

Protecting Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples: an IUCN Perspective

Gonzalo Oviedo, Sally Jeanrenaud, Mercedes Otegui

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Summary

IUCN – The World Conservation Union has been working for some time for the protection of sacred natural sites, through its Secretariat offices and its Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas of the World Commission on Protected Areas, and involving a wide range of partners, globally and nationally – government agencies, indigenous and community organizations, inter-governmental bodies, and others.

Sacred natural sites (SNS) are natural areas of special spiritual significance to peoples and communities. They include natural areas recognized as sacred by indigenous and traditional peoples, as well as natural areas recognized by institutionalized religions or faiths as places for worship and remembrance. Access to these sites is usually restricted by taboos and management codes to particular activities and members of a community. Many sacred sites have survived for hundreds of years and act as important biodiversity reservoirs. However, their contribution to conservation has been largely overlooked and undervalued by state and conservation agencies, policies and laws.

Sacred natural sites are also integral parts of ethnic identity and play a key role in traditional cultures and lifestyles. While community controls once helped protect sacred natural sites, rural peoples are increasingly vulnerable to political and economic pressures outside their control. Without security of tenure and active participation in decisions that affect them, it is impossible for such communities to effectively protect their lands and resources.

The growing appreciation of the contribution of sacred natural sites to environmental protection has prompted renewed interest in them as tools for biodiversity conservation. IUCN's Vth World Congress on Protected Areas (Durban, September 2003) paid high attention to the issue and produced relevant outputs and recommendations, which have been followed by several field and policy actions; two of them are the Project *Conservation of Biodiversity Rich Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples*, and *The Delos Initiative for the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites in Developed Countries* (reported on in a separate article by Joseph Maria Mallarach).

What is a sacred natural site?¹

Sacred natural sites (SNS) may be defined *as natural areas of special spiritual significance to peoples and communities. They include natural areas recognized as sacred by indigenous and traditional peoples, as well as natural areas recognized by institutionalized religions or faiths as places for worship and remembrance.*

Many sacred natural sites are areas of great importance for the conservation of biodiversity. In fact, very often the reasons for protecting the spiritual connections between people and the earth, and for conserving biodiversity in their lands, are inseparable².

The sacramental relationship with nature

As a result of spiritual beliefs, many communities throughout the world have given a special status to natural sites such as mountains, rivers, lakes, caves, forest groves, coastal waters and entire islands. Many of these have been set aside as sacred places. The reasons for their sacredness are diverse. They may be perceived as abodes of deities and ancestral spirits; as sources of healing water and plants; places of contact with the spiritual, or communication with the 'more-than-human' reality; and sites of revelation and transformation. They are sometimes temple sites, the burial grounds of ancestors, places of pilgrimage, or sites associated with special events. Particular plant and animal species may also be considered as sacred by some communities. While many of the sacred natural sites have historical significance, they are not static in time or space; new sites can be created in response to changing circumstances and environment.

Access to sacred natural sites is often taboo and restricted to a small circle of people, such as priests or pilgrims³. In Maharashtra in India, customs relating to the management of sacred groves are set down by priests with knowledge of forest deities and their influence on life. Ancient folklore and stories are told which include details on the supernatural penalties that will result if the groves are desecrated⁴. In some cases sacred sites provide a range of products used in rituals by traditional priests or shamans, or in healing, such as the medicinal plants used in Indian Ayurvedic medical system. In other areas, the harvesting of plants or the hunting of animals is not permitted in consecrated areas. As a consequence of their taboo status and access restrictions, many sacred places have served as important reservoirs of biological diversity, preserving unique and/or rare plants and animal species. Sacred natural sites such as forest groves, mountains and rivers, are often visible in the landscape as vegetation-rich ecosystems, contrasting dramatically from adjoining, non-sacred, degraded environments. In the Western Ghats (mountains) of India, sacred groves are the only remaining patches of greenery over vast stretches of otherwise devastated countryside⁵.

Their value for nature conservation

Many sacred sites are thus of great value for ecological research and nature protection. In some areas SNS are valuable genetic reservoirs⁶, and can be useful indicator sites, which are helpful in assessing the potential natural vegetation of degraded ecosystems. They are also useful sources of genetic material that can be used for rehabilitating degraded environments⁷. For example, sacred sites in the savannah of Ghana have been used for reviving degraded ecosystems. Afforestation schemes that included the establishment of fodder banks for livestock and the planting of cash crops on the periphery of sacred groves have also helped to enlarge the sacred groves through an additional buffer zone around the holy site.⁸ In other areas, sacred sites may play a role in safeguarding critical sites in watersheds, or helping to preserve the ecological integrity of entire landscapes.⁹

Sacred natural sites vary in size, biodiversity value and tenurial status. In some cases, sacred sites are very small areas found on private land. For example, sacred groves in Uganda are very small forests mainly found on private 'mailo' land tenure. In other cases, traditional peoples view whole landscapes as sacred, and it is difficult to identify self-contained sites (see Boxes 3 and 9). Taken alone, the significance of smaller sites may be quite limited for biodiversity conservation, but taken together they can represent sizeable protected areas. For example, it is estimated that there are between 100,000 and 150,000 sacred groves throughout India.

Many sacred natural sites contribute to the conservation of biodiversity. However, it would be false to assume that complex cultural and social traditions are the same as conservation objectives in environmental agendas determined by outside interests¹⁰. Any conservation *effect* is probably best seen as one of many effects, or even a side effect, of social and spiritual traditions. Traditional peoples are usually attempting to benefit from the protection and goodwill afforded by the deity in return for not disturbing the sanctity of the sacred area, rather than explicitly managing resources for conservation goals^{11, 12}.

Secondly, sacred natural sites also clearly express the interdependence of both ecological and cultural heritage. However, caution should be exercised in linking biodiversity, indigenous knowledge and cultural preservation in ways that imply a kind of 'enforced primitivism'¹³. There can also be problems with attempting to validate and integrate traditional ecological knowledge within conservation programmes. Such knowledge is not static and frozen in time, but depends on material conditions, responds to changing environments, and the uses to which it is put. Further, it is misleading to assume that 'traditional knowledge' is common to all groups within a village, and can be mobilised for development or conservation programmes. Traditional communities are not homogenous entities, and local knowledge, while drawing on a shared environment, constructs environments in different ways¹⁴.

Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples and Sacred Natural Sites of Institutionalised Religions

The relationship between the sacred natural sites of indigenous and traditional peoples with the world's major faiths has in some cases a complex and troublesome history. Many traditional sacred natural sites have been appropriated or destroyed because they were considered pagan or idolatrous by newly emerging world faiths. In some instances religious buildings were forcefully superimposed upon traditional sites. While it is important to guard against 'demonising' the involvement of major faiths with indigenous and traditional peoples, it is important to acknowledge that the erosion of sacred natural sites can be directly related to the expansion of the dominant faiths in many cases.

On the other hand, it is also important to recognise that some institutionalised religions, on their own, and in collaboration with others, have initiated in some cases environmental protection and biodiversity conservation programmes. As an example, the Alliance for Religions and Conservation – ARC works with the world's major faiths on environmental protection¹⁵.

There are a number of important differences between sacred natural sites of indigenous and traditional peoples and sacred sites of institutionalised religions. These include:

Age of sites. Many indigenous and traditional peoples' sacred natural sites may have their origins in Palaeolithic times, whereas the sacred sites of institutionalised religions are a relatively modern phenomenon, many of them having been established only within the last few centuries, in connection with the expansion of Christianity and other major faiths.

Relationship with nature. Indigenous sacred natural sites are often associated with a belief in the inherent sacredness of nature, whereas the sacred sites of the world faiths often bestow their own particular symbols upon nature.

Property Relationships. In general, indigenous and traditional peoples can not be said to ‘own’ sacred natural sites. Rather, sites are valued and guarded by people through traditional beliefs and practices. World religions, on the other hand, often own sacred sites in terms of legal property institutions.

Historical Recognition. Many traditional sacred natural sites were appropriated or destroyed because they were considered pagan or idolatrous by newly emerging world faiths. In some instances religious buildings were forcefully superimposed upon traditional sites.

Based on the preceding sections and examples, it can be seen that sacred natural sites of indigenous and traditional peoples share a number of common features. The exact nature of these features varies within and between communities:

- Sense of sacredness associated with place
- Identifiable spiritual authority in charge
- Limited access and restricted use
- Contributions to livelihoods
- Relatively undisturbed nature
- Variable size
- Variable tenure
- High degree of acceptance and respect from communities
- Threatened status in many cases
- Search for appropriate protection

SNS Links to Indigenous and Traditional Peoples’ Cultures, Lifestyles and Rights

SNS are important for the vitality and survival of the cultures that created them. There is an indissoluble link between the protection of sacred sites and the right of peoples, communities and cultures to continue to manage and control the places that connect them to their spirituality and cultural expression¹⁶.

The spiritual connections between indigenous peoples and the earth are more than a reflection of traditional views on nature – they are also integral parts of ethnic identity. In virtually every society, nature provides powerful symbols used to create strong links between the social and the natural. To the people of Orissa in India, the sacred grove is more than a mini-nature reserve. It is the keystone in a way of life. It is both locus and sign of the regeneration of body, land, community. It stands for the integration of the human community in nature¹⁷. To the Hopi people, natural springs are seen as the ‘soul’ of their people, representing their very identity¹⁸. Sacred natural sites are often focal points for social and cultural celebrations and religious rituals, establishing social cohesion and solidarity within communities. In many indigenous and traditional communities it is difficult to separate out cultural identity, kin and social relations, livelihoods, and traditional environmental knowledge from the ritualistic use of the land and protection of biodiversity – they are all strongly interdependent.

SNS and Community Livelihoods

It would be misleading to assume a complete ban on using resources from sacred natural sites. Many sacred places provide useful products for livelihoods. In Madagascar, many communities

have depended almost exclusively on sacred forests in times of drought¹⁹. Respect for the spirit in nature does not always mean that communities take a no-touch approach to animals. In many cases, it is recognised that it is the nature of things for one organism to feed upon another, creating relations of indebtedness in the process. For instance, in Japan a whale that has been killed is regarded as having given itself up to mankind so that we can live, and in return, the whalers become indebted to the whale. Thus whaling activities become intimately bound up with religious beliefs, and as a gift the prey has to be utilised to the fullest. To do otherwise would be an insult to the animal and the creator²⁰. Resource use often depends on the degree of ‘sacredness’ of the site or species, as well as the perceived power of particular deities²¹.

In SNS, spiritual values of the communities are the foundations of their commitment to protect their natural heritage and of their motivation to actively engage in the conservation of such sites. Further, there is an emergence of the ‘spiritual’ as a new motive force within wider debates about sustainability, and a growing appreciation of the need to re-engage with the sacred within international conservation²².

Ideas of the spiritual and sacred are not new within conservation paradigms. Early conservationists were often inspired and awed by what they termed “the wisdom of wilderness”, and “the infinite capacity of nature to uplift the human spirit”. Such values were frequently invoked and appealed to in the early protected areas movement. However, although early conservation efforts were undertaken “for the benefit of all mankind”, as part of the “universal human heritage”, the sacred natural sites were either overlooked, or alienated from their traditional owners, as they were assimilated into official protected areas.

The rekindling of interest in the spiritual within conservation paradigms does not preclude scientific knowledge or approaches. Nature is, of course, ‘a system’ that can be studied, understood, and protected. It is also ‘a set of resources’ which are to be sustainably and equitably managed. But, it can be contemplated in other ways which may be more significant to people. It is a mystery, beyond the bounds of contemporary science, which engenders awe; a source of pleasure to be enjoyed; a creative power to be praised – and more. Nature’s many dimensions provide opportunities to engage with people in other meaningful ways.

Threats to Natural Sacred Sites

Many SNS enjoy no legal protection and are faced with threats, broadly related to the impact of modernisation and globalisation. These include: agricultural expansion; demographic changes; erosion of traditional values, particularly associated with widespread diffusion of institutionalized religions brought in by colonization processes, and which considered traditional beliefs as ‘superstitious’; modern land reform programmes which have liquidated traditional land ownership; the expansion of the petroleum and mining industries; tourist development; changing social and economic aspirations of communities; immigration patterns, administrative and policy changes – particularly within last 20 years. Many traditional beliefs and practices that acted as effective controls in protecting the environment are now being overwhelmed by these changes.

To date, sacred natural sites have not been formally reflected in protected area designations and management plans, and existing policy and legal frameworks do not adequately support the sacred natural sites of indigenous and traditional peoples. Some sacred sites are included in official protected areas, but many are not and remain under traditional ownership and management. In the first case, conflicts between protected area agencies and indigenous and traditional peoples often limit the effectiveness and the survival of these sites. In the second place, traditional ownership and management are becoming overwhelmed in the face of growing

external threats. There are also questions of how to manage sacred natural sites on public land ceded by treaty. Several countries are in the process of examining the possibility of incorporating provisions for the protection of sacred sites in their national biodiversity laws and policies, but in general, there has been very little achievement to date. However, where existing policies and laws can be reformed, it is anticipated that more effective protection of sacred natural sites could bring additional and important benefits at local, national and global levels.

Insufficient Knowledge and Awareness about Sacred Natural Sites

While sacred natural sites are known to be highly important for biodiversity conservation, there has been no co-ordinated attempt, to date, to accurately assess their contribution to biodiversity; no global inventory of sites, and very little is known about the socio-cultural matrix of traditional belief systems that have helped conserve such sites, or how to integrate them into existing protected area networks to help safeguard them. The ability to influence international and national policies and legal frameworks in favour of sacred natural sites is also hampered by the lack of knowledge about legal, policy and technical tools, consistent with indigenous peoples' own cultures, values, knowledge and practices.

Despite the relevance of SNS to biodiversity conservation, and evidence of significant local level protection and management, their role has been widely overlooked by state agencies, conservation agencies, international conventions and legislation and wider civil society. While several activities have been carried out in recent years for protection of sacred sites by organisations like UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, IUCN, WWF, ARC, and others, no substantial progress has been achieved on the ground.

Marginalisation and Vulnerability of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples

In the context of unequal power relationships, indigenous and traditional peoples frequently lack the means to promote their rights and responsibilities as stewards of their land and resources. They are often excluded from decision-making processes which affect their lands, and they frequently lack information, organisational and financial support to develop and defend their interests.

Protecting Sacred Natural Sites

As indicated before, sacred natural sites have enormous value for biodiversity conservation. They are often places with limited access and restricted use that have preserved many rare species of flora and fauna. Although they have a high degree of acceptance and respect from local communities, their contribution to conservation has been overlooked and undervalued by state and conservation agencies, policies and laws.

Sacred natural sites are important for the vitality and survival of indigenous and traditional peoples' cultures. There is a fundamental link between the rights of people to control natural sites - which symbolise their cultural and spiritual identity, and their continuing protection.

Understanding of the sacred beyond the frontiers of the dominant world faiths, and to win respect and support for the spiritual visions and commitments of other peoples, particularly of indigenous and traditional peoples – which are frequently overshadowed or derided by the major religions, is fundamental for effective protection of SNS, as it is for the respect and strengthening of cultural diversity.

One of the possible avenues to support the long-term survival of sacred natural sites is to explore how they can be meaningfully integrated into existing protected area networks. This goal is to

enhance their protected status, but at the same time to support the belief systems and sustain the cultural heritage and integrity of the communities that created them. These efforts will need to consider how to protect large sites in their integrity, as well as how to integrate a series of smaller sites.

Issues related to the protection of SNS have gained more attention in the last few years. At the policy level, as well as in terms of learning, a seminal meeting was the UNESCO International Symposium on Natural Sacred Sites (Paris, 1998). After that, some of the important activities that took place between 2001 and 2005 on this matter are as follows:

- In Mexico in 2001, hosted by the WWF Mexico Office and WWF International, a meeting was held with the participation of IUCN (through its World Commission on Protected Areas – WCPA), UNESCO, the Rigoberta Menchu Tum Foundation (FRMT), indigenous organizations from Mexico and Mexican NGOs. At that meeting, IUCN, WWF and UNESCO presented their relevant areas of work and, together with the FRMT, decided to explore further coordination and collaboration.
- UNESCO organized an event on Sacred Mountains in 2002, and an International Symposium on Sacred Sites in 2003.
- The 8th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP) to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar), held in November 2002, discussed and adopted Resolutions related to the cultural aspects of wetlands, including specific references to sacred sites. Work on this subject will be again reviewed at the 9th COP in 2005.
- At the Vth World Parks Congress, organized by IUCN in 2003, substantial discussions on sacred sites were held, which resulted in various products and gave impetus to new initiatives from IUCN. This was reaffirmed at the 3rd IUCN World Conservation Congress in 2004. Among the indicated outputs, the most relevant are the Durban Action Plan, Recommendation 5.13 Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas, and Draft Guidelines for the management of sacred natural sites prepared jointly by UNESCO and IUCN.
- The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) adopted, at the Seventh Meeting of its Conference of the Parties (COP), the *Akwé: Kon Voluntary Guidelines for Cultural, Environmental and Social Impact Assessment Regarding Sacred Sites and Lands and Waters Traditionally Occupied or Used by Indigenous and Local Communities* (February 2004).
- The same meeting of the CBD COP adopted a Programme of Work on Protected Areas, which, although not addressing specifically the issue of sacred sites, provides a very important framework in relation to integrating cultural and spiritual values and considering the rights and interests of indigenous and local communities.
- In Mexico in May 2005, an International Meeting on Shamanism and Nature was convened by the Mexican NGO Música por la Tierra, with technical support from IUCN. The meeting produced a Declaration that raises important issues for the protection of sacred sites.
- And finally, the International Symposium of Tokyo, May-June 2005, co-organized by UNESCO and the United Nations University (UNU) in collaboration with IUCN, the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Secretariat of the UN

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (SUNPFII) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

The Project Conservation of Biodiversity Rich Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples

Against the background described herein, and with the benefit of the activities and processes listed above, IUCN, in partnership with the Rigoberta Menchu Tum Foundation (FRMT) and with the support of institutions such as UNEP, UNESCO, GEF and others, started in 2003 a project called *Conservation of Biodiversity Rich Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples*. The project goal is to achieve a strengthened enabling environment to support conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity of sacred sites of indigenous and traditional peoples, focusing on six regions (Meso-America, South America, South Asia, East Africa, and West Africa). The specific objectives of the project are to: (i) Increase awareness globally and nationally, through improved information, knowledge sharing and communications, (ii) Strengthen legal and policy frameworks, globally and nationally, (iii) Improve the institutional capacity of relevant actors to work at the national and local levels, and (iv) Make available lessons and field-tested tools.

The Project *Conservation of Biodiversity Rich Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples* starts at the heart of traditional peoples' relationships with nature. It understands that it is the sacredness of nature that has helped them preserve biodiversity. If spirituality is removed then the central motive for environmental protection is lost.

It also engages with the political core of the problem. In the context of unequal social relations, and historical inequities, the project recognises that indigenous and traditional peoples require support to establish and defend their rights to protect and manage their sacred areas.

There is an urgent need for conservation agencies to find new, creative and holistic ways of working to provide benefits to both people and nature - against the background of devastating threats to vulnerable people and nature at the beginning of the 21st century. By re-engaging with the spiritual, the Project seeks to provide this opportunity.

Project Features

What can be included here which is meaningful, interesting and brief??? Components? Sample of cases? Country profiles (in boxes)???

Boxes

(original order)

Box 1. Sacred Seas: Customary Maori Fisheries

In Maori culture all elements of the natural world originate from the gods, and are thus imbued with *mana atua* - the presence and the power of gods. Fish, like all living things, are possessed of *mauri* – the physical life force. The fisheries are *mahinga kai* – places of customary food gathering, and because of their origins and utility, they are *taonga* or valued resources. The customary rules and practices by which Maori managed their waters and fisheries reflected the significance of this view. Conservation has always been important to the Maori, and traditional Maori fishing practices included measures intended to maintain the habitat, preserve fish stocks, and regulate fisheries use²³.

Box 2. Sacred Wetlands in West Africa

In the forest and savannah zones of Guinea, traditional beliefs are deeply embedded in everyday village life. Here, several lakes are sacred to local communities, and strict taboos and local rules shape the use of wetland resources. At Lake Wassaya it is forbidden to hunt, there is a very short fishing season, and even the Wassaya's crocodiles are sacred. People wishing to see the lake must first gain permission from a group of village elders. These traditional beliefs are still followed today and have helped maintain the ecological integrity of these wetlands²⁴. For coastal peoples of Côte d'Ivoire', the great fishing period (May to October) is initiated by an opening rite over the 'Aby' lagoon, sometimes carried out simultaneously in the different areas. The priest of the spirit called *Assohon* opens the fishing in May and closes it in October. Sacred catfish of *Sapia* are sheltered in the Dransi River which is formally forbidden to fishermen. Together with the sacred crocodiles from Gbanhui, all the aquatic species are covered by food prohibitions to villagers. During the day it is forbidden to go to the Yonyongo River because it is dedicated to venerated crocodiles²⁵.

Box 3. Sacred Mountains: The 'Dragon Hills' of Yunnan Province, China.

The Dai (T'ai), an indigenous ethnic group in South-West China, inhabit the Xishuangbanna region in Yunnan Province. According to their traditional concepts a Holy Hill or *Nong* is a forested hill where gods reside. All the plants and animals that inhabit the Holy Hills are either companions of the gods or sacred living things in god's garden. The Dai also believe that the spirits of great and revered chieftains go to the Holy Hills to live, following their departure from the world of the living. Their management of the Holy Hills through informal and informal norms, ethical rules and spiritual beliefs has resulted in biodiversity and habitat conservation within the area. There are hundreds of well preserved seasonal rainforest areas, which are characterised by species of *Antiaris*, *Pouteria*, *Canarium*, and others. A large number of endemic or relic species of the local flora have also been protected, including about 100 species of medicinal plants and more than 150 economically useful plants. The large number of forested Holy Hills distributed throughout the region form hundreds of 'green islands'. This pattern could help the natural reserves, which were established by the state government in recent years, by exchanging genes and playing the role of 'stepping stones' for the flow of genetic materials²⁶.

Box 4. Sacred Forests: Naimina Enkiyio of the Maasai

“The *Naimina Enkiyio* indigenous forest is the centre of our lives. It means our survival, our spirit, our past and our future. As we are part of it, it is part of us. The forest is the holy temple or shrine of our people, a place of worship and communion with our deity. In the centre is the Cathedral of the Seven Trees, a sacred place where the Laibons or prophets bring offerings to *Enkai*, our Maasai God. Many ceremonies essential to our way of life are performed within or at the edges of our sacred forest. *Emowuo Olkiteng*, the beginning of a new age group when boys begin their rite of passage as young adults is marked by initiation rites. *Enkitainoto Olorrip Olasar Lolporror* – when the chosen spiritual leader of the new age group, accompanied by an elder spends the whole night awake standing motionless under a sacred tree deep within the forest. *Emayian oo Nkituak/ Ntomonak* – where Maasai women are blessed and cleansed to enhance their fertility under sacred trees of the forest. *Ilpuli* – in which morans partake of meat feasts deep within the forest to convalesce and restore their strength, commune with God, develop brotherliness and test their courage. Our spirituality is ultimately at one with the forest and everyday life. Our culture has preserved *Naimina Enkiyio* since it is the spiritual centre of our lives”²⁷.

Box 5. Contributions to Livelihoods: Sacred Groves in India and Ghana

In several sacred groves of the Western Ghats of India, people are allowed to collect fallen dry wood, fruit from the forest floor, honey, sap (by tapping *Caryota urens* to make an alcoholic beverage) and other products. In some groves, cattle grazing is permitted. In most groves however, timber cannot be felled without the express permission of the deity, which is obtained through a ritual process known as *kaul*²⁸. In Ghana, the use of products from sacred groves varies between and within communities. It partly depends on the power of the spirit of the grove in question. In the village of Nanhini, no villagers enter the grove of the goddess Numafoa or ignore her taboos. In the same village, a second deity has less influence and so the taboos are not so strictly followed. Each grove has particular governing rules. In some cases, entry to a sacred grove is strictly limited, but in others the area may be exploited or restricted for certain forest resources. In one sacred grove in Nanhini, palms can be tapped for wine, and medicines and other specified products can be gathered, but it cannot be used for farming or hunting²⁹.

Box 6. The Ironies of Successful Conservation: Sacred Groves in India

It is ironic that the most successful Asian conservation programmes have in many cases, already cut out the middleman – in this case the government. Sacred groves, or ‘life reserves’, as some locals call them, survive today without benefit from government gazettelement, without government nature wardens, without government education centres and sometimes even without government goodwill. Even when establishing new woodlands near busy towns, it has been as found that when specially carved ‘deified’ markers are placed next to newly planted trees, and sprinkled with powder used in worship, people start treating the special trees with respect and to ‘worship’ them. Even more importantly, they water the deified saplings. Woodlands flourish because they serve peoples’ physical and spiritual needs. Sacred groves reflect a refreshing view of nature for the people, by the people³⁰.

Box 7. Culture and Science in Marine Protected Areas: Western Melanesia

Recent collaboration between Torres Strait Islanders and Australian conservation authorities has helped establish a number of indigenous marine protected areas. These have integrated sacred, totemic sites and distinctive coral reef habitats. The experience suggests that cultural and ceremonial sites in the seas can work to enhance marine conservation, and reciprocally, how marine protected area approaches can protect sacred sites and traditional environmental knowledge³¹.

Box 8. Collaborating to Protect Sacred Wetlands: Lake Tsomoriri in Ladakh

Tsomoriri is a high altitude wetland of immense spiritual, cultural and ecological significance in South Eastern Ladakh. It is held sacred by the local community as a life giver. This once remote wetland basin was opened to tourism, economic exploitation, loss of cultural heritage and ecological degradation after 1990 when a road was built up to Korzok, a settlement on the western side of the lake. WWF-India has been collaborating with the local community to help provide economic benefits from sustainable tourism in the area. This involves the provision of proper camping sites, vehicle parking, garbage collection and disposal, sanitation system and tourist fee collection. Lake Tsomoriri was pledged as Sacred Gift to the Earth in 2000³².

Box 9. Whole Landscapes as Sacred Sites

The Atacameño people of Chile conceive places as sacred insofar as they share relationships with other places. The ancestor-mountains (Tate-Mayllkus), with the precious water they hold, are sacred insofar as they share relationships with mother earth (Pachamama), which they impregnate and make fecund. Both entities represent opposing male and female principles and form a unity³³.

Box 10. Variations in Size and Tenure of Sacred Groves

The Mawal and Mulshi Talukas of Maharashtra are communities who have lived in close association with forests for thousands of years, and have venerated deities associated with sacred groves. Of the 40 groves in the area, most are extremely small. Each grove by itself can not be said to be of great species richness. Taken together, however, they include most of the plant species that are present in this region of the Western Ghats, which is an acknowledged biodiversity hot spot. Research has indicated that the size of each grove does not correlate with their species richness, suggesting that the number of species is more closely related to the level of protection rather than with size.

Box 11. Finding the right legal frameworks: the Sacred Kaya Forests of Kenya

The sacred *Kaya* Forests are situated in the coastal plain and hills of Kenya, and have a very high conservation value. They tend to be residual patches (between 10-200 ha) of once extensive lowland forests. The *Kayas* owe their existence directly to the culture and history of the coastal Mijikenda ethnic groups, and have been maintained by the Elders as sacred places and burial grounds. However, over the past 30 years a number of internal and external pressures have threatened the remaining forests and groves. National Park status was originally considered as a means of protecting them, but this designation would have denied the Mijikenda peoples access to their sacred groves. Another option was to have the *Kayas* declared as forest reserves under the jurisdiction of Kenya's Forest Department. However, local people were aware of the Forest Department's shortcomings, and were fearful that their rights would be denied. Since 1992 some of the *Kaya* forests have been gazetted by the government, and declared as national monuments under the Antiques and Monuments Act, which comes under the National Museums of Kenya. A special Coastal Conservation Unit, funded by WWF, has been set up at the museum. This is helping to conserve the forests as well as stimulate interest in the cultural values and traditions that sustained these forests. It remains to be seen how effective the national monuments status will be for protecting the forests^{34, 35}.

Annex: Definition of Key Terms

Community³⁶

This paper uses the term local community to refer to ‘local communities embodying traditional lifestyles’ as per Article 8j of the Convention on Biological Diversity. However, it is worth briefly exploring other important aspects of the concept of community here. This paper uses the notion of community to denote formal rural groups with shared identities, values, knowledge and interests in sacred sites. This perspective includes communities of interest, which are not necessarily defined by physical location. These interests may include:

- cultural and spiritual identity
- property, user and access rights
- livelihoods
- biodiversity conservation and ecological restoration

In the past, the term community was often misleadingly used to refer to groups of people from the same *locality*. However, groups with shared identities, values, and interests may live dispersed over large geographical areas, and perhaps use special sites only seasonally, such as the *Saami* in Northern Scandinavia. It is also now widely recognised that groups of people may live in the same locality but relate to the environment in quite different ways. Such ‘communities’ are not always homogenous groups, but can be differentiated along many axes such as ethnicity, cultural values, gender, age, knowledge, access to and control of resources like land, labour and capital and so on. These social differences shape identities and access to resources, and have a profound influence on who benefits from and who bears the costs conservation and development interventions.

Culture

Culture is a broad term which is often defined as shared knowledge, values and norms that are transmitted, usually with some modifications, from one generation to the next through processes of socialisation. Culture is manifested in language, customs and traditions, social institutions, ways of life, modes of subsistence, technology, inventions, artistic expression and other forms of human creativity and innovation³⁷; it incorporates values, activities and objects of everyday life. The sense of the sacred has distinct and particular cultural forms of expression.

Indigenous Peoples³⁸

The term ‘indigenous’ as used in this paper stands for ‘indigenous and tribal’ according to the definition in Article 1 of the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries. The Convention applies to:

1. Tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own traditions or by special laws and regulations.
2. Peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present State

boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.

The same article also states: “Self-identification as indigenous or tribal shall be regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining groups to which the provisions of this Convention apply”.

Institutions

In social science these are understood to mean regularised patterns of social behaviour which emerge from rules, values, norms and dominant worldviews. They are relatively stable norms, which provide meaning and inform regular patterns of behaviour. They subsist independently of individuals and usually escape the control of any one individual. Institutions are also recursive, in that they are made and remade through peoples’ practices. They may be formal, such as the rule of law; or informal, such as social values and norms³⁹.

Natural

In this paper, the term natural is used to refer to the non-built environment. There is considerable debate over the meaning of *natural* in the development and environmental literature. Anthropologists point out that what we consider to be ‘nature’ and ‘natural’, and how we ‘engage with the natural’ varies across cultures. The western tradition often views nature as something separate from people, sometimes as an adversarial force to conquer and control, a view not shared by most indigenous and traditional peoples.

Research suggests that many so called ‘natural’ or ‘pristine wildernesses’ are in fact cultural landscapes, either created by humans or modified by human activities, and that traditional peoples have been the ‘authors’ of some *in situ* biodiversity⁴⁰.

Participation

This paper uses the terms ‘participation’ and ‘involvement’ synonymously. There are numerous ways to define and understand patterns of participation. One recent definition, which captures the contemporary meaning of participation as a political process, describes it as a “voluntary process whereby people, individually or through an organized grouping, can exchange information, express opinions and interests, and have the potential to influence decisions or the outcome of the matter at hand”⁴¹. It can take place at all institutional and geographical levels – local, regional, national and international.

Sacred

The word sacred comes from the Latin *sacrare*, meaning to consecrate, or to make holy⁴². In classical terms, the sacred is that which is set apart as holy for religious reasons, usually by religious ceremony. It is consecrated *by* religion, and consecrated *to* religious use. The sacred is often contrasted to that which is secular, profane or common-place. Thus, a sacred site is frequently understood to mean a place set aside, with a point of entry, with a religious experience within⁴³.

However, this definition may not adequately capture the relevance of the sacred as experienced by many indigenous and traditional communities. For instance, among the indigenous peoples of North America, any part of the earth or landscape may unfold the whole⁴⁴, and all beings are seen as sacred: the minerals, plants, animals, and insects. The concepts of ‘sacred and profane’ or ‘sacred and non-sacred’, as fixed parts of the landscape do not apply to such sacred experiences.

Sacred symbols are used to invoke a sense of spiritual awe, wonder and mystery. Indigenous peoples often use natural things as sacred symbols, because they are seen to embody spiritual essence.

Site

In this paper the term site refers to a physical area, such as a forest, woodland or grove of trees, river, lake, lagoon, coastal area, mountain, valley, etc.

Spiritual

Spiritual usually denotes an interest in things of the *spirit*. While there are many definitions and theories of spirit, in the broadest sense it may be considered as an non-material divine power which generates and animates corporeal things. It may also be viewed as the divine principle of life or consciousness which subsists independently of existence, but which nevertheless pervades the universe.

Stakeholder

In the context of this paper, a stakeholder is any person, group or institution that has an interest in sacred natural site activities. Stakeholders include both intended beneficiaries and intermediaries. Some organisations divide stakeholders into 2 broad groups: the primary stakeholders (local on site users) who expects to benefit from or be affected by interventions; and secondary stakeholders (such as the wider or even international community) who may play an intermediary role⁴⁵.

Traditional

The word ‘tradition’ is derived from the Latin *traditio* which means to ‘transfer’ or to ‘transmit’. As used in contemporary speech, the terms tradition and traditional are often misleadingly associated with a static body of beliefs or practices. However, the root meaning helps redraw attention to the dynamic, social process of ‘handing-on’ rather than the content of that which is transmitted per se.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

This has been defined as a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationships of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment⁴⁶. The Dene Cultural Institute of Canada defines traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) as “a body of knowledge and beliefs transmitted through oral tradition and first-hand observation. It includes a system of classification, a set of empirical observations about the local environment, and a system of self-management that governs resource use. Ecological aspects are closely tied to social and spiritual aspects of the knowledge system. The quantity and quality of TEK varies among community members, depending on gender, age, social status, intellectual capability, and profession (hunter, spiritual leader, healer, etc.). With its roots firmly in the past, TEK is both cumulative and dynamic, building upon the experience of earlier generations and adapting to the new technological and socio-economic changes of the present” (cited in Burgess 1999: 11⁴⁷). Tradition itself does not preclude growth, innovation and adaptation of knowledge. “What is ‘traditional’ about traditional knowledge is not its antiquity, but *the way it is acquired and used*. In other words, the social process of learning and sharing knowledge, which is unique to each indigenous culture, lies at the very heart of its ‘traditionality’. Much of this knowledge is

actually quite new, but it has a social meaning, and legal character, entirely unlike the knowledge indigenous people acquire from settlers and industrialised societies”⁴⁸.

End Notes

¹ See Appendix 2 for definition of terms.

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⁴ Bharucha, E. (1999): 'Cultural and spiritual values related to the conservation of biodiversity in the sacred groves of the Western Ghats'. In UNEP (1999): op.cit.

⁵ Hamilton, L. (1998): Forest and Tree Conservation through Metaphysical Constraints. In UNESCO (1998): **'Natural' Sacred Sites. Cultural Diversity and Biological Diversity**. Proceedings of International Symposium, Paris, 22-25 September 1998

⁶ Schaaf, T. (1999): op.cit.

⁷ Malhotra, K. C. (1998): 'Cultural and Ecological Value of Natural Sacred Biodiversity Sites in Orissa, India: threats and opportunities'. In UNESCO (1998): op.cit.

⁸ Schaaf, T. (1998): In UNESCO (1998): op.cit.

⁹ UNESCO (2000): 'Culture-Based Environmental Conservation for Sustainable Development'. UNESCO Draft Project Document.

¹⁰ Agrawal, A. (1995): 'Dismantling the Divide between Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge'. Development and Change 26:413-439.

¹¹ Laird, S. (1999): 'Forests, Culture and Conservation'. In UNEP (1999): op.cit

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¹³ Goodland, R. (1985): 'Tribal Peoples and Economic Development: The Human Ecological Dimension'. In McNeely, J. & Pitt, D. (Eds)(1985): **Culture and Conservation: The Human Dimension in Environmental Planning**. Kent: Croon Helm

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¹⁶ Oviedo, G. (2001): 'Notes on the Panel's Presentations and Discussions'. Symposium on the Importance of the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) for the Conservation of Biodiversity. Mexico City, June 12, 2001.

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¹⁸ Whiteley, P. & Masayesva, V. (1999): '*Paavahu and Paanaqso'a*: The Wellsprings of Life and the Slurry of Death.' In UNEP (1999): op.cit.

¹⁹ WWF Madagascar Programme (2001): 'Linking Faiths and Conservation in the Madagascar Dry Forest Ecoregion'. Draft English Executive Summary of Final Report.

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- ²⁰ Kalland, A. (1999): 'A Japanese View on Whales and Whaling'. In UNEP (1999): op.cit.
- ²¹ Falconer, J. (1999): 'Non-timber forest products in Southern Ghana: traditional and cultural uses of forests'. In UNEP (1999): op.cit.
- ²² See for example:
- Ramsar (2001): **The Cultural Heritage of Wetlands**. Ramsar, Gland, Switzerland.
 - Barrow, E. (Draft 2001): 'Use is not all. The Importance of Sacred Tree Values in Conservation: Linking Livelihood, Environmental and Spiritual Security'. IUCN Draft Discussion Paper, October 2001. IUCN Forest Programme, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.
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- ²³ Nga Kai O Te Moana (1993): 'Customary Maori Fisheries'. In UNEP (1999): **Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity**. London: Intermediate Technology Publications and UNEP
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- ²⁹ Falconer, J. (1999): in UNEP (1999): op.cit.
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³⁶ There are many excellent discussions on 'community' in the conservation and sustainable development literature. See

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³⁸ For additional comments on some definitions used in relevant WWF policies, see WWF (2000): **Indigenous and Traditional Peoples of the World and Ecoregion Conservation. An Integrated Approach to Conserving the World's Biological and Cultural Diversity**. WWF International, Gland, Switzerland, and Larson, Patricia et al. (2000): **Indigenous Peoples and Conservation Organizations. Experiences in Collaboration**. WWF-US, Washington.

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⁴⁴ *ibid*.

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