



Sacred Natural Sites Conservation of Biological and Cultural Diversity

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Summary

Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) are considered nodes of biological and cultural diversity that form a global, natural as well as a social conservation network which is not sufficiently understood or recognized, is generally under-funded and increasingly under threat. As we continually promote development at the expense of the natural world we are destroying these special places, through ignorance, overconsumption, overexploitation of resources and the consequent social pressures brought about by poverty and lack of human well-being.

The Millennium Ecosystems Assessment and TEEB studies show the earth's biodiversity and ecosystems are seriously threatened and many are beyond or almost at their tipping points. The resilience of interconnected biological and cultural systems is an often forgotten dimension and underscores the vitally important role local and indigenous communities and faith groups play in maintaining SNS. Importantly, SNS encode important ethical and moral behaviours related to sustainable ways of life and therefore hold very important lessons for wider humanity.

Sacred mountains, rivers, forests and groves, caves, wells and islands are the world's oldest conservation areas known to mankind (Dudley et al., 2009; Wild and McLeod, 2008). The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recognises the importance of SNS and has developed the Akwé Kon Guidelines (CBD Secretariat 2003) and has co-organised several high level symposia on sacred sites and landscapes (with UNESCO, FAO, IUCN a.o.). However, the current CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA) (including ICCAs) has made progress to support the recognition, protection, conservation and restoration of SNS these should also be made more explicit in future refinements of the programme.

SNS could be better integrated in the CBD PoWPA through the following strategies:

- Recognition and support for custodians and communities contributions to conserving biological diversity,
 - Strengthening protective measures and application of the precautionary principle and Free and Prior informed Consent (FPIC),
 - Dialogue with and support to the custodians of SNS from the indigenous and faith communities to develop protective cross-sectoral policy and legislation that properly recognises the values and customs which their SNS and landscapes embody,
 - Best practice management and policy guidance based on sound knowledge of custodians and communities, with support from policy makers, conservation experts, lawyers and academics,
 - Facilitation and space for of policy dialogue, from the local to the international level, about protection, management and reconciling sacred and other values of SNS,
 - Recognition of SNS as being suitable indicators of biocultural diversity and traditional knowledge from custodians,
 - Improved understanding is required on the biological and cultural diversity values of SNS, on how SNS are traditionally governed and managed and how they can adapt to ecological and socioeconomic changes,
 - Guidelines for researching, documenting and inventorying SNS need to be established while respecting fundamental rights of indigenous peoples and religious freedom.
 - Promotion of public awareness of the unique contribution of SNS to human culture and biodiversity conservation,
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- Creation of a fund for SNS and solutions for sustainable finance.

SNS, a global conservation network

Today a SNS network of undetermined magnitude and importance spans the globe. SNS networks are found in every country, some more acknowledged than others. Although overlap exists, SNS make a significant contribution to extending the global conservation network. Approximately 80 % of the world biodiversity and 95% of the world's cultural diversity is found on indigenous lands that constitute 20% of the earth's surface (7% of which is legally owned by indigenous peoples, but not necessarily included nor recognised in conservation designations (Sobrevila 2008 ; Secretariat of the Permanent forum on Indigenous Issues 2009). An additional 7% of the earth's surface is governed by mainstream religion's organisations to which over 80% of the earth's populations is known to adhere (O'Brien & Palmer, 2007). Biodiversity hotspots cover 2.3% of the earth's surface (Myers et al., 2004), mega diverse wilderness areas cover 44% of the planet (Mittermeier, 2003), protected areas around 12%, and according to some estimates indigenous and community conserved areas possibly would add up to an approximate 20% (Chape et al., 2008). As these designations may overlap, SNS networks exist throughout and beyond these designations and serve as a vehicle for nature conservation (Montserrat Statement, in Mallarach & Papayannis, ed. 2007).

Biodiversity benefits of SNS

Of late, SNS have drawn attention from the conservation movement as reservoirs of biodiversity. They provide for the protection of biodiversity but also for continuation of cultural practices and as such provide many unique conservation incentives (Dudley et al 2005; 2010):

- SNS in indigenous societies have especially trained custodians who are responsible for the guardianship of the sites and related customs and practices (Custodian statement, 2008 in Verschuuren et al. 2010).
- SNS protect a wide variety of habitats (including coasts, agricultural landscapes, forests, mountains etc.) in all continents, but Antarctica (Dudley et al. 2005).
- SNS occur in all IUCN categories of protected areas (Verschuuren et al., 2007).
- Sacred groves provide biodiversity benefits to many local communities and indigenous peoples in the face of climate change (Wild et al. in press).
- Many local and indigenous communities understand SNS and landscapes to be interdependent networks or systems, which maintain the resilience and integrity of the sacred territories in which they are embedded (Custodian Statement, 2008 in Verschuuren et al 2010; Dobson and Mamyev 2010,).
- SNS provide powerful incentives for mutual respect and conservation (Aanaar/Inari Statement, Mallarach et al., in press).

SNS provide important ecosystem services:

While Ecosystem Services have become the central metaphor with which to express humanity's need for the rest of living nature Redford and Adams (2009) argue that such an approach might undermine non-economic justification (e.g. cultural and spiritual values) for conservation nature. Where indigenous and cultural worldviews often treat themselves as part of nature in a holistic manner ecosystem services typically dissect nature's benefits in order for them to be marketed (Bhagwat 2009). Therefore ecosystem services predominantly form a western science dominated classification enabling their valuation and uptake in a global economic system they contribute little to our understanding of spiritual, religious and cultural teachings about human's relationship to the earth that are enshrined in SNS (Maffi and Woodley 2010).

SNS have unique guardians

Custodians of SNS bear unique responsibilities within local, indigenous and religious communities. They are also guardians of biological diversity and knowledgeable about healing, livestock breeding, plant diversification and agricultural cycles and systems. They play a vital role in the governance of the human community and in their relationship to the earth. In addition, many are shamans, monks, ascetics, religious and spiritual leaders, keepers of unique cultural and spiritual wisdom and traditions which diversity contributes to universal values that maintain human relationships with the earth. For example, monastic sacred sites can provide useful inputs to education and public awareness and their contribution should be encouraged in related protected areas. Principles and practice of Monastic asceticism may provide lessons towards ecological life styles and sustainable use of natural resources.

Threats to SNS

Globally, SNS are increasingly under pressure from intensifying contemporary development activities and social change, (Schomaker et al 2008) in particular materialism and secularisation. Although to indigenous people and mainstream religions the whole earth is sacred, the SNS networks are especially sensitive and sacred places within sacred territories (Barcelona dialogues statement, 2008). Examples of threats are: tourism, industrial forestry, infrastructure development, extractive and energy industries, large scale agriculture, industrialisation, urbanisation, inappropriate archaeological research, memorialisation by national museums, cultural and religious subordination, neoliberal market approaches. Many SNS are hotspots of biocultural diversity (Verschuuren et al, 2010b). As most threats to SNS affect both cultural and biological values (Persic and Martin, 2008), they weaken the resilience and interconnectedness of humans with nature that is typical of SNS.

Best practice guidelines and precedent

- **CBD: Akwé: Kon Voluntary Guidelines** for the Conduct of Cultural, Environmental and Social Impact Assessment Regarding Developments ... Likely to Impact on, Sacred Sites and on Lands and Waters Traditionally Occupied or Used by Indigenous and Local Communities.
- **UNESCO/IUCN: Best Practice Guidelines No.16** “Sacred natural Sites, Guidelines for Protected Area Managers” (Wild and McLeod, 2008).
- **The Delos Initiative:** Focusing on guidance for SNS in technologically developed countries, has published various proceedings and statements containing lessons learned from the initiatives work (Mallarach & Papayannis, eds. 2007; Papayannis & Mallarach, eds. 2009).
- **“Sacred Natural Sites; Conserving Nature and Culture”** (Verschuuren et al, 2010). The research for the book also informs this policy brief and contains a detailed action plan for work on SNS it also includes a Custodians statement.
- **The Custodians Statement** is issued by custodians of SNS from four continents who participated in a dialogue organised by IUCN CSVPA. The statement voices issues of importance to safeguarding SNS (Custodian statement 2008 in Verschuuren et al 2010,).
- **UNEP-WCMC’s ICCA registry** will include SNS in order to ensure their appropriate recognition by policy makers and conservation planners. Communities choose the degree to which their information is made available to the database and to the public.
- **CBD’s Code of Ethical Conduct** to ensure respect for the cultural and intellectual heritage of indigenous and local communities relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity (to be adopted by the CBD in 2010).
- **Community Protocols** are part of an endogenous process in which communities outline their aspirations for well-being and hence facilitate an interface between their traditional ways of life, their rights and external entities such as private companies and governments (to be adopted by the CBD in 2010).

Documentation, registration and assessment of SNS

Most SNS are guarded by their custodians who determine the code of conduct for these places. Indigenous custodians often receive such teachings from their ancestral traditions, which are born of their territories. Religious custodians derive conduct from their spiritual teachings but are often also institutionalised and hence closely related to formal governance structures. Whilst respecting secrecy and protocol, local custodians and their (religious) communities can assist with documentation of their SNS but for any such development, Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) should be exercised, respecting the rights of self determination, religious freedom and ,cultural continuity including the right to refuse action.

Need for a policy review and national law

To date, a review of existing laws and policies (international and national, plus local political realities) that assist with the conservation of SNS and landscapes is still lacking. The review should include existing rights, but also of those laws that contravene with laws that help protect SNS. The review should also address gaps, strengths and weaknesses (e.g. community/nation specific) as well as implementation of existing rights and provide specific legal/rights-based strategies for the protection of SNS and landscapes. Formal recognition that sacred sites form an interconnected and interdependent network is also lacking. Current international treaties that can support the protection of SNS and their custodians are:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948),
- International Labour Organization Convention (No. 169) concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, adopted 1989,
- World Heritage Convention - Cultural Landscapes (1992),

- UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere's (MAB) Seville Strategy for Biosphere Reserves (1995),
- UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001),
- UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003),
UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions 2005
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP; 2007)
- Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), article 8j., 10c & Akwé Kon Guidelines,
- The Ramsar convention on wise use of wetlands (1971). Resolutions VIII.19 and IX.21.
- Declaration on the rights of Pacha Mama (Mother Earth) (2010),

In many cases, there is a clear lack of support for communities and custodians to exercise their traditional cultural, spiritual and religious responsibilities within the framework of national and international law. Free and Prior Informed Consent, the right to self determination, right of religious freedom and of confidentiality of sacred sites and related knowledge, would be key concepts to such support and it is therefore essential that they be endorsed by the CBD.

SNS Alliance

An alliance with a wider network of traditional knowledge holders, conservationists, academics and others at this time of growing threats can be supportive of the protection of SNS and landscapes if it does not undermine the capacity of these systems to protect themselves and they maintain their integrity. Such alliance as well as individual researchers should, in addition to FPIC, not only follow research protocols applicable to their discipline but also contribute to creating new protocols that are in line with the wishes of the custodians and other best available information.

The CBD can play a key role in supporting this alliance and assist with developing protocols that need to be established to assure equity and respect for diversity and synergies of – cultural, religious and legal principles for example under article 8j. In return this can help to effectively mobilise religious and spiritual motivations for stewardship and custodianship of SNS custodians and faith leaders in order to motivate deliberate and mindful protection of biodiversity.

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