multi-functionality in increasingly simplified homogeneous landscapes, and it is increasingly recognized that diverse biological and cultural systems are more resilient and adaptable than homogeneous systems (MA, 2005).

Some communities are already taking cultural recovery into their own hands (see Chapters 23

and 26). An important message from the custodians of sacred natural sites is that these areas are not isolated but need to be thought of as a network that crosses cultural differences and brings a sense of unity of purpose and action.

The protection, restoration, management and celebration of sacred natural sites presents just one essential strategy for improved planetary care (see Chapter 23). The protection and restoration of sacred natural sites may offer a potential safeguard to critical habitats and threatened species and distinctive human cultures, but the specific approaches and technologies for this restoration are in their infancy and need research and experimentation.

8 Sacred natural sites need to be consciously included as part of a coherent and coordinated response to global change

Sacred natural sites and their associated communities have demonstrated themselves to be remarkably resilient to change, however, the scale of these changes is now taking its toll. Today, global change is a term increasingly used to describe processes in human society and the environment characterized in terms of uncertainties (UNEP, 2008). Changes such as biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, human population increase, shortages of resources, imbalances in wealth and poverty, increasing cultural homogenization and modernity all contribute to impacts on sacred natural sites. Deriving from and linked to these is global climate change, which is escalating uncertainty and is noticeable at a number of sacred natural sites. Increasing numbers of extreme droughts, floods and hurricanes and other extreme weather events constitute existential challenges to many societies. The links between human behaviour and environmental change are complex and the effects of these links on biological and cultural diversity are in many cases unpredictable.

Global trends such as increasing tourism also affect values related to sacred sites. Spoon (Chapter 8) illustrates how tourism is weakening some of these values, while reinforcing and remaking others related to place-based knowledge of Beyul sacred natural sites in the Sagarmatha (Mt Everest) region,

as a result of exposure to market forces. Ormsby and Edelman (Chapter 22), on the basis of studies on the regulation of ecotourism in a sanctuary for sacred monkeys in Ghana, recognize that tourism can also help generate income and enforce cultural practices, knowledge and education, especially when developed in tandem with conservation objectives. Although sacred natural sites are most often conserved for cultural and spiritual reasons, the details of these justifications are also subject to change. Sampang (Chapter 24) discusses social changes gaining a foothold in the degradation of the traditional fishing practices of the Palawan Ancestral Domain in the Philippines. These changes are becoming more common as a result of more rapid global cultural and societal change characterized by phenomena such as language loss, acculturation, modernization and urbanization.

Valuable traditional ecological knowledge, for example on healing practices, spiritual well-being, food provisioning, seed conservation, land management and social relations are often celebrated at sacred natural sites. Ceremony, dance, song, story and arts are the intangible companions to these special places, and even while they are being strengthened in some sites, they are rapidly being lost in others.

Dudley et al (Chapter 2) confirm that the remaining sacred natural sites often contain high biodiversity values, creating opportunities for landscape connectivity and the creation of corridors between conservation areas which are much needed in the face of climate change and economic growth.

In the rapidly developing response to climate change, sacred natural sites need to be taken fully into account. They can make substantial contributions to climate change mitigation and adaptation, but there are dangers that inappropriate policies, for example in forestry, could inflict further damage. Increased research and understanding on the roles of sacred natural sites in biological and social resilience are needed and these need to be translated into effective policies.

9 Local commitment, wide public awareness, supportive national policies and laws, state protection and international support are essential for the survival of sacred natural sites

Sacred natural sites are rarely considered in national-level decision-making processes and coherent, policy, legal and management approaches are lacking (Ghosh et al, 2005). Many sacred natural sites that lie outside government protected areas are increasingly being recognized at the international level as protected areas, or Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) in their own right (Dudley, 2008; see also Chapter 6). In some cases this support will enable the innovative creation of conservation networks such as the extension of the protected areas network based on sacred natural sites currently under way in Benin (GEF, 2009). Such successes require the combination of wide public awareness, strong local commitment, national policies that recognize the value of both sacred sites and local knowledge and protection by the government against other competing forms of land use.

Many mechanisms are being tested to support communities to continue to protect and manage their sacred natural sites as part of their territories. At the international level increasing recognition of sacred natural sites is reflected in several policy documents, such as for example the CBD Akwé: Kon Voluntary Guidelines (CBD Secretariat, 2004); the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2007) and IUCN-UNESCO Sacred Natural Sites Guidelines (Wild and McLeod, 2008). One of the major gaps in legislation is the development of national policies such as found in Guatemala (see Chapter 18) and laws that protect sacred sites in a way that does not undermine community level governance. Dobson and Mamyev (Chapter 23), Sampang, (Chapter 24) and Mandal et al (Chapter 25) indicate some useful directions.

At the national level it is particularly important that appropriate laws are developed to support

traditional custodians. Care needs to be taken to avoid national government interventions that could actually jeopardize the conservation of a sacred natural site by developing inappropriate legal frameworks. Using free, prior informed consent (FPIC) can empower custodians and help reduce destructive commercial and livelihood pressures on sacred natural sites.

With some notable exceptions, recognition of sacred natural sites has continued to decline at the national level. Environmentally and culturally damaging development proposals continue to be developed in the name of 'progress and privatisation'. Some welcome exceptions include:

- the aforementioned Benin, which is currently developing a specific category of Protected Areas for Sacred Natural Sites in collaboration with UNDP and the World Bank (GEE, 2009);
- Estonia, which is completing a national inventory of over 2000 pre-Christian sacred natural sites and creating a proposal for a new law to protect these places (see Chapter 19);
- Kenya, where the Mijikenda Kayas (sacred forests) have been inscribed on the World Heritage List and protected under the National Monuments legislation;
- Australia, where the oldest contemporary piece of sacred sites legislation is from the Northern Territory, originating in 1954 but consolidated in 1983 in its present form;
- Mongolia, which has given a high emphasis on protecting sacred natural sites and designated them as Special Protection Areas (see Figure 27.3);
- Guatemala where the 'Law for Indigenous management of sacred sites' was passed by parliament (see Chapter 18).

Several countries have legislation that aids the protection and conservation of sacred sites, often as part of legislation on cultural heritage, indigenous burial places and protected areas. A systematic review of national legislation for sacred natural sites is currently lacking. This book has identified several priorities for immediate legal action. Kamga-Kamden (Chapter 11) calls for a special law recognizing sacred sites as a forest category at the national level in Cameroon; Anwana et al (Chapter



Figure 27.3 Ceremony at Bogd Khan Mountain, Mongolia

The mountain is associated with the life of Chinggis Khan and has been a nationally protected sacred natural site since 1778. Ceremonies were suppressed from 1917–1989.

Source: Robert Wild

12) uses two Ramsar Convention resolutions (Ramsar Resolution VIII.19 and IX.21) to suggest special laws enabling the recognition of traditional management practices based on sacred natural sites in the Niger Delta in Nigeria, and Delgado et al (Chapter 18) discuss the legal proposition for the recognition of indigenous custodianship over sacred natural sites at the national level in Guatemala.

The development of supportive national policies and laws probably represents the single most important gap in the conservation of sacred natural sites.

10 Developing a broad strategy for conserving sacred natural sites, defining the priority actions required and building a global coalition to carry out these actions is urgently needed

Sacred natural sites are important to humanity and collective work is required to protect them, making full use of international partnerships and networks (see Chapter 15). A growing committed international partnership could lead to a critical mass of like-minded people and agencies that will lead a major shift of consciousness which will enhance the future of sacred sites worldwide (Thorley and Gunn, 2008).

A growing group of individuals and institutions is working together to support sacred natural sites. The Christensen Fund has been taking a specific interest in this area and with its partners, specifically the Sacred Land Film Project, it is working towards facilitating a coalition. Similarly a number of conservation NGOs are taking a more strongly cultural approach to their work (e.g. Worldwide Fund for Nature, International Union for Conservation of Nature, the Gaia Foundation and Fauna and Flora International, among many others). Some parts of the commercial private sector are also getting involved, especially the resource extraction industries that often have major impacts on sacred natural sites.

Recommendations

The chapters in this book and the efforts to produce guidance for conservation action have led to the following recommendations for actions that should be initiated immediately:

- Build a global coalition among governments, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations, grass-roots social movements, religions and the private sector to protect sacred natural sites and publicize their values to both people and nature.
- Develop a coherent and effective strategy for the conservation of sacred natural sites.

Building on the experiences of work up to now on sacred natural sites (see Annex 2 for a preliminary strategy).

- Empower indigenous peoples to protect and manage their sacred natural sites based on the right of self determination.
- Conduct a global inventory of sacred natural sites, including issues of ownership, tenure, governance and conservation, ensuring this is consistent with free prior and informed consent (FPIC); the inventory method should strongly respect those custodians and sites whose location cannot be revealed for cultural and security reasons.
- Develop greater public awareness and incorporate in conservation and education programmes the concept of the sacred in nature that is found in all religions and indigenous spiritualities.
- Give particular attention to sacred natural sites as part of the adaptive response to global changes in climate, economics, governance, communications, education, health and human well-being.
- Encourage funding agencies of all types to support the conservation and management of sacred natural sites.
- Establish a global natural 'knowledge and wisdom' programme for carrying out multi-disciplinary research on all aspects of sacred natural sites as a primary global conservation network and identify their contributions to human well-being, biodiversity conservation, ecosystems services and poverty alleviation.
- Encourage mainstream faiths to recognize the values of sacred natural sites of folk and indigenous religions and to respect their respective spiritualities in relation to sacred natural sites.
- Develop guidance for national and local governments to take into account sacred natural sites in their policies, legal instruments and planning mechanisms.
- Develop and expand guidance and codes of conduct with the private sector, especially in tourism, agriculture, forestry and the extractive industries, to better protect sacred natural sites in their business models, social responsibility programmes, planning mechanisms and field operations.

These important broad actions need to be implemented and followed up as soon as possible. One way to ensure that sacred natural sites receive the attention they deserve would be by establishing global initiative as part of a coalition of institutions that could include sacred natural sites as well as other forms of land use that have high conservation values. To enhance the effectiveness of such conservation networks it would also be wise to indicate those forms of land use that pose potential threats to conservation, biodiversity and sacred natural sites, such as the conversion of primary forest to plantation forests and the allocation of mining concessions over areas with current high conservation value. Being able to assess the conservation potential and sacred natural sites of those lands would greatly improve planning and allocation of such activities as well as generating advice for improving the policies and market mechanisms currently guiding such practices in favour of sacred natural sites. Being able to assess what is needed to make the most effective conservation measures work for sacred natural sites would require testing these ideas through an initiative with a global scope and endorsement of a large range of institutions and organizations. Starting with demonstrations, such as those described in this book, may inspire stronger support for sacred natural sites from a far broader constituency, including governments, the mining and forestry industries, biologists and development planners.

Our planet is going through a largely human-inflicted crisis resulting in extinction of many species of animals and plants, diminution in the diversity of biological and ecosystems, loss of languages, cultures and human diversity as well as changes in the global climate. These major threats require urgent and coordinated societal action. Sacred natural sites represent places where biological and cultural diversity come together within the context of humanity's highest ethical systems. They can provide a starting point to meet humanity's greatest challenge yet. With deep respect, hard work for the diversity of life, our Earth should have ample room to sustain its wild plants, animals and ecosystems in harmony with the large variety of human cultures to which these wonderful and iconic sacred natural sites are

central. Now we need commitment to realize this vision.

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