



SACRED NATURAL SITES connect people, nature and spirituality

Putting endogenous development on the conservation agenda

Over the last decade, cultural and spiritual values have come to be recognised as crucial elements in nature conservation. Today, the major nature conservation agencies all work with representatives of faiths and spiritualities. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is at the forefront of these developments, with several commissions working on the cultural and spiritual values attributed to nature, and collaborating with local and indigenous peoples on conservation issues. This work is gradually getting endogenous development onto the conservation agenda.

The IUCN defines sacred natural sites as 'areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities'. Examples include mountains, groves of trees, springs and caves. In addition, sacred natural sites are often safe havens for biological and cultural diversity, and represent long-standing relationships between human beings and nature. They offer examples of how people connect to nature in meaningful and often spiritual ways. Sacred natural sites are found all over the world, and many are located in protected areas of nature (which represent 12% of the world surface area), biodiversity hotspots (1.4%), indigenous lands (20%) and wilderness areas (40%). Many sacred sites are of course located outside protected areas, in eco-agricultural systems, community forests, semi-urban areas and even city centres.

Improving management of sacred sites

The creation of protected areas has often led to the exclusion of local people whose sacred sites fall within the boundaries of these areas. Nature conservation organisations are starting to recognise that strategies are needed that reconcile biodiversity and livelihood values. The

In our globalising world, we can grow ... certainly in terms of spirituality and cultural diversity

IUCN's Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) has brought attention to the role of sacred sites and landscapes and their custodians in biodiversity conservation.

Sacred natural sites: IUCN Guidelines for Protected Area Managers

- Recognise sacred natural sites already located in protected areas.
- Integrate sacred natural sites located in protected areas into planning processes and management processes.
- Promote stakeholder consent, participation, inclusion and collaboration.
- Encourage improved knowledge and understanding of sacred natural sites.
- Protect sacred natural sites while providing appropriate management access and use.
- Respect the rights of sacred natural site custodians within an appropriate framework of national policy.

Download the guidelines:

<http://data.iucn.org/dbtw-wpd/edocs/PAG-016.pdf>

Endogenous development approaches can offer solutions for conservation and protection of both cultural and biological diversity at these sacred sites, both inside and outside protected areas.

Central to the CSVPA Task Force's work is the notion that most biodiversity conservation management is in fact closely linked to 'people's management':

adequately empowering local people and site custodians so that they can maintain their relationships with the places that are special and sacred to them. This is of crucial importance. The CSVPA is

developing ways of conserving biological diversity by fostering the deep and dynamic cultural connections that communities have with elements in their landscape. One tool for facilitating protection and conservation of sacred sites is the new Guidelines for Protected Area Managers (see box), which were released at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Barcelona in October 2008. The guidelines can be used as a planning tool for developing conservation approaches that include peoples' worldviews and are flexible enough to adapt to changing cultural values.

Achieving recognition of sacred sites

In its work on endogenous development, the COMPAS network has encountered many cases of sacred natural sites playing an important role in people's livelihoods. Latin American COMPAS partners describe some of these experiences in a chapter in the forthcoming book *Precious Earth, Nature, Culture and the Sacred: Conserving nature and culture at Sacred Natural Sites during times of change and uncertainty*. The COMPAS contribution describes the relations between sacred sites, biodiversity and 'well-being' as defined by indigenous communities.

The chapter includes an example from Guatemala, where sacred sites are regarded by the indigenous Maya people as having a mythical origin. Sacred sites are defined by the Maya as natural or constructed spaces where cosmic energy is channelled for communication with the ancestors. The sites are used for spiritual and practical education, philosophy, science, technology and art. Sacred sites



Maya celebration of *Wajxaqib' B'atz'*, the lunar calendar, at Santa Cruz del Quiché, Guatemala.

play a crucial role in the Maya people's reaffirmation of their identity. However, many have been expropriated by the state for the construction of roads, housing and the development of tourism.

Therefore, Mayan community and spiritual leaders, united in the Oxlajuj Ajpop organisation, have formulated a 'Legislative proposal for a law on indigenous people's sacred sites'. The aim of getting the law passed is to achieve respect for, access to and recognition, use and conservation of Mayan sacred sites. It is also proposed that administration of sacred sites should be in the hands of the indigenous people, but with state support through a ministry. The law, currently under discussion in the Guatemalan parliament, is not simply

aiming at a new administrative arrangement. It also expresses many elements of well-being and Mayan cosmovision. Once passed by the government, the law will be a precedent for other themes such as education and health, as well as rebuilding the State and legal system, so that they are rooted in Mayan identity.

In addition to developing the legislative proposal, Oxlajuj Ajpop works as a COMPAS partner to strengthen Maya identity by revitalising traditional Maya medicine, supporting the conservation of biodiversity and working towards food safety. At regional level, a COMPAS network has been created in which over twenty community-based organisations,

Interacting worldviews and sacred natural sites

Spiritual: Reciprocity with plants and animals shows deep respect for nature and the spiritual.

Social: Sacred natural sites can strengthen social cohesion and improve well-being.

Material: Custodians of sacred natural sites can play a role in practical conservation measures.

NGOs, governmental organisations, educational and religious institutions are represented in the Municipalities of Momostenango and Quetzaltenango.

Source of inspiration

As you contemplate the relevance of sacred sites to your own work please remember that, in this globalising world, we can grow almost endlessly, perhaps not beyond the limitations of ecosystems, but certainly in terms of spirituality and cultural diversity. In the midst of rapid biodiversity loss, we can learn how nature inspires people all around the world and find out how it is held sacred as a life-support system upon which the diversity of cultures and our well-being ultimately depend.



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