

## THE DELOS INITIATIVE 2004-2007 TASK FORCE ON CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL VALUES OF PROTECTED AREAS

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### 1. The framework of the Initiative

#### 1.1 Aims

The purpose of the Delos Initiative is to identify the relevance and significance of sacred natural sites in technologically developed countries and to investigate whether and how spiritual values can contribute to both the conservation and proper use of important natural areas and the maintenance of cultural and spiritual heritage. Its main focus is on well-protected sites of great natural value that are representative of the world's religious and spiritual traditions.

More specifically, the principal objective of the Initiative is to reach an understanding of the views of the major faiths in developed countries on the sanctity of certain natural sites and the relationship of these faiths with the natural world, including the beliefs of indigenous people that still exist in developed countries. A second aim is to assess the pertinence and importance of sacred natural sites in people's lives today and thus to attempt to estimate their exact significance. Finally, the Delos Initiative aims to resolve possible conflicts between the essential nature of sacred sites and conservation and management requirements via the implementation wherever possible of interacting synergies.

The aim is for these objectives to be fulfilled by the Delos Working Group via work based on the experience gained from the study of representative sample of case studies or pilot sites. Conclusions are drawn from the analyses carried out and then, after a process of sensitisation, recommendations will be made and/or specific guidance provided.

#### 1.2 Framework and *modus operandi*

The Delos Initiative was launched in September 2004 as part of the Task Force ~~Task Force~~ on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) in order to study the contemporary relevance of sacred natural sites in technologically developed parts of the world. More specifically, the Initiative was set up to determine whether the spiritual/cultural values of a site are compatible with its natural values, and whether conservation efforts can create synergy between these different types of values.

The methodology of the Delos Initiative combines complementary bottom-up and top-down approaches. The bottom-up approach is based on an analysis of specific sites that aims to:

- identify participants and representative sites (country, protected area type, faith, governance, etc);
- examine objectives at local level;
- debate the results of the analysis with different stakeholders to reach conclusions acceptable to all
- generalise results and extrapolate them to a broader level.

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The top-down approach applies the basic metaphysical principles that all spiritual and religious traditions share a belief in the symbolic character of nature and in the sacredness of at least some natural theophanies and, thus, profess an awe and deep respect for the natural order as a terrestrial reflection of a celestial or divine order. Hence, the Initiative attempts to:

- identify the underlying principles of different spiritual traditions;
- examine their relevance and influence in different contexts;
- propose and validate relationships and analogies.

The Delos Initiative is coordinated jointly by Thymio Papayannis and Josep Maria Mallarach with the support of Med-INA and Silene, the two non-governmental organisations they direct. Its web site is located at [www.med-ina.org/delos](http://www.med-ina.org/delos).

The initial small Delos Working Group has expanded into the Delos Network and today includes over thirty members from countries in America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. All of its members contribute their work on a voluntary basis.

### 1.3 Activities

In summary the following activities have been carried out:

- Selection of pilot sites using clear criteria and the designation of a person in charge of each site.
- Bibliographic study of each pilot site aimed at identifying their spiritual, cultural and natural characteristics and significance.
- On-site questionnaire answered by key local stakeholders to determine challenges and threats and to identify attitudes and expectations.
- Analysis of the results of the questionnaire and drawing up of conclusions and recommendations.
- Submission of the recommendations whenever possible to the person in charge of the site's natural and spiritual heritage in order to reach a consensus.
- In some cases, further assistance for the implementation of the recommendations.
- Organisation of two workshops, in Montserrat, Spain (November 2006), and Ouranopolis, Greece (October 2007), to present the lessons learnt from the pilot sites, debate the results and issues that have arisen, discuss the guidelines for natural sacred sites, and plan for the future.
- Presentation of the Delos Initiative in different international and national symposia and conferences, such as:
  - International Symposium on Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes, Tokyo, 2005
  - Europarc Federation Conference, Rosas, Spain, 2004;
  - European Nature Conference, Europarc & Eurosite, Apeldoorn, The Netherlands, 2005;
  - The 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> Conferences of the Spanish Section of Europarc, in Cangas de Narcea, 2005 and Vall de Boí, 2006.

## 2. Sacred sites in technologically developed countries

The notion of a sacred site is undoubtedly culture specific. During the work of the Delos Initiative the term is interpreted in a broad sense and thus sites of significance to most of the world's major faiths were included, even when they only represented a small minority of the population, as in the case of the Holy Island of Arran and its Tibetan Buddhist monastery.

Particular attention was also devoted to indigenous spiritual traditions such as the Sámi in Scandinavia and the Cherokee Native Americans in the USA that still exist in a number of technologically developed countries.

It is worth highlighting here that there exists a high degree of diversity. Some sacred natural sites owe their status to the existence of important religious communities: this is the case of the large Christian monasteries on Mount Athos and Montserrat, which continue to attract a wide range of believers from many different countries. Other sites possess mainly oral traditions and experiences associated with particular groups of people: this is the case of the groups that retreat to nature, such as Taoist, Buddhist or Christian hermits and, above all, indigenous sacred sites.

A few sites are well-known and attract hundreds of thousands of people to major events, as occurs during the most multitudinous pilgrimages to the shrine at El Rocío in the Doñana wetlands. Others are of significance to much smaller groups and are celebrated in more modest or even secret fashion.

In terms of the natural environment, Delos focuses on sites of high natural values that already possess protected status at national or international level. Quite a few of the pilot sites examined are national parks or nature reserves, some are World Heritage Sites, Wetlands of International Importance, and one is a *hurm*, a sacred site based on Islamic law. Most of the European sites are included either in the European Union Natura 2000 network or the Emerald network, for the non European Union countries, both defined on a basis of ecological criteria applied at a bioregional scale and currently at varying stages of implementation in the individual countries involved.

To achieve these ambitious goals Delos needs resources and a broad alliance of partners in government, societies, academia, business and many other sectors. Religions, faiths, and belief systems, either institutionalised or not, are such a potential partner, as they concern most of the human population, often own and manage significant natural areas, especially as they exhibit a growing awareness of environmental matters. The Delos Initiative tries to work closely with all these partners in order to establish positive synergy, whenever our goals are compatible. On the other hand, we maintain our identity and recognise that our partners may have other goals that go beyond our own focus.

## **2.1 Threats and challenges**

In spite of their protected status and the significance that the associated faiths may have for society, sacred natural sites in technologically developed countries are today having to face up to a variety of threats to aspects of both their spiritual heritage and biodiversity, as has been confirmed by many of the case studies analysed.

Most of the threats can be put down to indifference and abandonment, especially in the case of sites that are of significance to traditional and indigenous peoples, which are often ignored by both government authorities and the public. As a result, these sites are often degraded – or even destroyed– by large development projects such as ski resorts, hydroelectric stations or motorways. The fact that most of these projects eventually prove to be unsustainable does not seem to prevent them from being planned and executed. Excessive tourist development ( Meteora being a characteristic example) and spreading urban development exert pressures that are intolerable in sacred sites and both are exacerbated by inadequate, weak or non-existent land-use planning and control.

Additional threats to the spiritual values of a site can arise as a result of insensitive practices carried out by nature management authorities: this conflict originates from the centuries-old schisms between science and spirituality, and between secularism and religion, sometimes aggravated even more by populist political or ideological considerations.

## 2.2 Opportunities

Looking on the bright side, a number of recent developments have occurred that may have a positive impact on the management and conservation of sacred natural sites.

One such development is the increasing awareness in the major faiths of environmental issues as a result of the recognition that nature is part of the Divine Creation and that its destruction by human beings is a sin. This has led to active initiatives such as the sustainable management of church properties. Monasteries, as well, have started recognising that asceticism –one of their guiding principles– represents a deeply ecological approach to life and a close collaboration between the Catholic and Orthodox Christian faiths has arisen as a result.

Likewise, nature conservation organisations –both multilateral and non-governmental bodies such as the Conventions on Biological Diversity and on Wetlands, IUCN and WWF International– have become much more conscious of cultural and spiritual values and are attempting to implement specific initiatives<sup>2</sup> into the management of protected areas and other fields of work. The Durban World Park Congress in 2003 issued a recommendation in the session entitled ‘Building Cultural Support for Protected Areas’ that all systems of protected areas should recognise and incorporate spiritual values and culture-based approaches into their conservation efforts.

The 11th Conference of the Spanish Section of EUROPARC held in Cangas de Narcea, Asturias, Spain, 8-12 of June 2005, approved conclusions related to the integration of non material values, both cultural and spiritual, in the methods and strategies of planning and management of protected areas would help to incorporate social agents and social feelings that have been marginalized until the present, in to the conservation of biodiversity and protected areas in general. Include a new section devoted to non-material values in the existing Action Plan for Protected Areas of Spain, during the evaluation process.

As a result of these and other developments, it seems that the schism mentioned above is narrowing, mainly thanks to the efforts of enlightened religious leaders and conservationists.

## 3. The Delos Workshops

The first workshop of the Initiative was organized in the holy mountain of Montserrat, Catalonia, Spain, in November 2006. Moral support was provided by the Monastery of Santa Maria de Montserrat, with financial assistance from the Board of the Muntanya de Montserrat, the Catalan Ministry of the Environment and Housing and the Fundació Territori i Paisatge belonging to the Caixa Catalunya savings bank.

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<sup>2</sup> The IUCN-WCPA Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas is one of them. The Convention on Wetlands as well has established a Culture Working Group to provide guidance on the incorporation of cultural and spiritual values into the management of wetlands.



From left to right: Miquel Rafa, Purificació Canals, Ramon Ribera-Mariné, Thymio Papayannis, Ramon Luque and Jordi López, at the opening of the workshop. Photo by Edwin Bernbaum.

### 3.1 The holy mountain of Montserrat

Nestling on a narrow platform 725 m above the valley below, the famous Benedictine Monastery, dedicated to the Holy Virgin, has been at the service for almost ten centuries years of the pilgrims from all over the world who come to worship the Black Madonna. The monastery today retains its centuries-old cultural and spiritual significance reflected in its active publishing house and school of music and its works on biblical, liturgical, theological and historical subjects. On the other hand, since the 7<sup>th</sup> century AC there were hermits living in scattered and isolated hermits, or caves, in different parts of the holy mountain. For centuries these hermits enjoyed great prestige as wise and holy men. There are 12 hermitages in the mountain, from which two are still used for temporary retreats by the monks and another by lay people.

A few years ago the monastic community of Montserrat chose 'Nature, Culture and Spirituality' as their motto for the general public. These words encapsulate the combination of important values to be found in and around the monastery and so it was only logical that the monastic community should be interested in hosting the Delos Initiative's workshop devoted to exploring the interaction between these three coexisting dimensions.

The monastery's prior, Father Ramon Ribera-Mariné, an experienced walker who has published several guidebooks on the footpaths that criss-cross this unique mountain, lent his full

support to the project during its preparation and was very active during the workshop itself as a leader of field trips.

### 3.2 Objectives and agenda

The main objectives of the Montserrat Workshop was to draw conclusions from an analysis of the pilot sites that would guide the future work of the Delos Initiative. Representative sites were selected on the basis of both their geographical location, the protected area type, and their natural and spiritual characteristics. Although most belong to mainstream religions, some reflect the challenges posed by indigenous and minority beliefs. An unavoidable and pragmatic criterion was the existence of experts able and willing to analyse the pilot sites on a voluntary basis within a fixed time frame and some case studies had to be postponed for the second phase.

A further objective was to strengthen the links between members of the Delos working group through personal contacts and lively debate, which had not been possible previously. The contribution of the Delos working group to other IUCN activities and, especially, to the preparation of the UNESCO/IUCN Guidelines on Sacred Natural Sites was also considered. Finally, the workshop debated the future of the Delos Initiative and suggested directions for the future.



Monastery of Santa Maria de Montserrat, and lodgements for pilgrims. Photo by Josep-Maria Mal-larach.

### 3.3 Case studies

The core work of the workshop focused on the presentation of ten case studies of sites from seven developed countries. The presentations, mostly by the experts in charge, included a critical analysis of the natural and spiritual significance of each site, a discussion of potential threats and prospects and usually some initial recommendations for improved management policies.

| <b>Country</b>             | <b>Site</b>                                    | <b>Protected status</b>                 | <b>Faith</b>                        | <b>In charge</b>                   |
|----------------------------|--|---|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Finland                    | Kolovesi                                       | National Park                           | Indigenous Sámi                     | M. Määttä                          |
| Finland                    | Äjjis / Ukonsaari Island                       | Natura 2000                             | Indigenous Sámi                     | Y. Norokörpi                       |
| Greece                     | Meteora  | WHS, Natura 2000                        | Christian Orthodox                  | I. Lyratzaki<br>+ A. Sorotou       |
| Greece                     | Mount Athos                                    | WHS, Natura 2000                        | Christian Orthodox                  | T. Papayannis                      |
| Japan                      | Kii Mountain Range                             | WHS, National Parks                     | Shinto + Shugen Buddhism            | M. Motonaka                        |
| Romania                    | Vanatori Neamt Nature Park                     | Nature Park, Natura 2000                | Christian Orthodox                  | S. Catanoius                       |
| Spain<br>Andalusia         | Doñana Protected Areas                         | National and Natural Parks, Ramsar Site | Christian Catholic                  | J. Falgarona +<br>J. García-Varela |
| Spain<br>Catalonia         | Mountain of Montserrat                         | Natural Park + Nature Reserve           | Christian Catholic                  | J. M. Mallarach                    |
| United Kingdom<br>Scotland | Isle of Arran                                  | Marine Reserve                          | Celtic Christian + Tibetan Buddhism | I. Soria                           |
| USA                        | Ocanaluftee River Trail, Great Smoky Mountains | National Park                           | Native American (Cherokee)          | E. Bernbaum                        |



Ukonsaari, a sacred place for the sámi people, in the middle of the winter, when the lake around the island is frozen. Photo courtesy of Metsähallitus.

### 3.4 Participation

Over 50 people attended the opening session, although numbers eventually levelled off to a stable core group of around 25. The diversity within the group was considerable: eight countries and four continents were represented, with two-thirds of the group connected to scientific/conservation organisations or agencies and the rest to religious bodies. There was also a good age balance, with both very young and elderly participants, although only 15 % of participants were women. Of particular significance was the participation of monks from three monasteries –Montserrat (Catholic - Benedictine), Poblet (Catholic - Cistercian) and Sakya Tashi Ling (Buddhist - Vajrayana)– located inside protected areas near Barcelona. The IUCN was well represented by Purificació Canals, Vice-President, and Gonzalo Oviedo, Senior Advisor on Social Policy.



A group of pilgrims on the way to the shrine of Nuestra Señora del Rocío, on the Doñana wetlands. Photo by Héctor Garrido, CSIC-EBD.

### 3.5 Outcomes

The conclusions of the workshop are summarised in the Montserrat Declaration, drawn up collectively by the participants as a firm declaration of the need for closer collaboration between the custodians of sacred sites and those in charge of the management and conservation of protected areas. It has been widely disseminated in three official languages of IUCN.

Additional outcomes include guidance on planning for the future development of the Delos Initiative, growing contacts between monastic communities (for the moment in Catalonia, Greece and Scotland), and the strengthening of the Delos Network, which has replaced the initial Delos Working Group. The publication of the Proceedings is a co-edition between the IUCN and the publishing house of the Monastery of Montserrat, as a sign of the alliances that the Delos Initiative is fostering between conservationists and custodians of sacred sites.

### 3.6 The Ouranoupolis Workshop

On 24-28 October 2007 the second workshop of the Initiative is planned in Ouranoupolis, Greece, to review the progress of the work under way. Ouranoupolis is the closest town to the Athos peninsula, another Holy Mountain, with its 20 Orthodox monasteries with a millennium history.

A session about sacred natural sites and monastic communities will include the following presentations about the initiatives of the Monastery of Poblet, Spain, to integrate spiritual and environmental values; the management plan of the Monastery Sakya Tashi Ling property, Garraf Park; the management plan of the Rila Monastery Natural Park, Bulgaria; a presentation about the ecological management of Mt. Athos, and a general overview about custodians of sacred natural sites versus protected area managers.

A number of additional case studies will be presented and discussed, including:

| <b>Country</b> | <b>Site</b>              | <b>Protected status</b> | <b>Faith</b>          | <b>In charge</b>                   |
|----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| Australia      | Dhimurru sacred site     | CCA                     | Aboriginal tradition  | Bas Verschuuren                    |
| Italy          | Foreste Casentinese      | National Park           | Christian Catholic    | Gloria Pungetti                    |
| Korea          | Mani-San Mountain        | National Tourist Area   | Folk religion         | Kyung-Koo Han                      |
| Morocco        | Jabal La-'lâm            | Hurm (sacred site)      | Sunni Islam           | Zakia Zouanat                      |
| Romania        | Buila Vinturarita        | National Park           | Christian Orthodox    | Sebastian Catanoiu                 |
| Russia         | Solovetsky Islands       | WHS                     | Christian Orthodox    | Alexander Davydov                  |
| South Africa   | Holy Circle of Cape Town | National Park & others  | Sunni Islam           | Siraj Hendricks + Nisa Mammon      |
| USA, CA        | San Francisco Peaks      | National Forest         | Indigenous traditions | Benally Jeneda + Lawrence Hamilton |

A session will be devoted to discuss the Guidelines for the management of sacred natural sites, so that the specificities of sacred natural sites in technologically developed countries, and, in particular, those related to mainstream religions, are properly taken into consideration.

The final session will be devoted to planning for the World Conservation Conference and the Delos Initiative contribution, and also to the discussion on the future of the Delos Initiative

## 4. Perspectives for the future

The success of the workshop at Montserrat confirmed the significance of the initial propositions of The Delos Initiative and the interest it has generated in both spiritual and nature conservation circles will ensure that work will continue.

An important future date is the World Conservation Congress of IUCN to be held in Barcelona in October 2008; the intervening period will be useful for broadening and expanding the analyses of the pilot sites, for determining what kind of technical guidance is needed and how to obtain it, and for consolidating views on major issues.

#### 4.1 Deepening the case studies

During 2007-08, monitoring of the pilot studies analysed during the first phase will continue. This will allow us to identify developments –both positive and negative– that may lead to a better understanding of the specific situation of each case study.

In certain cases, it might be possible to become further involved and to provide advice or even guidance on the implementation of some of the recommendations made regarding, for example, the promotion of integrated management policies and synergy between the custodians of sacred sites and managers of protected areas. An example is the Monastery of Poblet, Spain, a World Heritage Site included in a Natural Monument. This will have to be done with great care and only at the request of those officially in charge of the pilot sites. It will also depend to a large extent on the background of the person in charge of each site and on the contacts that this person can establish with its custodians and managers.



Pilgrimage route in Omine-Okugake, Kii Mountains Range, Japan. Photo courtesy of Makoto Motonaka.

#### 4.2 New case studies for a more balanced representation

During its second phase, the Delos Initiative has been adding further site case studies in order to improve the balance between the faiths and countries in the list of sites under study.

Mainstream faiths found in technologically developed countries as yet not considered in the Delos Initiative include some branches of Buddhism, Protestantism and Judaism.

On the other hand, despite being technologically developed, a number of large countries

such as China and India that are undergoing great transitions are still a world unto themselves. Nevertheless, in these countries there are numerous experts working on sacred natural sites and the results can be found in the proceedings of the Xishuangbanna International Workshop (2003). There is thus no need for the Delos Initiative to become involved.

Australia, Canada and New Zealand, however, are different cases. Their protected areas share many features with those already analysed and these countries possess experts who are interested in preparing case studies within the framework of the Delos Initiative.

### **4.3 Towards technical guidance**

During the first workshop, several participants argued convincingly for the need to go deeper and to start developing serious guidelines for the management of sacred natural sites in developed countries. This position had general support, although some reservations were raised concerning the legitimacy of attempting to provide guidance to those who have been managing sacred sites since long before the existence of modern protected areas.

The Delos Initiative has already started looking into guidance as part of an effort to incorporate its inputs and perspectives into the UNESCO/IUCN Guidelines on the management of sacred natural sites, which will be developed further in 2007 and published probably in 2008.

### **4.4 The way forward**

The World Conservation Congress (Barcelona, October 2008) constitutes a key event for the Delos Initiative. Not only will it allow its views and suggestions to reach a wider public in the field of conservation, but it will also provide the opportunity for in-depth critical assessment of the initiative's achievements, positions and plans. As such, the Initiative may well play a significant role during the Congress. For this reason it was agreed that the activities of the Delos Network during the intervening period should focus on organising its participation and contribution to this major event.

One of the proposals is to organise field visits to three sacred natural sites around Barcelona: Montserrat Natural Park and Nature Preserve, Montsant Natural Park, and Poblet Natural Monument, all previously analysed as case studies of the Delos Initiative.

Another will be launching the English and Spanish versions of a volume devoted to the spiritual, cultural and artistic values of Protected Landscapes and Seascapes, with the WCPA Task Force on Category V. It will be included in a series of publications on the Values of Protected Landscape and Seascapes, which is intended to document and spell out the various environmental, economic, social and cultural values that this category can provide.

Also, it is expected to launch a CD with sacred music from a selected sample of sacred natural sites included in The Delos Initiative, as music communicates in a unique way significant aspects that cannot be conveyed by words.

#### ***Why a 'Delos' Initiative?***

The island of Delos in the midst of the Aegean Sea is today an important archaeological site and a protected marine area. In Antiquity, though, it was a sacred site for both Greeks and Romans: it was dedicated to Apollo, the god of light, who, according to myth, was born on the island. In addition, from 478 BC onwards, after the Persians had been expelled from Greece, Delos became the centre of the Athenian Alliance and the location of its treasury, and was home to religious and peaceful political functions. Its role declined after the establishment of Christianity, although its cultural and spiritual in-

fluence has continued right up to the present day. As a sacred site set in a pristine marine environment, Delos is a symbol: it has no links to any single living faith and is an ancient centre of political alliance and international commerce.



Plate found in Delos  
(from a pottery shop on the island of Rhodes, second half of the seventh century BC)