

With Guest editors | Bas Verschuuren and Robert Wild

# Langscape

Sacred Natural Sites;  
Sources of Biocultural Diversity





**Langscape** is an extension of the voice of Terralingua. It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts about the importance and value of biocultural diversity. We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating biocultural diversity through scientific and traditional knowledge, within an elegant sensory context of articles, stories and art.



On the cover: Wixárika yarn paintings often depict the interconnection of the spiritual and natural world. The Wixárika Mara'akame pictured here (in ceremonial clothing), calls upon the eagle spirit under the watchful eye of the sun and the moon. Source: Yarn painting by Gonzalo Hernandez, courtesy of the Huchol Center for Cultural Survival. <http://www.thehuicholcenter.org>

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**Guest Editors:** Bas Verschuuren and Robert Wild, Sacred Natural Sites Initiative.

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Terralingua  
UNITY IN BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY

SACRED  
NATURAL  
SITES

**J**oin Terralingua and the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative as we explore the rich interconnections between Sacred Natural Sites and Biocultural Diversity.

Biocultural Diversity is a living network made up of the millions of species of plants and animals that have evolved in relationship with thousands of human cultures and languages. Languages, cultures, and ecosystems are interdependent. They're bound together through the myriad ways in which people have interacted with the natural environment, material, social and spiritual.

Through a unique lens of stories, photographs, articles, and a diversity of perspectives this volume of *Langscape* introduces you to the value of Sacred Natural Sites as valuable sources of biocultural diversity. They are the amongst the oldest places at which intersecting human culture and wild nature have deeply shaped humanity. Their conservation is complex but important not only for the survival of biodiversity and cultural diversity but also for human well-being and life as a whole.

The collaboration between Terralingua and the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative started with the "Voices of the Earth" project which supports custodians of sacred groves in Zanzibar and Ghana to conserve their groves and resources through building on their oral history and biocultural diversity.

Collaboration has also delivered us the opportunity to work together on this volume of *Langscape* and to take you on this journey in support of the custodians and communities of sacred natural sites. It is therefore timely that we explore sacred natural sites as sources of biocultural diversity and share the lessons learned from this journey. We hope you will enjoy journeying with us through this special volume of *Langscape* and we hope you too will share what you will learn with others.

Luisa Maffi and Ortixia Dilts - Terralingua

Bas Verschuuren, Robert Wild – Sacred Natural Sites Initiative





## WALKING OUR TALK: A Message from our Editor-in-Chief

**I**n all its essence, spirituality for me is cultivating my ability to walk my path with heart. By quieting myself in ceremony and nature, I am able to receive the spiritual nourishment to see the bigger picture but also to apply compassion and mindfulness to my daily work. I have come to the conclusion at this time that ‘vision without action, is as useless as action without vision’. Though *Langscape* itself, came to me within such context, ‘to support the voices of our ancestors through the act of beauty’, it has taken a lot of hard work to move that vision to reality.

This issue of *Langscape* continues to explore the intangible element to biocultural diversity conservation; compassion, reverence and respect for all life. I believe that the protection of sacred natural sites is invaluable to our planetary crisis: biologically, culturally, spiritually and economically. This issue draws together perspectives of indigenous cultures and scientific principles to show the ‘Sacred’ in the practice and conservation of global and local biocultural diversity and thereby stewardship of the earth.

To take a moment aside, over the years I have witnessed the power of sacred ceremony to heal and nourish the well being of First Nations communities in

British Columbia. Several elders have also expressed to me, in conversation, the need for a safe place in nature to hold ceremony and share their teachings for the sake of their communities, particularly for healing of drug and alcohol abuse.

I see a profound link between Sacred Ceremony and Biocultural Diversity, I would like to summarize some of these main highlights.

1) *Songs*: songs in ceremony are most often in the original language, passed down through countless generations. Sometimes this is the only place left where the original languages are still spoken. These songs hold great meaning, and hold the world view of the original culture intact.

2) *Traditional environmental knowledge* is shared through the teachings and stories. For example the use of cedar, sage and tobacco, and the ways taught to gather plants. The *medicines* change depending on the region. Between communities, medicines are exchanged and gifted, returning us to the theme of reciprocity, a sharing of resources, which has been lost over the years.

3) *Prayer*: more often than not, prayer opens the way for a compassionate earth based perspective, an

*Ortixia, Salt Spring Island, BC. Photo: kmax © 2012*



*When we enter the sweat lodge we speak the words, ‘For all my relations’, for the work we do here is for the benefit of all our ancestors seven generations back and our children seven generations after. But it also refers to ‘how we relate to all things seen and unseen as we walk through the sands of time’.*

opening prayer for instance, gives thanks for the life and abundance around us, (*the standing nation, the two-legged, the four legged*). In one ceremony a whole round of prayer is dedicated to water, it is conducted by women at dawn. Often parts of prayer are conducted in the original language as well. With each region I encounter, the first thing I learn is how to say ‘thank you’.

4) *Structure*: putting together a ceremony is very specific, disciplined and deliberate. These teaching are passed on through countless generations. They teach us to honour our resources with care. Firekeepers play an important role in ceremony. It is a highly disciplined task, often firekeepers will goad each other with jokes to keep each other in line, and conservation of firewood is an esteemed quality in a firekeeper.

5) *Community support*: coming together in humility, prayer for our families, and healing. Moments like these bring communities together with a sense of purpose. When a community comes together with a united purpose and intent, love, prayer, thankfulness, it generates ‘spirit’ that nourishes each person on their return journey home into their daily lives.

Traditional ceremony holds a key place in healing within communities. From a ceremonial perspective this also reflects a planetary crisis, where Mother Earth has been mistreated and abused and we need to remember to care for her once more. As each region has their own language and landscape, each ceremony is specific to the region and honours the food, medicine and resources within. Traditional ceremony teaches us to be stewards of the earth, and take care of each other. On a global level, with our 7,000 different languages (cultures, prayer ways) we can cover a lot of ground.

Sacred Natural Sites are sources of Biocultural Diversity; to protect sacred sites are to protect safe havens for cultures to practice stewardship of the earth and

community well-being. I am grateful for the opportunity to bridge my two disciplines together within this body of work. I humbly give thanks to the elders and others who have shared their teachings with me over the past 20 years, of significance, but too many to name: Dan Whetung (Anishnabe), Halukwii Edgar (Nuu-chah-nulth), Bill and Laeka (Hul’qumi’num), STOLØET John Elliott (W̱SÁNEĆ), the community of the Native American Church, Denise Legasse (Green Goddess), the late Anna Douthwright (Christian), and my partner, David Gooding (Carrier, Rainbow tradition).

To date, I would call this the most challenging Langscape issue ever. As a ‘rainbow child’ in the field of academia, I have had to face my preconceptions over and over again, needing to return to Nature to quiet myself, to respond more mindfully to the onslaught of changes, word counts, and professional standards and yet hold to my mission with elegance. My dear thanks to Luisa Maffi, Bas Verschuuren and Robert Wild for assisting me in this process, for your patience in calm explanations of terms, for all your hard work in soliciting these submissions, and your openness to present your work within the context of my scope. *Extra special thanks* to Bas Verschuuren, though despite the nine hour difference in our time zones, worked side by side with me on this issue, every step of the way.

In my intimate circles we have a proverb that is said over and over again, maybe in yours too: *be careful what you pray for, for it may certainly come true!* This issue of Langscape, for me, expresses that intangible result. This is the first Langscape ever that is going to print!

For All my Relations,  
Ortixia Dilts  
Editor-in-chief, Langscape  
Creative Designer, Terralingua





## GUEST EDITORIAL

# Sacred Natural Sites; Sources of Biocultural Diversity.

We are privileged to be invited to collaborate with Terralingua and to guest edit this volume of *Langscape* “Sacred Natural Sites; Sources of Biocultural Diversity”. Editing this issue has allowed us to invite exciting contributions ranging from interviews with spiritual leaders in Guatemala to stories on spiritual journeys in Kyrgyzstan!

The contributions are very different in nature, interviews, photo stories, academic articles, practitioners’ experiences and even personal revelations. Together they cover nearly all continents and span a broad range of geographical locations including Mexico, Guatemala, the United States of America, Greece, Ethiopia, Uganda, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines and Malayan Borneo.

What is also exciting is that these contributions discuss a variety of ecosystems, plants and animals that are protected and conserved because they are part of sacred natural sites. The critically endangered and red-listed Philippine crocodile, the vulnerable wetland habitats of the Apache, the alpine vegetation of the snowcapped Rwenzori Mountains as well as the pristine forests of the Gamo highlands. All these places have been protected by generations of people that have lived in spiritual relationship with these ecosystems.

In the Gamo highlands this spiritual dimension consists of close communication with the ancestral spirits that has aided a system of taboos leading to the sustainable use and equitable management of the forest. In the Philippines similar traditional beliefs are being revived in order to restore the last remaining and

dwindling populations of the Philippine crocodile. In Greece the church has long since pervaded the traditional spiritual domain of nature spirits inhabiting trees and groves that are now protected from logging by the Virgin Mary and orthodox saints.

Deep and meaningful relations between humans and nature set sacred natural sites apart in the landscape while the sites themselves sustain cultural and biological relationships within it. Their waters help cure the Apache people from disease whilst in Kyrgyzstan the water from sacred springs can aid woman wishing for a child. The Maya also recognise the healing energies of sacred sites. Besides sacred natural sites being physical places where healing can be performed they are also paces of ceremony and reflection.

In a unique interview, Felipe Gomez shows us that the Mayan calendar describes the importance of people being in harmony with the cosmos. He shows us that sacred sites are often intentionally chosen to sensitize people to these cosmic energies based on reference to astrological or planetary events and observations. This is also the reality of the Huicholes in Mexico who, as described by Baker, hold the Wirkuta sacred site to be the birthplace of the sun.

Several contributors in this volume point out their being restored to a sense of well-being through life-changing experience of sacred lands such as in the story of He Ren Gao. On a circumambulation of Mt. Kawegabo she overcame the physical hardship through this sacred Tibetan landscape. As she reaches towards the end of the

*Bas Verschuuren and Robert Wild on Tla O qui at land, Vancouver Island, 2010. Photo Christopher McLeod.*





*“Cloch-Chearcal Agus Cairn also called Dromberg Stone Circle is one of Europe’s ancient sacred sites now looked after by a government institution. Located in county Corc in Ireland it is also Ireland’s most most frequented sacred site by tourists. This poses challenges to its management and integrity thousands of years after it’s traditional custodians have passed away. Photo: Bas Verschuuren, 2006.*

journey she opens up to the imbued natural environment that sets her in awe and reveals to her deeper insights about truth and life.

Pilgrimage is walking with a spiritual or moral purpose. It can be a means to a first time spiritual experience or a personal revelation but it can also be a means to restore oneself to his or hers’ spiritual compass. To Dehose taking summer students to visit a sacred spring on their Apache reserve is a carefully planned event. After the students have spent some weeks working on practical wetland restoration, they come to the sacred spring so that they themselves can be restored to the land. It’s an empowering experience that instills a sense of respect for the land and links their identity to it.

In some cases the idea of protecting nature from man’s harm has been poorly implemented through exclusionary conservation practices. In this volume are two such examples where the original custodians were denied access to their ancestral homelands. Mahumza shows us how through his experience as a conservation planner, he discovered the culture and spiritual values as well as the institutions of the traditional custodians. This discovery led to their official recognition and their integration in the management of the Rwenzori Mountains National Park in Uganda.

In the other narrative Tekguk relates that once a year the Dusun communities of Malayan Borneo get permission from the protected area authorities to perform

their traditional pilgrimage to the summit of Mt. Kilabalu to honour the spirits of their ancestors. In order to effect this pilgrimage the protected area agency year has to lift World Heritage Status and, for one day, close “the park’s” mountain to tourists. The community members have to pay an access fee to go on their traditional pilgrimage, but they find the benefits to their community and their social and spiritual lives overwhelming. Despite past injustice they too are grateful for being able to move in the footsteps of their ancestors.

The article from Natural Justice shows us how biocultural community protocols can support communities to set their own agenda within the context of traditional, national and international law. Drawing on examples from Ethiopia and Ghana the article shows us that community protocols can aid the conservation of sacred groves in the face of gold mining and forestry operations. These and other developments slowly increase the receptivity of national policies and laws to the rights and needs of the custodians of sacred sites.

We hope that you will be inspired by the rich expressions of biocultural diversity at sacred natural sites in this volume of *Langscape*, and you will be encouraged to support these sites and their custodian communities into the future. ☸

Bas Verschuuren and Robert Wild



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*Photo: (detail) © Kalliopi Stara . See information page 60*



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Where there is a sacred site there is a space and a  
force for the human beings to live in balance and  
harmony with themselves, nature and the universe.

Felipe Gomez, pg 24



# Contributors

## Guest Editors

**Bas Verschuuren** currently works as a freelance researcher and conservationist with EarthCollective [www.earthcollective.net](http://www.earthcollective.net) doing applied research and conservation projects the integration of cultural and spiritual values in management and policy. Bas collaborates with a range of conservation NGO's, government agencies and research institutes on a variety of projects in Europe, South, Central and North America, Asia, Africa and Australia. His work leads him to lecture and publish (academic) articles, reports and books, especially on sacred natural sites.

**Robert Wild** is a conservation practitioner with over twenty five years living and working with communities at protected areas in tropical countries. A city child who in his teens wandered London's peripheral farmlands, sought out its secret locations and learnt its country lore. Years later he realized he had grown up with a sacred site at the bottom of his garden! Thanks to the elders of the forests of East Africa, he learned read the signs in the landscape and yes he also did the western education stuff.

Together Bas and Rob, have for the past 6 years been Co-Chairs of the IUCN Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas, they are now focusing on the development of the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative. The Initiative builds a programme of work with custodians, communities, scientists, conservationists and other stakeholders in support of the protection, conservation and revitalization of sacred natural sites and territories [www.sacrednaturalsites.org](http://www.sacrednaturalsites.org).

## Contributors

**African Custodians:** Munguti Kabibia, Murari Kanyoro, Sabella Kaguna, Mary Kathisya, Mwaro Baya Kaluwa, Sidi Thoya Maitha, Kazungu Mboro Thuva, HDr Rimberia Mwongo, HDr Jeremiah Imungi, Sanabulya Edward, Kobulemi Serina, Nyangabyaki Perezi, Nyasirwaki Sadiki, Kemal Hassen Tafo, Aman Mame Harke, Marshalllo Temo Dermo, Lelisa Debele Denboba, Mphatheleni Makaulule, Nevhutanda Nkhetheni Phineas, Netshidzivhe Mbengeni Nyamukamadi, Netshilungwi

Makondelela Aron, and Nevhutanda Nyamukamadi Nyadzanga.

**Felipe Gomez** is a K'iche Maya, a Ajq'ij spiritual leader, and a Ajkun traditional healer. Since 1992, Felipe has been working with Oxlajuj Ajpop, the National Conference of Spiritual Mayan Ministers in Guatemala. Felipe supports and promotes structures for the ancestral authorities to enable them to dignify their sacred sites and revitalise their ancient Mayan knowledge.

**Janelle Marie Baker** is an ecological anthropologist who worked with Wixárikari to record their ethnoecological knowledge about amaranth for her MA thesis at the University of Alberta (2005). She continues to visit Wixárika friends in Mexico and has a close relationship with the Huichol Center for Cultural Survival.

**Rylan Bourke** is a student at the Institute of American Indian Arts. **Julee DeHose** is a graduate student at New Mexico Highlands University. **Judy DeHose** is President of the Cibecue Community School Board. **Jayar Early** graduated from Cibecue High School and plans to attend Eastern Arizona College this fall. **Jonathan Long** is an ecologist with the USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station.

**Stephanie Booker** is a lawyer and consultant for Natural Justice and has a background in anthropology and politics. She has a particular interest in extractive industries, business and major development projects and corresponding effects on indigenous peoples and local communities including company/community dialogues.

**Holly Shrumm** works for Natural Justice and has a background in anthropology, zoology and community-based natural resource management. Based in Sabah, Malaysia, Holly co-coordinates the Asia Regional Initiative on Biocultural Community Protocols together with COMPAS, the LIFE Network, UNU-IAS and community partners in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. She has most recently coedited Biocultural community protocols: a toolkit for community facilitators.



**Moses Muhumuza** is a Ugandan Graduate teacher of Biology and Chemistry. He has Msc. degree in Biology and is currently pursuing a Ph.D in Environmental Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. He is also a fulltime lecturer at the Mountains of the Moon University in Uganda.

**Desalegn Desissa**, has extensive research experience both in Ethiopia and other African countries. He has extensive work experience in project coordination with a wide range of community based participatory research for forest conservation and management. His work has mainly focused on the importance of fragmented woodlands as living indigenous sacred sites, with high biocultural value closely connected with traditional systems of management.

**Dr. John R. Healey**, Senior Lecturer in Forest Ecology at Bangor University, with extensive research experience, including 'Biodiversity conservation in ancient church and monastery yards in Ethiopia'; Indicators and tools for restoration and sustainable management of closed-deciduous forests in East Africa, Combining ecological knowledge and socio-economic perspectives in participatory improvement of multistrata agroforestry systems in forest margins

Coming from Cyprus, **Inanc Tekguc** uses a camera to catalyze his passions for photography, traveling, and biocultural diversity conservation. After an MA in Visual Anthropology in 2010, he has been volunteering for organizations working with indigenous people, training his photography skills, and participating in biocultural diversity related courses as a photographer/videographer.

**Jan van der Ploeg** is an environmental anthropologist. In 2003 he founded the Mabuwaya Foundation. Mabuwaya is a compilation of the Filipino words mabuhay (long live) and buwaya (crocodile). The foundation aims to conserve the Philippine crocodile in its natural freshwater habitat. For more information see [www.mabuwaya.org](http://www.mabuwaya.org)

**Dr. Kalliopi Stara** is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Biological Applications and

Technology in the University of Ioannina, Greece. She is involved with the research on Trees and the Sacred since 2000. Her research interests lie on the scientific fields of Ethno-biology, Cultural Ecology and Environmental Education.

A researcher, **Cholponai Usubalieva-Gryshchuk** graduated from the American University in Central Asia with a BA degree in American Studies. Shortly thereupon, she developed an interest in traditional knowledge and shamanic practices, which made her travel to a number of locations in Central and Southeast Asia. Among other places, she delved into traditional practices in Kyrgyzstan, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma) and Indonesia. Currently, she works as a researcher with the Aigine Cultural and Research Centre based in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and collects materials for her PhD studies.

**He Ran Gao** finished her master degree on Landscape Ecology and Nature Conservation in Greifswald University in Germany. She first worked for a Beijing-based environmental NGO Green Earth Volunteer as project manager and now as an assistant researcher on environmental and resource policy in the Development and Research Center of the State Council.

## Editor-in-Chief

**Ortixia Dilts** has collaborated with Terralingua since 2008. Her passion for her work with Terralingua stems from her deep connection with nature. Among her 'many hats' at Terralingua, she serves as editor-in-chief/designer of *Langscape*, Terralingua's flagship publication and an emerging forum for the exploration of the many facets of biocultural diversity. Ortixia aims to educate the minds and hearts of people about the importance and value of biocultural diversity.





Bas Verschuuren and Robert Wild

# Safeguarding Sacred Natural Sites - Sustaining Nature and Culture





“Sacred natural sites are places of respect, religious practice, veneration and worship. They often have distinct natural features but they can also appear to be disarmingly “normal” being mere forests, lakes, caves, waterfalls, rocks, mountains or coastal waters”.



### Sacred natural sites networks

Today a network of undetermined magnitude spans the globe; a network of sacred natural sites. These sacred places are of fundamental biocultural importance to humanity and contain a great diversity of nature and cultural expressions. They form nodes and connections across nearly every county on all four habitable continents. Although many are acknowledged much of this network remains invisible and unknown to the majority of people. Many have in fact been destroyed over the past 50 years, and many more are becoming degraded and a disturbing number are under imminent threat.

Sacred natural sites are places of respect, religious practice, veneration and worship. They often have distinct natural features but they can also appear to be disarmingly “normal” being mere forests, lakes, caves, waterfalls, rocks, mountains or coastal waters. Almost every ‘animate’ and ‘inanimate’ landscape feature can be held to have spiritual or sacred values. Even when the whole landscape or territory is sacred, as is the case for many spiritual traditions these places are often of heightened spiritual significance. “Sacred natural sites 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” (Oviedo and Jeanrenaud, 2007).

*Dressed Shinto Statue and Buddha statue in Sensoji Temple forest garden in Asakusa, Tokyo. In Tokyo temple forest gardens still exist despite the increasing market value of land. The Ginkgo (Ginkgo Biloba) tree in the background, is classified on IUCNs red list of Threatened species as “endangered”. Ginkgo has been reintroduced into the wild from monastery gardens tended by Chinese and Japanese monks. Photo: Bas Verschuuren, 2005.*

### Custodians and Guardians

Although many people or community members may participate in practicing ceremony or ritual at sacred natural sites there is usually a special group of guardians, custodians or stewards that ensure that the sacred natural sites and their related sacred knowledge and rituals are looked after respectfully. At the heart, therefore, of sacred natural sites are their custodians. Custodians of sacred natural sites bear unique responsibilities within local, indigenous and religious communities. They are also guardians of biological diversity and knowledgeable about healing, livestock breeding, plant diversification, agricultural cycles and systems. They play a vital role in the governance of their community and their relationship to the earth. Above all, many custodians are shamans, monks, ascetics, religious and spiritual leaders and keepers of unique cultural and spiritual wisdom. They contribute to universal values that maintain human relationships with the earth.

### Ecological values and importance to conservation

Over the past decade conservation science has come to understand that sacred natural sites support high levels of biodiversity and sometimes equal or more than nearby nature reserves of larger area and often they are better





*Danil Mamyev, Custodian and Park Director with Standing Stone, Uch Enmeck Ethno-Nature Park, Karakol Sacred Valley, Altai Republic Russian Federation. Photo R.Wild, 2011.*

protected. A summary of these findings was published in 2010 (Dudley, et al), in which over 100 scientific papers were reviewed. Due to (in some cases) their limited area and human impacts they cannot conserve all species but nonetheless they contain important reserves of biodiversity. They represent areas of habitat, they contain species that are rare and endangered and some that depend entirely on sacred natural sites for their survival. Linked together in networks and integrating them in landscape scale conservation approaches greatly increases their contribution to the conservation of biodiversity.

While sacred natural sites often have significant natural values, the recognition and deliberate management of these vary across spiritual traditions and between guardians. For some nature is an essential element of the sacred value for others it is a by-product. The next section explores different religious types of sacred natural site in more detail.

### **Diversity of sacred natural sites**

A range of types of sacred natural sites can be recognised. From prehistoric, indigenous peoples, mainstream, the cultural variants - where these latter two

intersect - to a range of new, revived and cultural types. There is a wide range of overlapping and layering within and amongst these types such that the pattern is complex with many grey areas. It is important in this context that sacred natural sites of all traditions are respected and the natural elements maintained.

### **Indigenous faiths, mainstream religions and cultural intersections**

Within this huge diversity there are some distinctions that need highlighting although generalisations are difficult. The majority of sacred natural sites are associated with either indigenous, mainstream religions or the intersection of the two. The sacred natural sites of indigenous people tend to relate to natural elements that are imbued with spirits and reside in nature. These sacred natural sites are 'numinous' in that they possess agency as sources of wisdom and law (Byrne 2010). Indigenous people often express that the land itself is alive. Sacred natural sites of some mainstream religions tend to relate less to the natural elements at the site itself but associations with a transcendent deity or religious persons, holy men and saints. Often these sacred sites contain man-made structures such as mosques, chapels



or temples, and in some cases this building is expanding becoming increasingly urbanised and commercial at the expense of natural elements, especially where large-scale pilgrimages are being accommodated.

The many of 'cultural variants' of both indigenous and mainstream faiths' where these traditions as have met and melded represent a rich diversity of spiritual and cultural practice associated with sacred natural sites. Often pejoratively called 'folk' religions the fusing of local indigenous spirituality and mainstream religion should be recognised and celebrated rather than dismissed or suppressed. Given that most of the mainstream faiths sacred sites arose from earlier natural features and associated practices expunging these seems like a tree cutting off its own roots.

### **A values based approach**

Sacred natural sites by definition deal with areas of spiritual and religious values. We understand spirituality is not necessarily the same as religion, with spirituality (including religious experience) being important facet of what it means to be human. This is increasingly understood in the scientific discipline of transpersonal psychology (McIntosh, 2012) and cognitive anthropology (Atran 2010).

### **Intimate knowledge**

Sacred natural sites of indigenous practice but also several mainstream faiths are marked by intimate and often specialised knowledge related to the environment at the sites. This knowledge has often been passed on from generation to generation. Sacred natural sites also encode laws, rules and regulations for ethical and moral behaviour that often indicate to people how to live together and in harmony with their environment. Many sites record or represent the origin of a people, community or a nation, and their founding narrative or mythology. Sacred natural sites therefore have deep levels of knowledge and meaning embedded within them.

### **Secret knowledge and cultural protocols**

The spiritual knowledge and practices entrusted to site guardians may in part be secret and known only to the initiated. Because the regulation of such knowledge is mostly cultural and socially determined, so called inside and outside knowledge can be distinguished. The inside story consists of the deep cultural types of knowledge and experience, usually only for the initiated. The outside story is what most of us are allowed or perhaps required to know about these highly sensitive places.

To the interested, sensitive and sensitized person ensuring that local protocols are followed may come

naturally. Unfortunately sacred sites are often not respected. Some of the threats which they face may be caused by ignorance of their special and sensitive nature, and sadly arrogance stemming from opposing value systems. Lack of awareness may not be surprising as many sacred sites are steeped in secrecy. Community members may not be privy to certain knowledge or even aware their location let alone those people coming from outside the community.

### **Science**

Beyond a discussion of religious belief, western science, made its entry during the enlightenment period in 18th century Europe. The mainstream religions that dismissed indigenous nature spirituality, as 'superstitious' became themselves labelled superstitious as science became elevated to the only rational and objective means for knowing the truth about the world. Cartesian science has since grown to become the main instrument of states and industry. It has generated dramatic technological changes, with undoubted benefits to mankind, but arguably also with serious long-term consequences for human ontology and meaning. Recently post-modern approaches to science have started to recognise the diverse 'ways of knowing' such as those evolved by many of the world's indigenous peoples and cultures such as Ayurveda and Chinese Sciences for example. Many of these 'knowledges' have resulted from empirical testing and are increasingly recognised as sciences in their own right. Besides the recognition of 'indigenous science' local people are also endeavouring to take control over the ways that research is practiced in their communities on their lands and sacred natural sites.

### **Research protocols**

While it is true that most universities nowadays have an ethical code of conduct for research, these have not been specifically developed to include all sensitivities related to sacred natural sites. The Code of Ethics of the International Society of Ethnobiology (ISE, 2006) is probably the most comprehensive guidance invoking an overall principle of 'mindfulness' in research and laying out processes for Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), is worthy of greater promotion. Placing control over research in the hands of site guardians is central to avoid touching on any issues that are not for research. Both-Ways Management from Australia (Yunupingu and Muller 2009), and Two Eyes Learning developing in Canada (Bartlett et al, 2012) represent powerful experiences and expressions of combining western and indigenous science and indigenous beliefs and practice into a mutually respectful and powerful approach to ways of knowing.



## Action research, supporting change

Custodian and indigenous people often make mention of the extractive style in which social and anthropological research had traditionally taken place and largely remains today. A very legitimate indigenous question is, “Who holds the right to study us and our knowledge with a measure of their own?” In contemporary research we find that science as a universal measure is perhaps more diverse and complex than we originally thought. Many scientists also desire to make a contribution to the complex realities and processes of change in which they take part. This has led to new and innovative forms of participatory, community and action research being developed. Using these approaches the research questions, design and organisation are open for exploration and agreement with the custodians and the communities involved and aim not to be prescribed by external interests or actors. This way, researchers can combine research with practical work in a collaborative process that aims to assist custodians and communities with issues that are set by their own agendas. The research is typically aimed at progressive problem solving, improving strategies, practices and knowledge to curb threats to sacred natural sites or to find suitable ways to support their management and conservation. Often necessity is the initial driver, as when the custodians of threatened sites realise that they need outside help to protect against outside threats.

## Site destruction by economic development

The most serious source of threats to sacred natural sites is the ever-increasing process of so-called ‘modernization’ and economic development. Commercial forestry, mineral extraction, tourism, industrial fishing and infrastructure expansion are all common causes, of sacred site destruction. The product of over 300 years of the industrialisation, the disenchantment of nature and a colonial and economic process, coupled with the development of western science, has led to land, soils, trees and food simply being commodities of an industrial economy. In addition, market based ‘global culture’ is increasingly drawing younger people away from their cultures and at the same time the elders who hold the knowledge are passing away, often with out being able to transmit it to the next generation. Population increase, consumerism, and high levels of poverty mean that the value of land for production takes on an increasing importance. These pressures internal to communities are leading to a gradual degradation, erosion and shrinkage of many sites while the external often lead to immediate destruction.

### Box 1. Initiatives supporting sacred natural sites

- **CBD: Akwé: Kon Voluntary Guidelines** for the Conduct of Cultural, Environmental and Social Impact Assessment Regarding Sacred Sites and on Lands and Waters of Indigenous and Local Communities (Secretariat of the CBD 2004).
- **IUCN-UNESCO: Best Practice Guidelines No.16** “Sacred natural Sites, Guidelines for Protected Area Managers” (Wild and McLeod, 2008).
- **The Delos Initiative:** Focusing on guidance for sacred natural sites in technologically developed countries, has published various proceedings and statements containing lessons learned from the initiatives work (<http://www.med-ina.org/delos/>).
- **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 sacred natural sites and also a Custodians Statement.
- **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.
- **International Society of Ethnobiology Code of Ethics for Research:** Acknowledges harms resulted from research undertaken without the consent of Indigenous peoples and aims to contribute to positive, beneficial and harmonious relationships.
- **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.
- **Community Protocols**, when Communities outline their aspirations for well-being to facilitate an interface between their traditional ways of life, their rights and external entities such as private companies and governments.
- **SANASI:** a research initiative that aims to present already published data on sacred natural sites in a world database. ([www.sanasi.org](http://www.sanasi.org))
- **The Sacred Natural Sites Initiative** builds an alliance of custodians, traditional knowledge holders, conservationists, academics and others in support of the conservation and revitalisation of sacred natural sites and territories ([www.sacrednaturalsites.org](http://www.sacrednaturalsites.org)).





*Joe Martin from Clayoquot Sound explains; “To us, the Tla-o-qui-ath people of Vancouver Island, Canada, our totem poles represent our constitution and how our rights and responsibilities are based on natural laws. They help us affirm that communities are not merely stake-holders, but are also rights-holders”. Photo: Bas Verschuuren/COMPAS, 2010.*

## Business responsibility

At the other end of the spectrum, some companies are slowly, often only partially, developing social and environmental responsibility. Based on the demands of their shareholders some may improve their social ‘license-to-operate’ or they simply pursue a competitive advantage over other companies as an aspect of their ‘reputational management’. An example of such a company is Lafarge, the world’s largest cement producer, which recognized the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in its 2011 Sustainability Report (Lafarge 2011). Lafarge also signed up on a broader UN platform for business to provide an authoritative global standard for preventing and addressing the risk of adverse impacts on human rights linked to business activity (see: United Nations 2011). This might be the first time that a major extractive corporation has given such recognition, which sets up an operational and public relations constraint. Under the contractual law of some countries it could also be argued as constituting implied terms of contract. Large multinationals as such do not only have the power to raise the level of the playing field on which extractive industries compete, they may also have an influence over the legal requirements that governments set for the sector within their counties and the norms that industry recognises as best practice in its field.

To date such innovations in the extractive industries are isolated cases and more positive change is badly needed as due. Due to the exponential growth of the extractive industries over the last decade they pose a global threat to sacred natural sites and their custodians. Therefore, one cannot help but think that simply

developing more stringent legally binding international and national law would be a more effective manner to achieve social equity and environmental sustainability throughout the sector. In practice too, we see that an improved dialogue with industry is required in order to develop strategies that can help curb the threats to sacred natural sites. The widespread adoption of UNDRIP and expanding this to other local communities allied with implementing its provisions for Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) would go a long way to reducing the threat to indigenous sacred natural sites, and there is no reason why the FPIC principle should be limited only to indigenous community rights. Much greater engagement with the extractive industries is required, including the promotion of a moratorium on mining in sacred natural sites and respecting these as ‘no-go areas’.

## International laws

Despite, what is an increasingly bleak picture for the survival of sacred natural sites and their indigenous guardians there are some signs of positive change and some high profile test cases. Incentives are being developed in the arena of international law and conventions, (see Booker and Shrumm in this volume). Some of the most promising conventions are known as “soft law”, countries sign up to them but their implementation is voluntary. Examples of this type of international law are the UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2007).

Other conventions are legally binding within the limitations of national law such as the Convention on



Biological Diversity. Article 8j concerns “Traditional Knowledge, Innovation and Benefit Sharing”. This article deals the conservation of biodiversity found in sacred natural sites and ecological knowledge related to this biodiversity such as through cultural and spiritual practices.

### **National Uptake**

Generally, however, it takes a long time for countries to translate the provisions of international conventions into appropriate, equitable and effective national policy and legislation. This is precious time during which sacred natural sites and their biocultural diversity are being lost. In many countries national policies and legislation on these matters are not being implemented or have a very limited degree of implementation. Especially when it comes to improving the recognition for sacred natural sites and their custodians, lobbying international policy venues such as UNESCO and the CBD has to be taken forward hand in hand with advocacy efforts at the national level, often resulting from local, regional and subnational levels.

### **Changing national context**

National governments generally require a good overview and understanding of how international policies intersect with their national legislation. Experiences in Guatemala with developing a national law for the indigenous management of sacred sites show that clarity on its intersections with other national legislation is required, see the interview with Felipe Gomez in this volume and Gomez (2010). In addition a clear plan for its implementation can be extremely helpful to convince specific government departments that the proposal is indeed feasible and has national value in terms of strengthening identity, values and social cohesion. Of course, a law proposal will have to be preceded by a detailed process of local dialogue with custodians, communities and knowledge holders, as well as regional dialogue and consultation with interest groups, companies and government departments.

### **Changing to biocultural approaches**

The modern conservation establishment is used to Western scientific and ‘rational’ approaches to biodiversity, and ecosystem management. Today conservationists are challenged to find new ways forward as they come to realise that one of the best mechanisms for conserving sacred natural sites, is to support the retention or revitalisation of indigenous practice. Indigenous practices can have many implicit meanings, some of which can be highly compatible with scientific conservation priorities.

Sacred natural sites, pilgrimage routes and other places of spiritual significance are often not sufficiently understood or recognized in conservation policy and management. Yet the growing recognition for indigenous people’s rights and their traditional knowledge provides a strong impulse for the protection and conservation of sacred natural sites. Paradoxically, religious imperatives can be the carriers of important values such as science itself may lack the mandate to carry. This reality is reflected in the IUCN Protected Areas categories guidelines, which recognise that sacred natural sites not only exist in all IUCN categories, but also under all governance types (Dudley 2008). A good example of this increased recognition is the guidelines for protected area managers to help them recognise and manage sacred natural sites inside protected areas (Wild and McLeod 2008). Other initiatives and incentives have been developed to guide the conservation of sacred natural sites of indigenous peoples and mainstream faiths, see Box 1.

### **International Protected areas target**

Many national protected area agencies will be influenced by the CBD’s 2010 Target 11, to increase the terrestrial area of under protected areas and ‘other effective means’ from the current 12.1% to 17% of land area by 2020. While there may be good opportunities from using protected area mechanisms to support the conservation of sacred natural sites there are also significant risks. Great care will be needed to ensure that social safeguards are put in place to avoid top-down exclusionist conservation policies with regard to sacred natural sites, but that legal mechanisms are developed that endorse and empower site guardians to continue their traditional management practices and remain in the ‘driving seat’. The global recognition of ICCAs is very supportive of the conservation of sacred natural sites, and the development of community responsive protected area authorities, which thus far has proved elusive in many countries, is increasingly needed.

Key directions for the conservation of biocultural diversity at sacred natural sites includes the following:

- Increasing indigenous (and other) articulation of the importance of sacred natural sites through protocols and statements - see the Statement of Common African Customary Laws for the protection of Sacred Natural Sites (page 20 of this issue),
- Sacred natural sites need to be no-go areas for the extractive industries,
- Respectful and empowering conservation processes at the national level avoiding government driven top-down process,



“a natural site with sacredness has a phenomenological significance that might take it beyond mere utility from a conservationist’s point of view. It is possible that such sites are important not just for the biodiversity of non-human species, but also for the evolution and health of the human condition in a troubled world”

(McIntosh, 2012)

- Reconciliation and rapprochement processes that respect indigenous and local community faith tradition and their sacred sites,
- Increased proactive recognition of biodiversity values by guardians
- Significant shifts in the practice of industrial forestry, agriculture and infrastructure planning to respect and avoid sacred natural sites,
- Proactive design of city expansion that retains sacred natural sites as an integral part of city landscapes and retaining their critical values to urban populations.
- Revitalisation of culture to strengthen the traditional conservation and protection of sacred natural sites,
- Revitalisation of the memory of sacred natural sites in developed countries where their importance has been lost or forgotten,
- Recognition of sacred natural sites as overall importance to the well-being of communities.

Sacred natural sites are rich sources of biocultural diversity they are the places that human culture and wild nature have critically intersected over the last 5000 years of human evolution. Their conservation is complex but important not only for the survival of biodiversity and cultural diversity but to humanity and the well-being of life as a whole. We end with a recent quote (see above) from the Scottish academic, writer and environmental activist Professor Alastair McIntosh. 🌿

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28 April 2012, SNS Custodians Meeting, Nanyuki, Kenya

# STATEMENT ON COMMON AFRICAN CUSTOMARY LAWS FOR THE PROTECTION OF SACRED NATURAL SITES

## Introduction

In April 2012, the African Biodiversity Network (ABN) organised a regional gathering of Sacred Natural Sites Custodians from four African countries (Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and South Africa). The Custodians met in Nanyuki, Kenya, to share their experiences in reviving their knowledge, practices and governance systems, as well as their concerns over the increasing threats to their Sacred Natural Sites and Territories. Custodians from these and other countries have been working with their communities to revive the memory and the practices for protecting their Sacred Natural Sites and rebuilding their traditional governance systems centred on these sites. They form a “community of practice” under the umbrella of ABN, which, together with partners, accompanies them to deepen their work and to build national, regional and international connections and alliances with other Custodians.

At the Nanyuki gathering they discussed how the term itself, “Sacred Natural Sites”, does not reflect the deep meaning embodied in their local languages - each tradition having their own word for these potent places. Despite some differences, the customary laws that govern Sacred Natural Sites are remarkably similar and provide important guidance, especially for outsiders, regarding how they should be recognised and respected as No-Go Areas for any activity other than the expected spiritual rituals. The common customary laws expressed in this Statement were drafted and issued by the Custodians, with the support of the organisations who accompany them - partners within the African Biodiversity Network.

## A call for circulation and sharing

The Custodians invite you to share this “Statement on Common African Customary Laws for the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites” among your networks and

especially with other Custodians. They are also keen to learn of similar laws, principles, protocols, statements or guidelines from Sacred Natural Sites Custodians, from the elders and guardians who are entrusted to safeguard the Sites of their clans or communities. They believe that the Laws of Origin governing protection of Sacred Natural Sites are very similar for indigenous communities across the world.

We encourage you to circulate and discuss this Statement widely so that people begin to learn about the basic meaning of Indigenous Sacred Natural Sites and how they need to be respected as the temples of indigenous cultures. As the Custodians say: *“We need everyone to understand this: the public, so that they respect these Sites and their meaning to us; civil society groups, so that they support our ways of life and do not try to impose their development or conservation agendas on us; the governments, so that they recognise our rights and responsibilities to maintain our ancient traditions, our spiritual practices, and the sanctity of our Sacred Natural Sites; and commercial interests, so that they do not even consider any activities in our Sacred Places, which are our temples.”*

## Feedback

Please do feedback to us and let us know about other similar statements or guidelines from Sacred Natural Sites Custodians. These will be collated and shared among those who participated in Nanyuki, with many others with whom ABN partners are working, and with those who engage with us on the issue.

## Contact

Mr. Simon Mitambo at: [smitambo@africanbiodiversity.org](mailto:smitambo@africanbiodiversity.org), [smitambo@yahoo.com](mailto:smitambo@yahoo.com)





*A group of Sacred Natural Sites custodians from Kenya, Ethiopia, South Africa and Uganda - led by Mwongo M'Rimberia - at their gathering in Nanyuki, Kenya, April 2012*

**W**e, custodians of Sacred Natural Sites from four African countries, are working together to revive our traditions and to protect our Sacred Natural Sites and Territories. We are deeply concerned about our Earth because she is suffering from increasing destruction despite all the discussions, international meetings, facts and figures and warning signs from Earth.

The future of our children and the children of all the species of Earth are threatened. When this last generation of elders dies, we will lose the memory of how to live respectfully on our planet, if we do not learn from them. Our generation living now has a responsibility like no other generation before us. Our capacity to stop the current addiction to money from destroying the very conditions of life and the health of our planet, will determine our children's future.

We call on Governments, corporations, law and policy makers, and civil society to recognize that Africa has Sacred Natural Sites and custodians who are responsible for protecting them, in order to protect the wellbeing of the planet.

## **Preamble**

The whole Earth is Sacred. Within the body of our Earth there are places which are especially sensitive, because of the special role they play in ecosystems. We call these places Sacred Natural Sites. Each Sacred Site plays a different role, like the organs in our body. All of life is infused with spirit.

Sacred Natural Sites exist everywhere, including in Africa. They are spiritual places created by God at the time of the Creation of our Earth, where our Custodial Clans have been praying and giving offerings since time immemorial. Our responsibility is to protect God's Creation, and to ensure that these especially holy places are not disturbed in any way. Their role and significance cannot be replaced.

Sacred Natural Sites are sources of law. They are centres of knowledge and inter-generational learning. Our governance systems are established through our relationship with and responsibility towards Sacred Natural Sites.



We are the generation of custodians who carry the responsibility of ensuring that we all learn from the elders of today, who are the last generation with living knowledge of nurturing the health and integrity of our Earth, passed on directly from generations before them.

We emphasize the importance of using our local language because it embodies the meaning given by our Creator. We each have a local name for our Sacred Natural Sites, for example *Zwifho* in Venda, South Africa; *Kaya* in Giriama, *Irii* in Tharaka and Meru, *Mathembo* in Kamba, *Karigai* in Ari Gikuyu, Kenya; *Awulia* in Afan Oromo and *Adbar* in Amharic, Ethiopia; and *Ihangiro* in Banyoro and Batoro, *Kiggwa* in Baganda, Uganda. We agreed to use 'Sacred Natural Sites' as a common term to describe our potent places, despite its limitation of meaning.

### Our Common Customary Laws of Sacred Natural Sites

1. **Sacred Natural Sites are the source of life.** Sacred Natural Sites are where we come from, the heart of life. They are our roots and our inspiration. We cannot live without our Sacred Natural Sites and we are responsible for protecting them.
2. **Sacred Natural Sites are places where spiritual power is potent.** They are energetic points in the landscape. They are places where God, spirits and ancestors are present. The sacredness of the Sacred Site reaches deep into the Earth and up into the sky. They are places of worship, like temples, where we Custodians are responsible for leading prayers and offering rituals with our Clan and communities.
3. **Sacred Natural Sites are natural places in our Territory, such as sources of water, rivers, crossing points, wetlands, forests, trees, and mountains which are home for plants, animals, birds, insects and all of life.** Our Sacred Natural Sites protect the diversity of plants and animals and all the life which belong in our ecosystem. Because of the threats from the outside world, they are now the last safe places for God's Creation.
4. **Sacred Natural Sites are the home of rain, which falls for all communities, our land, and all of life.** When there is drought, for example, we carry out rituals in our Sacred Natural Sites, which bring rain. The potency of our Sacred Natural Sites and our practices are able to stabilize some of the local climatic changes. However this is increasingly disturbed due to industrial society's destructive beliefs and behaviour towards Sacred Natural Sites and the Earth as a whole.

5. **Each Sacred Natural Site has a Story of Origin, of how they were established by God at the time of the Creation of the Universe.** Sacred Natural Sites existed before people. They are not made by humans. Sacred Natural Sites were revealed to our ancestors who passed on the original Story and Law of Creation of how they came to be in our Territory.
6. **Sacred Natural Sites are places where we pray and perform rituals to our God through invoking the spirit of our ancestors and all of Creation.** Rituals strengthen our relationship amongst ourselves as a community, with our land, our ancestors and our God. Our offerings, such as indigenous seed, milk, honey, and sacrifices of goats, sheep or cows, are our way of sharing and giving thanks to God and God's Creation, our Earth.
7. **These rituals and prayers maintain the order and health of our communities and our Territories.** As Custodians we are responsible for ensuring that we carry out the required rituals during the year, such as before we plant our seeds or reap our harvests. They cleanse and potentise our people and our Sacred Natural Sites.
8. **Sacred Natural Sites are places of healing and peace.** When our communities have problems, for example with ill health or lack of rain, we do a specific ritual to deal with the challenges. After we receive the blessing, we perform a thanksgiving ritual. Sacred Natural Sites are places where we can resolve conflict and maintain harmony among people and all beings. There are different rituals for different needs.
9. **Each Sacred Site has Custodians chosen by God at the time of Creation.** Not everyone is a Custodian of Sacred Natural Sites. Custodians lead the rituals for our Clans and communities. There are men and women custodians with different roles. Custodians have to lead a disciplined life following certain customs, restrictions, times and protocols, according to the ancestral law, in order for our rituals to be acceptable and to have effect.
10. **Sacred Natural Sites are sources of wisdom.** This wisdom and the knowledge gained by our ancestors over generations, is passed on from generation to generation. We are responsible for ensuring that our living knowledge of how to live respectfully on Earth is passed on to the next generation of Custodians. This knowledge cannot be learnt through writing and books, but is earned through life-long experience and rigorous practice with our elders.
11. **Sacred Natural Sites are connected to each other**



**and function as a network or system.** If one is damaged it affects all the others. Together we, as Custodians of different countries, are protecting networks of Sacred Natural Sites across Africa.

12. **Sacred Natural Sites give us the law of how to govern ourselves so that we maintain the order and wellbeing of our Territory.** Cutting of trees, taking away water or disturbing Sacred Natural Sites in any way is prohibited. These laws are non-negotiable.
13. **We are responsible for protecting our Sacred Natural Sites and Territories through our Custodial governance systems, which are based on our ancestral Law of Origin.** Our Sacred Natural Sites and our governance systems need to be recognised and respected on their own terms, so that we are able to maintain our cultural and ecological integrity and continuity. We are responsible to our ancestors, who have nurtured our traditions for generations, and to the children of the future, to ensure that they inherit a healthy Earth.
14. **Sacred Natural Sites are No-Go Areas – Sacred Natural Sites are places which need to be respected by everyone, so that they remain the way God made them - in their diversity of life forms.** We are responsible to ensure their continuity and wellbeing. This means they are out of bounds for any other activities:
  - i. **Not for tourism** – as these are holy places which are not for entertainment. There are many other places where tourists can go.
  - ii. **Not for other religious activities** – just as we do not do our rituals in churches and mosques, or criticize other religions, because we respect the diverse ways in which humans pray to God, others should respect our indigenous ways.
  - iii. **Not for research and documentation** – because Sacred Natural Sites are our holy places with related spiritual knowledge and practices, and cannot be written down by others. We are the only ones who can write down what we wish to communicate to others, because it is our sacred knowledge.
  - iv. **Not for mining or extractive activities** – because these are our holy places, our temples, and they play a vital role in maintaining the health of our Earth – as sources of water, rain, plants, animals, regulating climate, and maintaining energetic stability.

- v. **Not for any ‘development’ or ‘investments’, meaning land- grabbing in all its forms** - because Sacred Natural Sites are not for making money. Our children need a healthy planet with clean air, water and food from healthy soils. They cannot eat money as food or breathe money or drink money. If there is no water, there is no life.
- vi. **Not for foreign law** – because Sacred Natural Sites give us the Law of Origin, which existed since Creation of the Universe, before humans. The dominant legal system should recognize our customary laws, which are based on the Laws of Life.
- vii. **Not for foreign seed** – our rituals and prayers require only indigenous seeds which Custodians have planted themselves, as this is what our ancestors and the Territory recognize as acceptable. Genetically modified (GM) seed is strictly prohibited and our Territories are GM free areas.
- viii. **Not for any other activities which may undermine the Law of Origin and the life of our Sacred Natural Sites and our Earth.**

*We call on everyone to join forces and take responsibility to protect our Earth and respect Sacred Natural Sites, as our common duty to future generations at this time of deep crisis for life on our planet. 🌱*

**This statement was drawn together by the following Custodians of Sacred Natural Sites:**

Munguti Kabibia, Murari Kanyoro, Sabella Kaguna, Mary Kathisya, Mwaro Baya Kaluwa, Sidi Thoya Maitha, Kazungu Mboro Thuva, HDr Riberia Mwongo & HDr Jeremiah Imungi – from Tharaka, Meru, Kamba and Magarini, Kenya;

Sanabulya Edward, Kobulemi Serina, Nyangabyaki Perezi & Nyasirwaki Sadiki –from Buganda and Bunyoro, Uganda;

Kemal Hassen Tafo, Aman Mame Harke, Marshalllo Temo Dermo & Lelisa Debele Denboba – from Bale and Suba, Ethiopia;

Mphatheleni Makaulule, Nevhutanda Nkheteni Phineas, Netshidzivhe Mbengeni Nyamukamadi, Netshilungwi Makondelela Aron & Nevhutanda Nyamukamadi Nyadzanga – from Venda, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

The work of the Custodians is accompanied by the African Biodiversity Network (ABN) through its partners Porini Association, MELCA-Ethiopia, Mupo Foundation, National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE),

Institute for Culture and Ecology (ICE); and the Gaia Foundation, UK.



Interview by Bas Verschuuren

# A Conversation with Mayan Spiritual Leader Felipe Gomez



*Photo: Shu Sagrib-Al is a sacred mountain in north western Guatemala which the mayans discribed in the Popul Vuh as the place of the awakening of the sun. Bas Verschuuren, 2012*



**F**elipe Gomez is a K'iche Maya, a *Ajq'ij spiritual leader*, and a *Ajkun traditional healer*. Since 1992, Felipe has been working with Oxlajuj Ajpop, the National Conference of Spiritual Mayan Ministers in Guatemala. Felipe supports and promotes structures for the ancestral authorities to enable them to dignify their sacred sites and revitalise their ancient Mayan knowledge.

**What position do you have in Oxlajuj Ajpop?**

I am founder and currently Director of Oxlajuj Ajpop and currently responsible for coordinating several projects.

The “Maya Vision” project is about documentation and communication of ancient Mayan wisdom, knowledge and practices using audio, video, internet, printed materials and radio programs. I am also tasked with organizing and implementing the “School of Mayan Wisdom, Knowledge, Practices and Dialogue” for the good of humanity. This year I am supporting the Alternative Celebrations for the coming of the new Mayan cycle which are based on indigenous interests rather than the activities promoted by the government and private companies.

**In your opinion, what is a sacred natural site?**

Sacred natural sites are mountains, forests, volcanoes, caves, springs, rivers, waterfalls, ponds and lakes. These are natural areas that have spiritual forces which are important to living our lives as humans.

**Why are the sacred places important to you?**

Because these sacred natural sites have a great spiritual force, they are places where the

heart of Fire, Earth, Water and Air manifests themselves and support all life in the universe. These sacred sites are the places that make us human in so many ways. They help us to acknowledge “existence”, to ask for Wisdom, to form knowledge, treat health problems and to connect with our ancestors, the first mothers and fathers of this world.



Photo: Bas Verschuuren/COMPAS, 2010



## **What is the power of sacred sites?**

They are special places that connect us with the spiritual force of the four elements: Fire, Earth, Water and Air. This way they transform our lives and connect us to all elements of the universe.

## **Can you give some examples of how sacred sites are connected to the daily life of the Maya?**

Sacred sites communicate with each one of us inside ourselves. The sacred sites represent the days of the Sacred Mayan Calendar. They are linked to changes in our environment such as winter and summer and they help us relate to the most difficult problems that we are confronted with in our daily lives. This is possible because many sacred sites are dedicated to our ancestors, men, women and children and they allow us to continue a relationship with them at these sacred sites.

## **This is a special year for the Maya and their holy places, can you explain why?**

In the Mayan calendar there are cycles of one day, one year, 20 years, 52 years, 1,040 years and more. The changes in the cycle of the calendar are always marked with celebrations of a spiritual, social, scientific and astronomical nature. They mark the time to reclaim the principles of the true meaning of human being in connection with all the elements of the universe.

For us the change of the cycle of the Mayan calendar occurred in December 2010. The celebration of the Oxlajuj Baqtun on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2012, doesn't coincide with the register and time keeping of the one of the most prominent elders "Abuelo Nicolas Lucas". Mathematically the change of the "Mayan century" took place December 21<sup>st</sup> in 2010. However, this year we are organizing the celebrations of this change in 52 Mayan sacred sites in Guatemala.

## **What are the current challenges in the protection of sacred sites?**

Indigenous people must reclaim the principles of life of our ancestors. They can do this through a process of identification, recovery, conservation and management of sacred natural sites that are located in their communities.

An additional challenge is the recognition of the right of Indigenous Peoples to participate in the management of sacred sites that are currently under the administration of the state.

## **Oxlajuj Ajpop has developed a draft law on sacred sites. How did this unfold?**

Mayan Spiritual Leaders at the National Conference Oxlajuj Ajpop coordinated their actions with the National Commission on Sacred Sites. Together they developed the "Initiative for a Law on Sacred Sites, Law No.3835" and delivered it to the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala.

The objective of the law is to guarantee Indigenous Peoples' historical, spiritual and cultural care of sacred sites. To this end the law secures recognition, respect, dignity, use, conservation, management and access to natural and built sacred sites that are under state protection.

The revitalisation and dignification of sacred sites coincides with the conservation of nature and at the same time goes hand in hand with restoring our spiritual, social, scientific and educational activities.

Oxlajuj Ajpop supports the communities to gain control over their sacred sites and helps them find ways for their management and co-management. It does so through dialogues and building bridges between the community level up to the national governmental level and in some cases the international level.

## **Can you tell us about the legal process the "Initiative for a Law on Sacred Sites".**

In 2003 a first draft of the Law Proposal on Sacred Sites was presented by Oxlajuj Ajpop to the Commission for the Definition of Sacred Sites. In 2006 government renewed its agreement to support the indigenous management of sacred sites. Oxlajuj Ajpop consulted its member organizations, made a strategic plan, organized linguistic groups of Maya, Garífuna, and Xinca origin to discuss contents related to sacred sites, and formed its own technical and legal team.

In 2008 this team completed a draft of the law. Based on dialogues with the indigenous peoples and wider communities, the Commission for the Definition of Sacred Sites revised and accepted the Law Proposal on Sacred Sites.

Later that year the "Initiative for a Law on Sacred Sites" was presented at the Congress and assigned the No. 3835. The Initiative was then sent to three committees for their consideration and to eventually provide appropriate advice for the government to take a decision on its adoption.

Throughout 2009, the initiative progressed peacefully but in 2010, some government services under pressure of economic powers indicated the need to dialogue on the Initiative for a Law on Sacred Sites. The Chamber of



Agriculture, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Chamber of Construction and Mining expressed their opposition to the bill No.3835.

Interest groups lobbying the Guatemalan parliament on behalf of the private sector have on several occasions when the law proposal was being discussed in parliament put forward that Article 20 affects private property. As a result the Article was modified in 2009 and now reads: *"In cases in which sacred sites are declared sacred and are part of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation, the administration of these sacred sites is coordinated by the Ministry of Culture and Sports and the National Council of Sacred Sites"*.

Although Article 20 still respects rights of indigenous peoples, it does not directly enable indigenous action that may affect ownership, and exploitation of as well as access to private property and natural resources contained therein. This complicates the indigenous custodianship of sacred sites on private

### **Have these changes to the law helped its acceptance by the Guatemalan Parliament?**

To a certain extent they have helped to grow acceptance of the proposal but due to the initial opposition to bill No.3825 support from the broader government as decreased. The electoral environment in favour of the bill has been reduced to the legislative agenda of the Commission on Indigenous Peoples in the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala.

After these changes, during the first six months of 2012, the Congress had finally been passing legislation proposals that had strong relations to agriculture, commerce, construction and mining. Unfortunately, they did not yet touch on indigenous initiatives under the Commission on Indigenous Peoples which at this time is the only proponent of the bill No.3828.

Regardless of these difficulties Oxlajuj Ajpop and the Commission on Sacred Sites actively maintain our advocacy action in Congress. At the same time Oxlajuj Ajpop is working with local communities for the recovery and management of sacred sites.

### **What could the government and other stakeholders do to give recognition to the holy places and to help protect them?**

Some very simple rules could be observed by the government as well as those pursuing private interests:

Respect the historical, spiritual, social and scientific holy sites. Apply free and prior Informed Consent.

Actions affecting sacred sites under the protection of the states must involve the direct participation of the spiritual

leaders of the Indigenous Peoples concerned. These should be enabled to play a key role in their conservation, access and management.

Archaeological investigations should be made in consultation with spiritual leaders of Indigenous Peoples.

Sacred sites located in communities should be conserved and managed by the communities themselves.

### **Do you think the custodians of sacred sites around the world can help and how?**

It has become urgent to form an international body of spiritual leaders and custodians of sacred sites to stand up against the threats of road construction, residential expansion, mining, hydroelectric development and the oil industry.

This international body of spiritual leaders should demand that the United Nations, which is an organisation of member states, develop a convention for keeping states, companies, research centres and churches to a code of conduct that will help respect the sacred sites of local and Indigenous Peoples.

### **What is your message to the world?**

As human beings we must return to our true meaning of being, the whole human being respectful to all elements of the universe. This includes caring for the mountains, forests, water sources, rivers, lakes, ponds and oceans, many of which are sacred. We have a responsibility to conserve biodiversity and its genetic heritage whilst at the same time we need to respect the diversity of cultures and the traditional systems of indigenous peoples for keeping peace and justice.

As humans we should oppose war, weapons, nuclear testing, social and racial exclusion and of course the extractive development model. Instead we should focus on caring for native seeds, crop diversity and healthy food free of poison such as pesticides and insecticides.

There is also an urgent need for the transformation of a mono-cultural state to multicultural and in cases multinational states. Mainly through the recognition of the local and Indigenous Peoples territories and their very ways of living within and beyond state boundaries. In a similar way I plead for religious diversity, that the Christian churches respect the spirituality, celebrations, sacred places and objects of ancient cultures.

Where there is a sacred site there is a space and a force for the human beings to live in balance and harmony with themselves, nature and the universe.

Thank you very much! 🌱





## Wirikuta, Birthplace of the Sun: A Wixarika (Huichol) Sacred Site

Janelle Marie Baker

### Wirikuta a sacred natural site under threat

In 2003, when I first met Susana Valadez, Director of the Huichol Center for Cultural Survival and Traditional Arts in northwest Mexico, she described to me the need to protect Wirikuta, an important Wixárika sacred site. In order to perform ceremony the Wixáritari (Wixárika people also known as the Huichol) travel 400 kms from the coast to this inland location where they believe the sun was born. The ceremonies include the collection and use of the hallucinogenic and sacred cactus, *hikuri* or peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*).

I had asked Susana what work needed to be done in support Wixárika people and the Huichol Center's various projects. This is when she told me about the need to curb threats to the peyote, how farmers were grazing cattle in Wirikuta and how this was impacting on the delicate desert ecosystem. Peyote tourists were also harvesting

the cactus in an unsustainable way by taking the whole plant and not leaving the tap root. For Wixáritari, deer, peyote, and maize are symbols that are united and have interchangeable qualities. For example, when Wixáritari collect peyote, they refer to it as "hunting" and peyote is often referred to as "brother deer". The peyote needs the deer to graze it and to aerate the soil with their hooves maintaining a delicate spiritual and ecological balance. Diminishing deer populations throughout the Wixárika territory have caused a decline in peyote populations, which are required for completing Wixárika ceremonies. Locally, in Wirikuta, peyote populations have recently plummeted just like in the United States and other areas in Mexico.

Today, nine years after Susana described to me the pressures on the populations of peyote that jeopardise

*Photo above: (detail) Yarn Painting: Wixárika yarn paintings often depict the interconnection of the spiritual and natural world. The Wixárika Mara'akame pictured here (in ceremonial clothing), calls upon the eagle spirit under the watchful eye of the sun and the moon. (Yarn painting by Gonzalo Hernandez, courtesy of the Huichol Center for Cultural Survival.) Photograph by Leon Wartinger.*



the continuation of ceremony at Wirikuta, Wixárika people face more serious threats to their sacred site. First Majestic Silver, a Canadian Mining Company based in Vancouver holds thirty-eight mineral concessions that span more than 6000 hectares across the Wirikuta territory and include Wirikuta sacred site. Wirikuta is known as the birth place of the sun and therefore it is ironic that First Majestic Silver which is now threatening to mine Wirikuta has named their mining project “La Luz”, which means “The Light”. In order to understand more about these current threats to Wirikuta, we first need to understand more about the Wixáritari and their sacred landscape.

## The Wixáritari, their sacred sites and ceremony

The Wixáritari are a semi-nomadic indigenous people who live in the region of the Sierra Madre Mountains where the four Mexican states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Zacatecas, and Durango meet. They have a series of *comunidades*, or government-assigned settlements that are shrinking in size due to *Mestizo* people settling in the outskirts of Wixárika communities. Along the steep banks of the Chapalagana River, Wixáritari practice swidden agriculture and gathering and hunting. The mountainous region has a wide variety of ecological zones that range from tropical to dry pine forests depending on the elevation.

The Wixáritari territory is significantly larger (90,000 km<sup>2</sup>) than the area that they have been assigned in the Sierra Madre Mountains because they have paths, or pilgrimage routes that stretch out across the landscape in the four directions (Liffman 2000). These paths have sacred sites along them that the Wixárika people visit. They know these places through oral traditions so that even if someone has not yet visited a place, they can describe it as if they have (Schaefer 2002; 187).

It is also through oral traditions that Wixáritari people know that it is their responsibility to continue

their ceremonies in the Sierra and by reliving ancestral treks on pilgrimages to ensure the survival of all people. *“Wixáritari relate the origin myths of the landscape to the site where they are narrated and leave offerings at key points of the landscape where divine history happened so that the earth will continue”* (Liffman 2000: 11). *“These ceremonial actions replicate a basic set of sacrificial exchange relationships with divine ancestors who regulate the ecosystem”* (ibid.: 30). In other words, Wixáritari see themselves as the people who are meant to be intermediaries between the human and spirit world and it is their job to maintain a reciprocal system to ensure that the earth continues to provide for all of us.



One of the most important ceremonial sites for the Wixárika is Wirikuta, located in the peyote-producing desert near Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí. *Reu'unaxi* is a bare peak that overlooks the desert. For Wixáritari, this is the place that the sun was born. The Wixáritari practice of making an annual sacred trip to Wirikuta began with creation and it continues today even though it is a long and difficult journey. Although people now often use vehicles rather than going by foot, they still abstain from many regular comforts such as eating and sleeping. People are often

blindfolded as they approach Wirikuta. Interestingly, during Spanish rule other indigenous people avoided the area because they were afraid of being forced to work in the mines, however, Wixáritari took the risk and continued to visit Wirikuta (Schaefer 2002: 188).

## Protecting Wirikuta from silver mining

The Wixáritari community leaders have been working together to protect their sacred areas and they have gained some remarkable local and international attention. In 1994 the State of San Luis Potosí declared an area within Wirikuta of 140,000 hectares to be a Natural Protected Area and a Natural Sacred Site. Many websites and newspaper articles claim that Wirikuta is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, however, upon checking the UNESCO World Heritage List online (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>), one will find a lot of historic silver

*Photo: Peyote Mandala: Wixárika artwork is created from the memories of peyote-induced visions. Images of the sacred peyote plant are common in yarn paintings such as this vibrant mandala. (Yarn painting by Gonzalo Hernandez, courtesy of the Huchol Center for Cultural Survival) Photograph by Leon Wartinger.*





*Photo: Wixárika Mara'akame (medicine man): While driving down a winding Mexico mountain road in the back of a pickup, this Mara'akame prepares for a ceremonial deer hunt. Photograph by Leon Wartinger.*

mines and archaeological sites in the Mexico section, but no Wirikuta. The “Huichol Route through the sacred sites to Huiricuta (Tatehuari Huajuje)” (as of 06/12/2004) is however on Mexico’s tentative list for UNESCO World Heritage sites. Worth mentioning is that “San Luis Potosí on the Mercury and Silver Route of the Intercontinental Camino Real” was also added to Mexico’s tentative list in 2007 due to the area’s role in the silver and mercury trade.

Regardless of the State protection and intentions to declare Wirikuta a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Mexican government granted First Majestic Silver thirty-six mining concessions covering 4,974 hectares within Wirikuta in 2009. In September 2010, the Wirikuta Defense Front (an organization of Wixárika leaders) released the “Declaration in Defense of Wirikuta” calling for the cessation of mining in Wirikuta. A series of websites and clever youtube videos have sprung up to raise awareness about Wirikuta and this got the attention of Mexican celebrities. In May 2012, 60,000 people attended a music festival called “Wirikuta Fest”. Twenty different well-known acts performed and rallied against mining in Wirikuta. The famous Wixárika band Venado Azul (Blue Deer) performed and there were many Wixárika people in attendance. Interestingly, the money raised from the concert went to people living in the

area around Real de Catorce to support them in finding alternatives to mining as their main source of income.

As we are left wondering what will happen to Wirikuta, Wixárika people continue their ceremonial cycle that follows the seasons and the ancient trails of their ancestors. We know that Wirikuta is not the only sacred place that is under threat from industrial development. As the global population explodes and people over consume, we put pressure on remote areas that we used to leave alone. However, Wirikuta is certainly a crucial sacred site for Wixárika people, one that they must perform rituals for so that the spirit world will ensure that we all have enough sun and rain for our crops to grow. ☘

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## Conserving Sacred Natural Sites of Cibecue

Rylan Bourke, Julee DeHose, Judy DeHose, Jayar Early and Jonathan Long  
the *Ndee Bini Bida Ilzaah Project* (Pictures of Apache Land)

Every summer since 2005, high school and college students from Cibecue Arizona work for the *Ndee Bini Bida Ilzaah Project* (Pictures of Apache Land), a program designed to teach the students about their environment. The program is active during the summer months of June and July. Its emphasis is to instill the values and teachings of their ancestors. They work with wetlands such as springs, lakes, and rivers. They are trained on how to treat these wetland sites that suffer from erosion, animal trampling, and other harmful impacts. The participants learn of the importance of water and the land, including sacred sites. Two of these sites, where many of the Apache people go to make pilgrimages, are White Spring (*Tu hagai*) and Pumpkin Lake (*Beilkan daana eet*).

In the last eight years, the participants of the *Ndee Bini Bida Ilzaah Project* have accumulated information based

on the original goal of learning about the traditional Apache stories about places and values that go along with them. Every summer, we combine traditional ecological knowledge with scientific methods to explain the changes in the land. Participants have been challenged to analyze the changes in the environment from a personal and social perspective—what do those changes mean to them and their community? From their own experience with the project, the students have learned the importance of water sources and wetlands on their own land. They also realize the importance of never ending restoration, especially after the Rodeo-Chediski wildfire in 2002.

White Spring emerges from a limestone formation into Cibecue Creek, which then flows for twelve miles into our community of Cibecue. From time immemorial, our ancestors have come to White Spring to pray and do





*Left: White Spring in 1996, showing erosion after the White Spring fire burned the site. Photo by Jonathan Long. Right: White Spring in June 2012, following restoration treatments including fencing and placement of rock riffles. Large walnut and cottonwood trees were lost during the Rodeo-Chediski fire in 2002; younger trees now surround the spring. Photo from the Ndee Bini' Bida'Ilzaah Project.*

ceremonies. To this day, many people still come to this site to get water; the water is medicine for the people. Through this project, we asked an elder of Cibecue about this spring, and she said, “A long time ago, my uncle, we took him up there and he talked to us about that water and its everlasting water that the creator had blessed us and [how] you need to bless yourself with that water-- wash your face, or where ever you have pain, or wash your hair.” These are some of the rituals many do when going to White Spring, not only do they cleanse themselves but they also fill up empty water bottles or whatever they have that they can carry water back with them to people they wish to share with back home, usually with their grandparents or people who can't make the trip to White Spring anymore because of old age. There are many other stories told about White Spring; all the history that we can gather comes orally. According to another elder of Cibecue, she remembers that White Spring was a place to travel to when steaming corn during the harvest time. This seasonal procedure has long since faded into memories.

When asked if there were changes they noticed at specific places in the land, community members we interviewed named White Spring almost immediately. The spring suffered severe erosion following two major wildfires in the past 16 years. After the first fire, community members built a fence around the site to keep vehicles out and to help the spring recover from trampling by wild animals. Our interviews revealed that White Spring remains an important site to Apache people, young and old, who remember White Spring before and

after the fires. It is a cornerstone of reconnecting with our spirituality and reserving time to mediate on life. Each year, people find time to visit the site; they see a reflection of themselves in the water that bubbles up from the ground. They are reminded of the resilient spirit that lies within them. They see White Spring and the many changes it had to go through to adapt to its ever-changing environment. They remember the White Spring Fire of 1996 and the Rodeo-Chediski fire of 2002 and how the land was damaged. Even after these trials, White Spring is still there with its enticing water.

The aquifer that feeds White Spring also feeds another sacred site called Pumpkin Lake (*Beitkan daana eef*), which is believed to have strong healing powers. Every year, the participants of *Ndee Bini Bida'Ilzaah*, visit this site. They pray for every aspect of their life, from education, family, and protection for the coming year. They bless the lake with an abalone shell and turquoise beads and end their prayers with a cross marked with cattail pollen. By practicing these traditions, our young people connect with the land through their mind, heart and soul.

This particular site also has many stories that many have been shared, especially among the elders, one of whom said that pilgrimages were made by horseback during droughts; upon arriving at the site, prayers and rituals were performed. They would ask for rain, and when the ceremony was completed there would be rain fall for the people and their crops. This was also a place to ask for healing—people take water home and used it to bless themselves, as Catholics would with Holy Water.



Both sites are significant to the Apache people, especially to the students who work with *Ndee Bini Bida ilzaah*. Every year we have new students; many share the same testament that they do not know anything about their land. Throughout the project they visit many sites to learn from them and conduct restoration work; they treat and care for the land under the hot summer sun. During the last week, after all the strenuous labor, the students visit White Spring and Pumpkin Lake. At these sites they find renewal and strength. By the end of the project, the students know who they are. They have a sense of identity. Through the project, students learn a great deal. They learn to respect the land. Like elders before them they now realize they are connected to the land.

Above all, the students learn that water is very sacred to our people. We cook, clean, wash, bathe, drink and even pray with the water that flows on our reservation. The theme of the project is that water supports life; this element has much power and is one of the reasons for our existence. 🌿

*Photo (page 31): Participants and leaders in the Ndee Bini' Bida' Ilzaah Program at White Spring, June 2011: Mark Mallow, Adriano Lupe, Michael Enriquez, Michael Tessay, Bernard Dale, Leon Lawson, Fernando Thompson, Tristan Narcisco, Judy DeHose, Clarissa Gooday, Julio DeHose, Julee DeHose, Rylan Bourke, Jayar Early, Bernalyn Enriquez, Donita Machuse, Samaria Mallow, Sissy Beatty, and Phil Endfield. Photo by Jonathan Long.*

*Photo (below): Pumpkin Lake in June 2012, ten years after the Rodeo-Chediski wildfire burned through the site. Photo from the Ndee Bini' Bida'Ilzaah Project.*





# Protecting the Sacred:

## the Role Community Protocols Play in the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites



*A custodian (Tandansup) of the sacred groves in Tanchara, inspects an illegal mining site together with CIKOD staff and a community member. The forest in the background to the left is a sacred grove which is potentially impacted by water pollution. Photo: Bas Verschuuren/COMPAS, 2011.*

The importance of sacred natural sites to the conservation and protection of cultural and biological diversity has long been recognised. The particular role of custodians, individuals and communities alike, in the conservation, protection and maintenance of such sites is continually gaining recognition. Rights associated with these roles of custodianship have emerged in a number of key international environmental and human rights legal frameworks, appreciating the inextricable links between custodians, their communities, and their key facilitation of conservation of sacred natural sites around the world. There is, however, a gap between the existence of these international laws and the ability of custodians to enforce their rights. This article examines one method custodians of sacred natural sites are engaging with to acknowledge, recognise and enforce their rights. This is through the development and use of biocultural community protocols.



The intricate relationships between sacred natural sites and their traditional custodians are continually exposed to a number of threats involving increasing natural resource needs and acquisition, changing belief systems within communities, negation of the role of traditional custodians, lack of general awareness of the location and significance of sacred sites and lack of capacity of communities to map their sacred natural sites and resources of significance and advocate for their custodianship rights.

**B**iocultural Community Protocols (BCPs) are community instruments that articulate how customary laws, values, and systems of self-governance can be used to respond to the challenges and opportunities posed by external actors. The process of developing and using a BCP involves endogenous development<sup>1</sup>, social mobilization, legal empowerment, and strategic advocacy in order to secure indigenous peoples' and local communities' territories, areas, and resources.<sup>2</sup> The article will examine how communities in Tanchara, Ghana, and the Sheka Forest, Ethiopia, have undertaken these processes to protect their sacred natural sites and traditional knowledge and practices. The article will also raise some key considerations for community facilitators of BCP processes.

### Sacred Natural Sites

"Sacred natural sites", broadly defined as "areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities" (Oviedo & Jeanrenaud 2007), are some of the world's oldest conserved areas and support high levels of biodiversity, often higher than those found in nearby protected areas (Dudley Etet al. 2010). The intricate relationships between sacred natural sites and their traditional custodians are continually exposed to a number of threats involving increasing natural resource needs and acquisition, changing belief systems within communities, negation of the role of traditional custodians (Techera 2010), lack of general awareness of the location and significance of sacred sites and lack of capacity of communities to map their sacred natural sites and resources of significance and advocate for their custodianship rights.

In light of the biodiversity and conservation value of sacred natural sites, a number of international human rights and environmental laws recognise the global importance of sacred natural sites and the role of custodians:

- The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), specifically Articles 8(j) and 10(c), supports the traditional role of custodians in the protection of sacred natural sites, obligating State parties to protect and promote traditional knowledge, innovations and practices and the customary sustainable use of biological resources;

- The CBD's *Akwe: Kon Voluntary guidelines for the conduct of cultural, environment and social impact assessments regarding developments proposed to take place on, or which are likely to impact on, sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities* calls on Parties to incorporate the cultural, environmental and social considerations of indigenous and local communities into impact assessment procedures for developments that are likely to impact sacred sites;



Photo: MELCA, 2012

<sup>1</sup> "Endogenous development" is understood as change that is initiated from within communities, utilising local resources and retaining benefits within the community. For more information see [www.compasnet.org/?page\\_id=36](http://www.compasnet.org/?page_id=36)

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see [www.community-protocols.org](http://www.community-protocols.org)





*A community meeting in Tanchara too discuss the development of the Biocultural Community Protocol in order to protect the sacred groves from mining impacts. Photo: CIKOD/Bas Verschuuren, 2011.*

- The CBD's *Tkarihwaïé:ri 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* provides voluntary guidance for ethical conduct with indigenous and local communities to promote respect, preservation and maintenance of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices relevant for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity (paragraph 1);

- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples acknowledges the right of indigenous peoples to practise, develop and revitalise their cultural traditions and customs and spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies, including the right to maintain, protect and develop archaeological, historical, religious and cultural sites (Articles 11(1) and 12(1)). In addition, the Declaration acknowledges the right of indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their spiritual relationship with traditionally owned or other otherwise occupied or used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources (Article 25);

- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage defines “intangible cultural heritage” as including “cultural spaces” (Article 2(1)). Sacred natural sites could arguably be included within this definition and ought to be safeguarded accordingly (see Articles 2(3) and 11);

- The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity also calls for the preservation and enhancement of all forms of heritage for future generations so as to

foster creativity in all its diversity and inspire dialogue (Article 7);

- International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), World Conservation Congress (2008), Resolution 4.038, that affirmed the urgent need for culturally appropriate sacred natural site conservation and management within and near protected areas and called for recognition, support and facilitation of the rights, skills and knowledge of custodians of sacred natural sites. Whilst these resolutions are not legally binding, they do contribute significantly to conservation policies and treaty-related processes (such as the CBD).

Given the importance of the presence of sacred natural sites for the conservation of biodiversity, the specific role that custodians have played in caretaking such sites and the present threats faced, advocacy by custodians for recognition of custodian rights afforded to them under national, regional and international law is essential. This is challenging in the context of the fragmentation of legal protections in international law, given the piecemeal fashion that the conservation of sacred natural sites and rights of custodians is addressed in the binding and non-legal binding instruments (some focused on the environment, others focused on the rights of custodians) noted above. In addition, there is a lack of relevant domestic laws in many countries and there are inherent gaps between existing laws and actual implementation and lack of capacity of communities to engage with disparate legal frameworks and centralized government administrations. Against this backdrop, there is a need for tools and approaches that bridge the gaps between international recognition and local realization of the rights therein.

## **The Role of BCPs in the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites:**

BCPs are one rights-based approach that can help indigenous peoples and local communities redress the conflicts between customary and externally imposed laws and values to ensure that their priorities and ways of life are effectively supported in practice. BCPs can be formulated to include community aspirations (such as benefit sharing agreements) or in defence of an existing or perceived threat. BCPs are useful in articulating a community's priorities in forms that can be understood by others, thereby catalysing constructive dialogue and collaboration to support the community's plans and priorities in locally appropriate ways on the community's own terms.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly in the context of increased community engagement with external actors

<sup>3</sup> For further information and guidance on BCPs, please see: *Biocultural Community Protocols: A Toolkit for Community Facilitators*, available at [www.community-protocols.org/toolkit](http://www.community-protocols.org/toolkit).



in the context of access and benefit sharing, development projects, extractive industries etc.

The BCP process supports an endogenous development approach, including community visioning, participatory documentation and communication, resource mapping (where appropriate), legal empowerment and social mobilisation. Importantly, BCPs can be used as a platform for advocating and asserting their rights and affirming their responsibilities under customary, national and international law. In the context of sacred natural sites, custodians can use BCPs to assert their rights to natural resources and outline their customary conservation practices, commitments and responsibilities in response to relevant threats and challenges that they face. The BCP process is complemented by examining power dynamics between stakeholders in the context of such processes. Associated “multi-stakeholder processes” assist communities in assessing the power dynamics internal and external to their community, in order to encourage and better facilitate dialogue between a multitude of relevant actors.

In addition, the BCP process includes improving legal capacity among community representatives. It has helped to develop partnerships between communities and local lawyers that often continue after the BCP development process has ended. Legal empowerment on regional and international laws has also encouraged communities to advocate on relevant issues at a broader level, bridging the gap between local experience and international advocacy.

BCPs have been developed by custodians and their communities in Tanchara, in the Upper West Region of Ghana, and in the Sheka Forest in Ethiopia, in order to deal with internal and external threats to their sacred forests.

### *Tanchara, Ghana*

The Center for Indigenous Knowledge and Organisational Development (CIKOD) has been strengthening endogenous development processes in the Tanchara community of northern Ghana for a number of years. CIKOD have done this through the Community Organizational Development (COD) process. The COD process involved building the capacities of the community to carry out Community Institutional Resource Mapping leading to the documentation of the community resources, traditional knowledge, boundaries with other communities as well as their history of origin and customary laws regarding sacred sites conservation. This contributed to the internal recognition of the community’s own assets and revitalisation of traditional conservation techniques. It was with this background that the Tanchara community engaged an Australian

mining company, Azumah Resources, regarding gold prospecting licences it had obtained from the Ghanaian government without community consultation and likely to affect its sacred groves.

CIKOD has assisted the community to draft a BCP based on the information from the COD process setting out the community’s connections with its lands and sacred groves and knowledge of natural resources, its commitments to conservation, its demands for the protection of the sacred groves, free, prior and informed consent with respect to any developments likely to affect the community, a comprehensive environmental impact assessment and potential benefit sharing. CIKOD has also worked with the community to assess the likely effects mining will have on community well being through the use of the “Community-Driven Health Impact Assessment Tool”. The information obtained through the use of the tool has been forwarded to the local Environmental Protection Office, leading to further calls by local Ghanaian authorities to obtain a comprehensive environmental impact assessment, taking into consideration social and cultural impacts. The BCP process has also resulted in collaborations between the community and local human rights law agency, including training on relevant national laws.

CIKOD worked closely with the community in each stage of the BCP process and built upon the foundations laid by years of endogenous development processes. The development of the BCP has developed community confidence and skills, though it is likely that the community will need external support in order to negotiate with their BCP document in the future (Guri et al. 2012). The community has used a preliminary form of community protocol as the basis for engaging in a dialogue process with the mining company in the past. More recently, the community has participated in a multi-stakeholder process, whereby community representatives with differing viewpoints were given the opportunity to engage with other community stakeholders (including the Environmental Protection Agency), to promote dialogue.

### *Sheka Forest, Ethiopia*

MELCA (Movement for Ecological Learning and Community Action) – Ethiopia is a non-governmental organisation of environmental practitioners and lawyers committed to the conservation of biodiversity in Ethiopia. MELCA-Ethiopia has worked with the communities of the Sheka Forest for several years, including preparation of a thorough study of the land use, cultural, legal and institutional environment of the Sheka region to inform advocacy strategies on forest conservation (such as community training on advocacy, law enforcement and





*3D Mapping Project in Ethiopia. A participant is putting a pin on the map while others are observing where he is placing it. The participant explained that it is a sacred site which they call Ujuba. Discussion amongst the participants revealed a struggle for its protection from the mainstream religions that are demonising indigenous sacred natural sites. Photo: Million Belay/MELCA.*

policy development. Sheka Forest has been in decline with population increases, expansion of large-scale economic development and associated pressures on natural resources. Whilst the forest was traditionally preserved by local communities guided by clan leaders, the government now leads conservation efforts.

With MELCA-Ethiopia's assistance, the Shekacho community (inhabiting the Masha and Anderacha Woredas of the Sheka Zone) have drafted a BCP to the sacred Sheka Forest, their traditional knowledge within it, and to revive traditional conservation practices. The undermining of social structures had led to the deterioration of traditional stewardship practices and increased pressures upon the forest's resources. The BCP process has assisted in bringing together clan leaders, community representatives and local government officials to help secure protection of the forest.<sup>4</sup>

MELCA have been involved in the training of community members, academics and government officials to demarcate and map 321 sacred sites (including sacred trees, rocks, waters, cultural houses, wetlands, and ceremonial locations) within the Sheka Forest using geographical positioning system (GPS) technology and

in agreement with local community members from each village concerned. MELCA drafted the BCP in the local language based on previous community consultations. A series of workshops was then held with over 60 clan leaders and 50 relevant local government officials to present the draft's content for revision. Clan leaders were encouraged to share the content of the BCP to their communities, to sensitise and be as inclusive to relevant communities as budgets allowed. Both groups suggested changes to the BCP that have since been incorporated. The BCP has now been disseminated for final endorsement. Once it is finalised, local districts within the Shekacho community will request local governors to recognise the BCP as a legal instrument under the *Access to Genetic Resources and Community Knowledge, and Community Rights Proclamation No 482/2006* and present the BCP to the Federal Institute of Biodiversity Conservation, so as to encourage collaboration between the community and government with respect to the conservation of the forest and for any potential access and benefit-sharing arrangements.

Given the presence of Government at the community and civil society levels, its involvement in

<sup>4</sup> MELCA has documented the issues in Sheka Forest in an engaging film located at [http://www.africanbiodiversity.org/content/latest/sheka\\_forest\\_story](http://www.africanbiodiversity.org/content/latest/sheka_forest_story).



the establishment of this BCP has been unique, with government officials providing resources to map sacred sites in collaboration with community representatives. It also had some input into community representation during the process, encouraging the election of community representatives in each *kebele* (local government area), rather than just using existing clan leaders.

### Can a BCP approach assist custodians to protect their sacred natural sites?

Communities have used BCPs to protect their sacred natural sites through illustrating their identities and ways of life, identifying territorial boundaries and important resources and sites, documenting customary laws and decision-making processes, communicating commitments to conservation, and gaining greater understanding of their rights under national and international laws. Both the introspective and unifying process of developing and using BCPs and the BCPs themselves have been important and often self-affirming for communities.

However, it is important to remember that BCPs are not a panacea and that there are several potential pitfalls to consider within the process of developing and using a protocol. As one rights-based approach, BCPs integrate endogenous development, social mobilization, legal empowerment, strategic advocacy, and reflexive monitoring and evaluation. As such, they are best used in conjunction with a range of other tools and strategies to secure communities' rights, territories, and resources. A number of issues to consider when developing a BCP in relation to the protection and preservation of sacred natural sites include:

- How to work effectively and appropriately with traditional authorities and custodians and in accordance with customary laws and values;
- Careful contemplation of existing power dynamics to mitigate excessive influence of certain parties (including external parties);
- Mindfulness of competing views within communities and the effects of rights-based advocacy with respect to conflict with external actors (particularly in politically sensitive or repressive countries);
- BCPs can be a lengthy process and are not a "quick-fix" - rushing the BCP process can cause conflict and mistrust within communities and care must be taken if communities face urgent or immediate concerns on their sacred sites;
- Care must be taken when documenting sensitive community information - documentation can increase interest in natural resources or traditional

knowledge by external parties; and

- BCPs can be used by external actors in unintended ways, such as coercing communities into agreements.

### Conclusion

Indigenous peoples and local communities are striving to protect their sacred natural sites and the integral traditional, spiritual roles of custodians. In the face of a range of internal and external challenges, many are increasingly engaging in internal capacity development and strategic advocacy on a number of levels. The process of developing and using a BCP alongside other rights-based approaches can help unify and mobilize communities to articulate their stories, values, and priorities and assert rights and responsibilities under a range of legal frameworks in a way that is both meaningful for the community and clearly understood by external parties. In a world rife with power imbalances and injustice, there is a great need for tools such as BCPs that can help enable constructive and more equitable engagement with external parties that affect communities, sacred natural sites, and their broader territories and areas. 🌱

**Natural Justice** works to uphold the principle that people should be involved in decisions that affect them. Natural Justice uses its understanding of international and domestic legal frameworks to help indigenous peoples and local communities to assert their rights to govern their lands, natural resources and traditional knowledge. Natural Justice and its partners are actively contributing to the development of biocultural community protocols as a widely accessible means by which communities can articulate their stewardship ethics, assert their rights and affirm their responsibilities. 🌱

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# Biocultural Diversity Conservation Through Sacred Natural Sites in the Rwenzori Mountains National Park



*Photo above: A fetish called eshendekere at Katwelake sacred natural site, one of the sites in the park that local people have recently been allowed to access. Photo: Muhumuza M. 2012.*

## Introduction

The Rwenzori Mountains which are located in western Uganda. They are snow capped and host the third, fourth and fifth highest mountain peaks on the African continent. The mountains have unique ecological attributes such as rare and endemic plant and animal species. The mountains are also a water catchment for various rivers and lakes.

The ecological attributes of the mountains have made them habitable by the Bakonzo and Bamba people. These people depend on the mountain resources for livelihood and survival obtaining plant and animal resources from the mountains and conducting various activities there.



“..it was found that the root of the problems was largely associated with the infringement of the cultural values of the people by the park staff. Among the cultural values that people respected but the park administration had ignored were sacred natural sites in the Rwenzori Mountains”.

Formal efforts to conserve the Rwenzori Mountains and the resources therein started in 1941 when part of the mountains were set aside as a forest reserve. When the forest reserve was created, local people were restricted from accessing resources in the reserve. For example, hunting was totally prohibited, a limited amount of the forest products could only be extracted for domestic use after obtaining a permit.

In 1991, a bigger part of the Rwenzori Mountains was set aside as a national park (the Rwenzori Mountains National Park). More stringent rules about access to the park were put in place. For instance many activities including traditional rituals were totally prohibited.

The establishment of the park was influenced by the need to protect the biodiversity resources. The cultural attributes and values of the park were ignored. Even UNESCO in 1994 declared the park a world heritage site and not a natural or cultural heritage site.

### *Problems resulting from the creation of the Rwenzori Mountains National Park*

When the park was established, the objectives for its establishment were not attained. The park administration experienced various problems because local people continued engaging in the prohibited activities (Mutebi, 2005). Biodiversity loss and resource degradation at the hands of the local people persisted. Many human induced calamities such as floods, landslides, and erratic seasonal changes were common phenomena in the mountains and the local community blamed this on the park administration for failure to allow them into the park to conduct some rituals there to avert the calamities (Cultural Values and Conservation Project report, 2007). Efforts by the park staff to prevent these activities from taking place in the park were futile.

### *Attempts to solve the problems associated with the creation of the Rwenzori Mountains National Park*

Resulting from the problems described above, the park administration implemented a collaborative park management strategy. Under this strategy, agreements between local resource users and conservation authorities for negotiated access to natural resources in the park were made (Mutebi, 2005). These according to Oryema (1996) included revenue sharing, involvement of the local people in the park management, creating employment opportunities for local people and allowing regulated access to the park by some people.

These proposals were made in anticipation that the local people would be motivated to support conservation and ensure sustainable use of natural resources in the park. However, despite these provisions, the problems did not cease. In an attempt to further investigate the causes of the problems, I conducted consultative meetings with over 3000 local people living in villages neighbouring the Rwenzori Mountains National Park.

From the consultative meetings, it was found that the root of the problems was largely associated with the infringement of the cultural values of the people by the park staff. Among the cultural values that people respected but the park administration had ignored were sacred natural sites in the Rwenzori Mountains.

In the remaining part of this article, I delve into the sacred natural sites found in the Rwenzori Mountains, the traditional practices associated with these sites and how allowing people to access some of the sites facilitated the conservation of both biodiversity and the culture of the people in the Rwenzori Mountains.





*A sacred natural site in the Rwenzori Mountains National Park where people moving through the park performed a ritual of tying something on the tree to prevent muscle tightness in their legs Photo: Muhumuza M. 2009.*

## Natural sacred sites in the Rwenzori Mountains

It was found that in the Rwenzori Mountains, there were over 100 sacred natural sites. Most of these sites were located inside the Rwenzori Mountains National Park. The sacred natural sites varied in type, shape and nature. For example, most of the sites were either plants (for instance, *Ntole* site was a single Bamboo shrub) or hills (for instance *Kahindangoma* site was a hill located between two rivers). One sacred natural site called *Nyamwereka* was a Tortoise-shaped stone.

It was revealed that each mountain ridge had at least one sacred natural site and each sacred site had a specific name with a local meaning. For example, *Katwekale* sacred site (which means a very high hill) was located in a ridge called *Kinyamapanika* (which means to hang somewhere at a raised surface).

## Traditional practices associated to sacred natural sites in the Rwenzori Mountains

Community members believe that sacred natural sites are a cultural heritage from their fore fathers. Sacred natural sites in the Rwenzori Mountains were traditionally accessed for ritual, spiritual and magical religious performances. These performances were conducted for various purposes (see Photograph above and read its caption). For example, local people visited *Kambasa* sacred natural site to appease the god known

as *Kitasamba*. *Kitasamba* literally means he who does not climb. The Bakonjo and Bamba people believed that the overall god of the Mountain is at the top and hence cannot climb further. People believed that *Kitasamba* produced a semi solid sperm (which was basically the snow found on the top of the mountains) which fertilized their land to ensure abundant crop yields and to prevent various natural calamities. Other sites were associated with other gods such as *Nyabibuya*, *Kalisya*, *Kahiyi* and *Nyabinji* each of which had a specific function. Generally, the people conducted rituals in sacred natural sites for four main reasons which included; ensuring good health state, cleansing of ridges, averting drought, and enabling peace to prevail among the community members. The details of rituals associated to the gods that were conducted in sacred natural sites are described in Muhumuza (in prep.)

Although some people could clandestinely conduct rituals in some sacred natural sites in the park, many of the sites had not been accessed for many years. In many of the sites, there was no sign of natural sacredness of the area. For example *Kaghoma* sacred natural site could easily be mistaken for an ordinary tree (see photograph next page). Abandonment of sacred natural sites is an indication of cultural diversity loss.

## How traditional practices and values associated to sacred natural sites enhanced biodiversity conservation in the Rwenzori Mountains.

From discussions with the local people in the Rwenzori Mountains, it was found that some sacred natural sites in the Rwenzori Mountains had a rich biodiversity. This was because access to these sites was restricted through a system of religious beliefs, taboos, customary rules and regulations and traditional practices. For instance not everybody in the community was allowed to access sacred sites. To access these sites people had to first seek permission or first perform particular rituals. Such provisions enabled limited access to the sites and hence left the sites and the resources therein intact.

Additionally, it was a taboo for any herbalist to move around a tree when gathering resources from that tree. This taboo could have ensured that only a few of the resources from only one side of the tree are taken hence leading to sustainable use of those resources. There were other rituals performed in sacred natural sites to monitor resource use by people in various areas of the mountains. Generally, sacred natural sites and the associated practices traditionally ensured restricted access and hence there was no over exploitation of resources.



## Integrating sacred natural sites in the management plan of the Rwenzori Mountains National park

Based on results from the consultative meetings with the local communities, the Rwenzori Mountains National Park administration realized that local people could be allies in biodiversity conservation through their cultural practices. This was motivated by the fact that the culture of the local people was linked to resource use and had potential for biodiversity conservation. Also sacred natural sites were traditionally owned by ridge leaders who still had interests in managing them.

Before integrating sacred natural sites in the management plan of the park, there were a number of issues that had to be addressed. Collaboration between the park staff and the local people was historically difficult, politically charged and tense because initially, neither the park staff nor the local people trusted each other. The legitimacy and authenticity of some sacred sites that were abandoned was a debatable issue. Also, how to make the traditional structure for managing sacred sites work in parallel with the government structure of managing park resources was another issue of concern.

After various consultations with the local people, the management plan of the park was revised to include regulated access to sacred natural sites in the park by local people (see Photograph page 40). In the management plan, the interests of both the park staff and the local people were able to be compromised. For instance it was agreed that since animals such as goats are neither killed during rituals nor taken back home by people associated with the rituals, other people not associated with the rituals (such as game rangers) could take the animals away for their own use after the ritual had been performed. In this way both the park achieved its objective of preventing domestic animals to wander in the park and also the local people will have achieved their objective for performing the rituals.

Access to sacred sites has improved the relationship between local people, and park staff, and consequently it shall not only enhance biodiversity conservation but also culture conservation. Never the less, negotiations are still ongoing to enable local people manage the sites through the traditional leadership structures that existed in the past.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that the collaborative management of national parks based on exclusion of the local people or their inclusion by providing to them economic incentives might not solve problems faced by



*One of the ridge leaders standing near Kaghoma sacred natural site (a tree on his left) that was abandoned when the park was created Photo: Muhumuza M. 2009.*

the park. This is because in some cases, the problems might be cultural other than economic in nature. In some way, traditional beliefs, knowledge and practices associated with sacred natural sites though not scientific, can enhance biodiversity conservation. If cultural values associated with sacred natural sites can be recognized and incorporated in the park management plan, they can improve relationships between the park staff and the local people, and consequently to integrated conservation of both culture and biodiversity. 🌿

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# Sacred groves in the Gamo Highlands of Southern Ethiopia: Biocultural Value and Threats



*Gamo Elders praying in Dorbo Meadow in Southern Ethiopia at the beginning of the Mascal Ceremony. Photo: Christopher McLeod.*



“You can see many people dying each year due to the wrath of the spirit. Marriage is not fruitful, rain is unpredictable, and untreatable disease is killing our people. Before [when sacred groves were respected] if something went wrong, we went and prayed to the sacred grove and got an answer immediately. Today, when we pray to the sacred grove, it takes longer to get a response or we get nothing at all.”



In 2006, research was conducted on sacred groves in the Gamo highlands of southern Ethiopia. The research took place with support of the Christensen Fund and explored the links between people and their local biodiversity. Sacred sites were mapped and an assessment of local people’s cultural attachments to these sites was made. The assessment also included the sacred groves’ biodiversity and the threats that they face. This work is based on interviews with 24 Custodians who within their communities are responsible for protecting six sacred groves in the Gamo highlands.

The Custodians were selected for interview because they are the most knowledgeable community members of the sacred groves. Group and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted based around a pre-determined set of questions. The interviews were designed to gather information about the Custodians’ perception of; the groves spiritual and material significance, of the role of the groves on their lives and that of community members and of current threats to the groves. The Custodians fall into the broad group of “elders” who are very knowledgeable about traditional rituals,

norms and taboos. They are responsible for organizing rituals in sacred sites and punishing those community members who act against traditional norms. They consisted of religious leaders, clan elders, lineage heads and community chiefs. The Custodians were all males aged between 45 and 70 and all had lived in the village where they were interviewed since childhood. According to local traditions women are not allowed to be direct observants of ceremonies conducted in sacred groves but they participate in festival preparations and prepare food, drinks and liquors for sacrifice.

## Sacred groves

The sacred groves consisted of burial grounds (*bossaor* or *dufo*) and relict natural forests (*kasha*). The sacred groves are not the only sacred sites in the Gamo Highlands. The Custodians reported that the Gamo people believe that every natural object, mountains, pasture lands, rocks, rivers, streams, trees, animals, footpaths, the sun and the moon, are potentially sacred and inhabited by spirits, both good and evil.



## Value of sacred groves

Sacred groves have enormous significance to the people. Local communities have well-established traditions, cultural respect and sense of interconnectedness with these groves. Sacred groves also harbor spirits that help families and protect them from any misfortune. Prayers are offered to the deity by the ritual leaders and community elders in the sacred groves. The Custodians believe in the sanctity of sacred groves and the spirits inhabiting them. Ritual leaders known as *eqaa* perform offerings and make prayers each year to maintain the sanctity of the groves for the wellbeing of the whole community. As a result of the traditional belief systems of the local communities protection is offered to the sacred groves that contrast the protection offered to other natural and semi-natural habitats in the area. It has made these places very important reservoirs of biological diversity. They preserve the highest diversity of plant species recorded during the research. A botanical survey of six sacred groves recorded 152 plant species in a sample area of 2.24 ha, of which 19 species were endemic to Ethiopia. Two of these were tree species (*Cordia africana* and *Hagenia abyssinica*) listed as priority species for national conservation and one tree species (*Prunus africana*) is included in the IUCN red list of threatened species. The biodiversity of the six sacred groves was higher than the four non-sacred forests with which they were compared.

## Management of sacred groves

The Custodians reported that all plant species present in the sacred groves were protected through the traditional belief systems and the use of these plant species is carefully managed. While cutting trees is not permitted, limited gathering of non-timber forest products such as fruits (by children), and plants for medicine and ritual initiations (by ritual leaders) is allowed. Because of the beliefs, the spiritual significance and the sanctity of the groves, it is not permitted for adults to enter them. The only exceptions made are for ritual leaders making sacrifices as way of thanking and for collecting plant parts for ritual purposes. Hunting in sacred groves is also forbidden because eating meat of animals from sacred groves is considered taboo. Grazing is not allowed. The Custodians believe that if anyone enters the sacred groves or especially if someone cuts trees or kills animals in the groves, the spirit will bring wrath to the village. This can be in the form of

epidemic disease or death of children and milking cows. According to the Custodians the Gamo people confess whenever they break these rules followed by performing a ritual in the presence of ritual leaders to receive a pardon for the wrong action. All Custodians agreed that anyone who was not willing to perform the sacrament would encounter misfortune including death to one of his family members. These and other associated belief systems have helped the protection of the sacred groves in the Gamo highlands.

The sacred groves are the most threatened of the sacred sites in the Gamo highlands and the Custodians were increasingly concerned about deforestation and forest degradation. They stated that sacred groves currently face a range of threats, which they classified into two types, physical and spiritual threats. Almost all Custodians said that the main physical threats to the sacred groves were livestock grazing and tree cutting equally. However, four Custodians placed more emphasis on grazing than tree cutting. All Custodians said that the spiritual value of sacred groves was threatened by changes in belief systems between older and younger generations. This in turn, caused the above physical threats. Examples of the custodian's statements are:

*"Today sacred groves and other sacred places are disregarded by some people especially by the young generation. As a result wrath came to our village as well as to the region as a whole. Consequently, there was no harvest, the harvest had no value. Milking cows have died and the living are not giving milk as much as before when the sacred groves were respected by the whole village all together."*

*"Today we are spiritually impure because some [village members] are going their own way. They have chosen another religion. On top of that they keep preaching to our family members so that they abandon their customs and beliefs and follow them, which is the equivalent to preaching to lose identity"*

*"Our children are out of control, we can't teach them our customs as we used to since they are not willing to participate and learn. We are all spiritually degraded because of them"*

*"Because of all these, we are under the wrath of the spirit. You can see many people dying each year due to the wrath. Marriage is not fruitful, rain is unpredictable, and untreatable disease [HIV] is killing our people. Before [when sacred groves were respected], if something went wrong we went and prayed to the sacred grove and got an*





*An example of sacred forest in the Gamo highlands. Photo:: Desalegn Desissa, 2006.*

*answer immediately. Today, when we pray to the sacred grove, it takes longer to get a response or we get nothing at all."*

The appropriation of sacred groves by other religions that have only recently become strong in the Gamo highlands was identified as a spiritual threat by the Custodians. Observations of some sacred groves that had been changed into places for the practice of these new religions confirmed the Custodian's' statements. Custodians also noted that, in some places, the Custodians of the sacred groves were preached at by those promoting new religious beliefs. They were told that they are backwards and believe in superstition. The Custodians reported that this type of preaching is occurring widely in the Gamo highlands. They believe there is an intention of taking over the sacred groves to build churches inside them. Most Custodians also mentioned that they were under pressure from their spiritually converted relatives who are forcing them to believe in the new religion as well as the indigenous traditional belief system.

While traditional Gamo religious leaders and community elders still adopt traditional sacred values, belief systems, cultural taboos and rules to protect sacred groves this is no longer effectively ensuring their preservation. Despite the continuation of these traditional values and institutions, the threats to the sacred groves reflect the complex economic, social and cultural changes currently taking place in the Gamo highlands.

## Conclusion

Sacred groves are the forests most strongly protected by the traditional institutions of local communities in the Gamo highlands. They are clearly important as habitats for biodiversity in the agricultural dominated landscape of this area where most forests are now plantations of exotic species of *Eucalyptus* and *Cupressus*. These sacred forest patches, their flora and their associated culture are increasingly under pressure from changes in land use (expansion of farmland, grazing land) and cultural institutions (decreasing status and influence of the traditional belief systems and their Custodians). If this trend is to be countered, measures need to be taken at a local level to empower local traditional institutions and facilitate community participation in the protection and management of sacred groves. For Custodians to effectively conserve and manage their sacred groves and freely exercise their traditional practices, they must be empowered by the communities to maintain control over their sacred groves.

In the face of new political, cultural and economic pressures, Custodians may also need effective collaboration with non-governmental and governmental organizations that should play an active but not equal role to the Custodians, that of a facilitator rather than that of a legal authority. Conservation NGOs in particular can play a significant role in contributing to community discussion forums, by raising awareness and disseminating information about the value of sacred groves from ecological and cultural perspectives. 🌿



Jan van der Ploeg

# Friendly Crocodiles and Vengeful Ancestors: Conserving the Critically Endangered Philippine Crocodile in Dinang Creek



*Enhancing cultural values: the Philippine crocodile dance show links crocodile conservation to Kalinga culture Photo : G. Persoon 2011.*





## Night falls over Dinang Creek

The moon comes up over the forest. A thunderstorm in the distance flashes. Fireflies dance in a fig tree along the creek. The monotone buzz of the cicadas is deafening. We crawl through the bush to the bank of the creek, our shirts drenched in sweat, and switch on the flashlight. The light sweeps over the water. Two red eyes shine in the darkness: a crocodile. Then, the rain sets in and the flashlight burns out.

Dawn. The village slowly awakens. A rooster crows in the distance. Women sweep their yards. A girl fetches water in the creek. A farmer on the way to his field pauses briefly in the shade of the creek to clean his slippers. Two young boys bath a carabao in the same spot where we saw the crocodile just a few hours earlier. An old woman washes her clothes in the water. She laughs when we approach the water: *'never mind the crocodiles, they are friendly!'*



People intensively use Dinang Creek for washing, fishing, shading livestock and irrigating fields. Photo: by J. van der Ploeg 2010.





*Traditional beliefs and practices protect crocodiles. Mrs. Garatiyu, a traditional healer believes she can transform into a crocodile. Photo: J. Hulshoff-Pol, 2005).*



## The Philippine crocodile

(*Crocodylus mindorensis*) is one of the rarest and most threatened species on the planet. Commercial hunting, the widespread use of destructive fishing methods and the massive conversion of freshwater wetlands have led to the disappearance of the species throughout the Philippine archipelago. It is estimated that less than 100 individuals remain in the wild. On the IUCN Red List the Philippine crocodile is classified as Critically Endangered, the category for species with the highest risk of extinction.

In theory the Philippine crocodile is legally protected in the Philippines. However, in practice the species continues to be killed out of fear. Most people think that crocodiles pose a severe threat to children and livestock. They generally do not differentiate between the relatively small and innocuous Philippine crocodile and the much larger and potentially dangerous saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) that also occurs in the Philippines.

Crocodiles are portrayed as dangerous man-eaters in mainstream Filipino culture. They are associated with corrupt politicians, and there is little public support for the protection of the species in the wild. The government Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), mandated to protect the country's wildlife, lacks the capacity and resources to effectively enforce environmental legislation in the remote rural areas.

Policymakers have given up on the species. They argue that crocodiles cannot survive in human-dominated landscapes, and that people will only protect wildlife if they profit financially from it. Undisturbed wetlands no longer exist in the Philippines, and the species has little economic value: harvesting leather and ecotourism are not viable solutions. Typically, the Secretary of the DENR, Ramon Paje, recently remarked that: *'there is no place for crocodiles in the Philippines [...] because the reptiles could attack locals in the surrounding areas'*.

## The Kalinga

A remnant Philippine crocodile population survives in the northern Sierra Madre mountain range on Luzon. Here, the species survives in the ancestral domains of indigenous people: the Kalinga. The word *kalinga* literally means enemy in Ibanag, the dominant language in the Cagayan Valley, and was used by the Spanish friars in the lowlands to refer to the infidels in the mountains. There is still much debate about the origins of the Kalinga. Most likely the Kalinga are the descendants of people who rebelled against colonial repression and conversion in the 16th and 17th century, and fled to the forest. Very little is known about the culture and language of the Kalinga.

They nowadays form a small, closed community in two remote watersheds in the municipality of San Mariano: the Ilaguen River and the Catalangan River.

Crocodiles play an important role in Kalinga culture. Crocodiles are regarded as the embodiment of the ancestors. During festivities and healing rituals (*patunnuk*) the Kalinga offer rice cakes to the ancestors in the form of a crocodile. Crocodiles are associated with mystic power and fertility. People for example narrate that their chiefs can change at will into fierce crocodiles, and that faith healers (*bugeyan*) can command crocodiles to attack people as a punishment for antisocial behavior. People regularly place small offerings along creeks to appease the ancestor-crocodiles.

Killing or disturbing an ancestor-crocodile is considered an unwise provocation: *'you cannot kill something that is stronger than you'*. Not all crocodiles are ancestors, however: it is believed that ancestor crocodiles can be distinguished from normal crocodiles by their large size, or by their strange colors, or by having four instead of five toes. Conversely, not all ancestors are crocodiles: the ancestors can manifest themselves in many different ways and shapes. In any case, it is wise to treat crocodiles with respect: *'the crocodile will not bite innocent people; if you do not harm the crocodile, the crocodile will not harm you.'* Occasional crocodile attacks on humans are regarded as the punishment of the ancestors for the transgression of a social taboo. When a boy was bitten in 2000, people for example reasoned that this was because his father had thrown stones at the crocodiles.

The traditional beliefs and practices of the Kalinga have provided some form of protection to the Philippine crocodiles in the wild. Nowhere is this intricate link between indigenous people and crocodiles, and its implications for conservation, clearer than in Dinang Creek.

## Dinang Creek

Dinang Creek is a small tributary of the Ilaguen River. The 11 kilometer-long creek meanders through sloping grasslands and corn fields. The area was logged in the 1970s by logging corporations. Only the banks of the creek remain forested. The water is almost stagnant and murky. A small Kalinga village, Lumalug, is located adjacent to Dinang Creek. People intensively use the creek for fishing, washing, fetching water, shading livestock and irrigating fields.

Arguably, this shallow creek is the most important nesting site for the Philippine crocodile in the wild! In



## MGA BUWAYA AT MGA TAO



### ANG MGA BUWAYA AY BAHAGI NG PAMANANG PILIPINO

Kahit noong unang panahon, ang mga tao at mga buwaya sa Pilipinas ay tahanan na naramuhay malapit sa isa't-isa katulad ng makikita sa larawang iginuhit ni Suarez noong 1734. Ang mga tao ay nanasamba sa buwaya at pinaniniwalaang ang mga ito ay nagdadala ng suwerte sa larangan ng agrikultura.

Ang buwaya ay simbolo ng kahalikasan, sensuwalidad, katipungan at kapangyarihan.



Suarez (1734)

Sa mga kuwento at mga alamat, ang mga bayani at mandirigma ay inilalarawan bilang mga buwaya at sila ay nag-uugnay ng mga kuwintas na gawa sa mga pangil ng buwaya bilang simbolo ng kamalang kapangyarihan. Ang ugapan ng buwaya ay ginagamit ding agimat at proteksyon laban sa masamang espiritu at karamikman.

Ang impluwensiya ng buwaya ay makikita rin sa mga sinasagay na larawan, alamat, kuwentong bayan, pananampit at mga kanyang awitin.

2



### PANINIWALA NG MGA KATUTUBO SA MGA BUWAYA

May mga Pilipino pa rin sa ngayon na nakatira malapit sa tirahan ng mga buwaya. Ilan sa mga katutubong Pilipino ang naniniwala sa mga buwaya nanumbalik ang mga kahuluwa ng kamalang mga ninuno kaya karala itong nirespeto. Karaniwan ding may mahalagang bahagi ang mga buwaya sa mga kwentong kamalang inasalaysay.

Narito ang ilang halimbawa.

Ang mga Kalinga sa Luzon ay umaawit ng kundiman na nagtataglay ng pagkakamagay ng kamalang mga penuno at ng mga buwaya.

Ang mga Tagbanua sa Palawan ay naniniwala na ang kamalang mga ninuno ay nagkaroon ng kaunduan sa mga buwaya na pinagtibay ng pangambab na dugo.

Ang Magindanao ay naniniwala pa rin hanggang sa kasalukuyan na mayroon silang mga ninunong buwaya.



Ang mga katutubong ito ay hindi punapapay ng buwaya bagkus ay hinahayaan nila itong mamuhay ng matwasay. Hindi nila ito itinuturing na salot o pangambab. Ang buwaya ay kinans na sa kamalang pang-araw-araw na pananampay.

Salamat sa paniniwalaang ito ng mga katutubo kaya't ang mga buwaya ay patuloy pa ring naninuhay sa kamalang mga lupain hanggang ngayon.

3

*The crocodile manual provides information on why and how to protect the Philippine crocodile. Mabuwaya Foundation, 2009*

2009 three Philippine crocodile nests were found along the creek. Crocodiles regularly breed in a densely vegetated forest patch along the creek: the burial ground of the village. The fact that crocodiles are occasionally observed close to the graves reinforces the belief that ancestors turn into crocodiles.

Of course, the Kalinga have never purposively protected crocodiles. There is, after all, no need to protect the ancestors... But Kalinga culture undoubtedly protected the crocodiles in Dinang Creek. People in Lumalug could have easily killed all crocodiles had they wished so. But they did not.

## Social Change

Nowadays the Kalinga form a marginalized minority in their ancestral lands. In the 1970s, Ibanag and Ilocano migrants settled in the area and bought land from the Kalinga. These newcomers often have very different

attitudes towards crocodiles: they believe that crocodile meat is an excellent medicine against asthma, that crocodile scales have magical power and that a crocodile penis is an aphrodisiac. To them the only good crocodile is a dead crocodile.

Kalinga culture is rapidly eroding as markets, schools and televisions become more accessible. Most Kalinga have converted to Christianity. People have become reluctant to talk about their traditions and beliefs, afraid of being labeled as stupid, backward or superstitious. Many Kalinga youngsters are ashamed to speak their language, and many people longer identify themselves as Kalinga. People claim that in the past crocodiles carried their chiefs and heroes across the rivers, but say that *'they no longer believe these old stories'*.

Also in Dinang Creek crocodiles are now under severe threat. The Kalinga still refrain from killing the species, but don't object if other people are foolish enough to risk the fury of the ancestors. Crocodile nests are regularly



raided to eat the eggs. Hatchlings are occasionally captured and sold as pets. Also in Lumalug fishers now use electricity, dynamite and pesticides to maximize fish catches. Farmers increasingly clear vegetation along Dinang Creek to cultivate corn and reclaim freshwater habitat to grow rice. The municipal government declared that people could no longer bury their dead in the graveyard along the creek, thereby further unraveling the cord that tied people and crocodiles together.

## Conservation

Over the past years the Mabuwaya Foundation has worked with the people of Lumalug to preserve the Philippine crocodile in Dinang Creek. It took a long time to gain the trust of the community. Who, after all, could be interested in a worthless crocodile? People in Lumalug at first feared that our interest in the species was a front for land grabbing or espionage. But after several consultations and regular visits people accepted the Foundation's presence in the village, and they now understand that it is genuinely interested in the Philippine crocodile.

But how to protect a sacred natural site such as Dinang Creek in a context of rapid social change, debilitating poverty, weak governance and a history of State-sponsored resource plunder? Is it possible to restore the traditional conservation ethic? And how to convince people who live below the poverty threshold to value crocodiles?

Under Philippine law indigenous people can claim rights to their ancestral land. In theory the Indigenous People's Rights Act seems a perfect solution to strengthen traditional resource management. In practice, however, red tape, corruption and institutional conflicts between the DENR and the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP) inhibit the issuance of an ancestral domain title to the people in Lumalug.

Farmers in Lumalug don't have security of land tenure and the traditional burial ground remains open-access. The formal recognition of indigenous rights is a major step forward, but will in the current socio-political context, not lead to the conservation of crocodiles in the wild or the improvement of people's livelihoods. The Mabuwaya Foundation has therefore mainly focused on environmental communication. An intensive public awareness campaign aims to enhance traditional values that protect crocodiles (such as respect for the species), and foster a sense of pride in people's cultural and natural

heritage. A Philippine crocodile dance show, which is performed during the annual village feast, features the bond between Kalinga and the Philippine crocodile. Informative posters call on people to respect crocodiles. And a manual highlights the rich cultural heritage. The campaign has raised awareness on the plight of the Philippine crocodile, changed negative attitudes towards the species and influenced people's behavior.

At the same time the foundation aims to empower rural communities to protect their natural resources. After a lengthy negotiation process the village council declared Dinang Creek as a Philippine crocodile sanctuary in 2005. The use of destructive fishing methods is banned and farmers are encouraged to maintain a 3 meter natural buffer zone. The municipal government appointed three people as *Bantay Sanktuwaryo* (sanctuary guards). These guards protect crocodile nests and report violations of the rules of the sanctuary to the village council. Billboards were placed along the creek to inform people about the protection program. Six pump wells were installed in Lumalug to minimize human-crocodile interactions and improve access to safe drinking water. A performance-based payment system was set up to provide a financial incentive to the community: every year the village receives a reward based on the number of crocodiles that survive in the creek (1000 peso per crocodile). The Philippine crocodile now is the flagship species of these community-based conservation actions.

## Coexistence

As a result of these conservation efforts the Philippine crocodile population is slowly recovering in Dinang Creek. The people in Lumalug tolerate the species in their village. In their worldview there is a place for crocodiles. Dinang Creek is the proof that people and crocodiles can coexist in the 21st century. 🌿

### Further reading

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Story and Photographs by Inanc Tekguc

# Kakakapan id Gayo Ngaran

(Return to the Big Name)



*Tialam Doronsoi, a 77-year-old Dusun lady walking from Bundu Tuhan to her neighboring village in the early morning. Mt. Kinabalu towers over the surrounding landscape.*



Through dialogue with park officials, finally an agreement was reached to give the neighboring Dusun free access to the mountain for one day in December 2010. With great joy, people from the villages of Bundu Tuhan and Kiau came together to organize what they called Kakakapan id Gayo Ngaran (Return to the Big Name), their sacred pilgrimage to Mt. Kinabalu.

Strangely, before I was in a car heading in its direction, all I knew about Mt. Kinabalu was that it had some significance for the Dusun people living nearby.

We set out from Kota Kinabalu, the bustling seaside capital of Malaysia's Bornean state of Sabah. Our 90-kilometer route took a turn to the east and we started our steady ascent toward Bundu Tuhan, a cluster of Dusun villages at the foothills of Mt. Kinabalu with an altitude of around 1500m. The mesmerizing green colors of the hill dipterocarp and lower montane forests carpeted the hillsides on either side of the road. I would learn later that before this road was built the bigger challenge faced by early western scientists was not to climb the mountain per se, but more so the difficult terrain to get to the foot of it with all their supplies.

As our car serpentine around the hills, Agnes told me about the work of the Global Diversity Foundation (GDF) in Sabah. An international non-governmental organization, GDF works with several communities bordering the Crocker Range Park and Kinabalu Park. One of their aims is to empower indigenous people by enabling them to plan and carry out community-based research and document their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK).

Along with her colleague Adam, they have been training several young members of the local Dusun people in a variety of ethnobiological and

participatory action research methods, who in turn work closely with their communities. The emergent team of Dusun community researchers has not only carried out field research with their communities, they also engage in constructive dialogue with government agencies, international organizations and academics.

Historically, Mt. Kinabalu has been a very important resource for the Dusun for their daily subsistence of food, medicine and forest products. Mt. Kinabalu is among the highest species diversity centers in the world, with more than 5,000 species within an area of 1600 km<sup>2</sup>. As a result of the mountain being one of the youngest mountains in the world, the flora of Mt. Kinabalu includes apparently neo-endemic species in large numbers, (Martin *et al.*, 2002).



*Community members wait at the starting point in Kinabalu Park to start their climb of Mt. Kinabalu, during Kakakapan 2011.*





One employment option for the indigenous Dusun communities is to work as porters on Mt. Kinabalu, which is a very physically demanding job.



*Nepenthes* flower, also known as the pitcher plant, is among the botanical attractions of Mt. Kinabalu.

Beyond the biological significance, however, Mt. Kinabalu has another major role in Dusun lives, at a spiritual level. Since time immemorial, it has been the sacred place where the Dusun believe their deceased rest before they finalize their journey to *Libabou*, the eternal resting place (Martin *et al.*, 2002). When someone passes away, the body is buried facing the mountain, so when the spirit awakens it can find its way easily. The Dusun revere the mountain so much that, out of respect, they do not use its name and instead call it *Gayo Ngaran* (the Big Name). In toto, Mt. Kinabalu occupies a prominent meaning in what it means to be a Dusun.

The high biodiversity of the mountain made it important also for the Malaysian government and the world at large. Mt. Kinabalu and the surrounding area were gazetted in 1964 as Kinabalu National Park, which later was categorized as Type II under IUCN categories for protected areas. Then, in 2000, UNESCO declared the mountain as Malaysia's first World Heritage Site.

From a strictly conservationist point of view, the designation of Mt. Kinabalu as a protected area might be

seen as a way to secure the area from exploitation. While exploitation is a serious threat to the biodiversity, it is also argued that biodiversity in environments of sacred sites is likely to have survived under sustainable use by the indigenous people because of their importance (Thorley and Gunn, 2008). Mt. Kinabalu has been, for many centuries, a central aspect of Dusun cosmology as a sacred place. Their reverence and their extensive knowledge about its ecosystem have resulted in the conservation of Kinabalu area for centuries prior to any state-driven initiatives.

For example, the Dusun along the Papar River have been customarily applying what they call the *tagal* concept for conserving river resources. They designate no-fishing zones and even feed the fish in certain locations to keep the species population steady. Similarly, Bundu Tuhan community is extending the *tagal* concept to conserve their forests as well.

Unfortunately, existing community-based conservation methods were overlooked and with the declaration of the park, the uninhibited access of the





*The South Peak seen from the summit shortly after the sunrise. Some people on the left already going down, while others still climbing up.*

Dusun people to this sacred place was severed. The mountain slowly became a hotspot for about 50,000 wealthier local and foreign tourists who climb the mountain each year. The rising prices of access to the mountain have made it more than a luxury for most of the Dusun people except for those who are employed by the park, mostly as porters or guides.

The background information from Agnes made me impatient to see this sacred place. Finally, as we turned another bend she announced the symbolic landmark of Sabah. The sun had set and it was getting dark. What I thought, at first, to be the growing darkness to my left was a steeply ascending wall of forest. My head tilted upwards, leaving my lower jaw where it was with my mouth open in awe. My eyes followed the towering massif up toward the granite top, stopping for a moment on the waterfall cascading down the southwestern slopes. I was staring at the tallest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea, with its highest point at about 4100m above sea level. Its rapid ascent was equally impressive; just looking at it reminded me of how little I was in

comparison to the forces of nature. I doubted that my experience of “seeing” Mt. Kinabalu would be the same if I did not learn what I did from Agnes and from the local Dusun in the following days.

Over the days that I stayed in Bundu Tuhan and in other Dusun villages, I had the chance of a glimpse into Dusun worldview and how much their lives are interconnected with nature. Having lost their access to the mountain, Dusun elders have grown increasingly worried that this lack of access was a factor for erosion of traditional values and knowledge amongst the younger generation, which they seemed eager to revive. They had tried to find ways to conserve the knowledge and values.

Since the 1990s, the Dusun living around the park have demonstrated the depth of their traditional ecological knowledge through participatory research in collaboration with park personnel and expert researchers. With the help of GDF, Dusun of Bundu Tuhan have started to document their traditional ecological knowledge and conservation practices in an organized way. They constructed a scaled 3D map of their customary





*A GDF community researcher feeds the fish in the protected part of the Papar river under “tagal” system, a community-based conservation practice.*



*Dusun elders transfer their ecological knowledge onto a 3D modeling map prepared by GDF community researchers.*



*Two groups compete over a photo puzzle during a workshop organized by GDF community researchers that emphasizes the awareness of biocultural diversity in the region.*



Having lost their access to the mountain, Dusun elders have grown increasingly worried that this lack of access was a factor for erosion of traditional values and knowledge amongst the younger generation, which they seemed eager to revive.

territories adjacent to the park. As a community, they worked together to mark on the map their ecological practices within designated zones.

They shared their results with park authorities to show that the repository of their ancestral knowledge, accumulated over generations, has maintained their local environment and that what might seem like random land management practices, in fact, have deep roots based on experience going back centuries. Most importantly, they emphasized that access to Mt. Kinabalu is crucial for the continuation of their traditions. Through dialogue with park officials, finally an agreement was reached to give the neighboring Dusun free access to the mountain for one day in December 2010.

With great joy, people from the villages of Bundu Tuhan and Kiau came together to organize what they called *Kakakapan id Gayo Ngaran* (*Return to the Big Name*), their sacred pilgrimage to Mt. Kinabalu. In accordance with their traditions, the elders performed the *monolob* ritual, a propitiatory ceremony to seek safe passage before climbing the mountain.

The team of Dusun community researchers recorded important moments of the inaugural event with their video cameras. A Dusun elder reflected his joy in an interview: “*When the Park authorities agreed to permit the community to climb the mountain for one time, we were very happy.*” A younger Dusun expressed his hopes for the future “*I hope for the communities of Kiau and Bundu Tuhan that this program continues every year.*” (An edited version of the video recordings can be watched at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-huqQH2k2j4>.)

The pilgrimage was repeated in 2011, coinciding with my visit to Bundu Tuhan. I participated in the Kakakapan event and later had the chance to climb the mountain too. Although it was a brief encounter both with the Dusun and Mt. Kinabalu, my experience of “seeing Mt. Kinabalu” was far deeper than it would be, if I were just a tourist chasing a World Heritage Site whose beautiful pictures I



*Grandmother of one of the Dusun community researchers walking in the forest.*

saw on some magazines.

I like to think, if it were not for these communities venerating Kinabalu, the Malaysian government would not find a mountain to turn into a protected park. Likewise, the people of Bundu Tuhan would not be who they are, without Mt. Kinabalu being in their lives. Their fate seems to be intertwined, perhaps represented in the term “biocultural.” I am glad to see increasing Dusun involvement in the conservation efforts for the area. After all, the wealth of our world is not just biodiversity, rather *biocultural* diversity. 🌿

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## Trees and the sacred in modern Greece

Kalliopi Stara

*“Neither from the community land that does not belong to you make profit, nor from the church’s land, because the first is unfairness, but the second is a sin”.*

(Greek proverb)

**I**n mountainous areas in Greece mature trees in the vicinity of shrines, chapels or churches are conceptualized as sacred. The Virgin Mary, Christ and various orthodox saints act as supernatural guardians of the church and its trees. These beliefs are considered to be based in pre-Christian ideas of nature-spirits, which inhabit, haunt or take the form of mature trees (Philpot, 2004). Christians directly countered or gave new meaning to earlier beliefs incorporating them in a modern religious concept (Stewart, 1991). Frequently these are the Saints who protect their trees, while more rarely the narratives refer to tree spirits, which appear next to their trees as dragons, shadows, fairies, pigs, oxen or snakes.



*"[Husband]: -'We used to have a field behind the village and for some reason the whole area became a monastic property. Our field was down hill, close to the river but within the view of the monastery, which belongs to Virgin Mary. We never go to cut wood there. We went few times, but my wife since then refuses to go'.*

*[Wife]: -'The field still belongs to us, not to the monastery and it is located far away from it, but because of the view I had the feeling that the Virgin Mary was observing me. I cannot cut trees there'".*

(Interview: 15/9/2006, Agios Minas Village, Evangellos & Athina Stergiou).

*"Here in St George there is a shrine and big trees. In the past locals never cut the trees because a snake with horns was guarding them. I never saw that snake, this is an old story"*

(Interview: 2/8/2006, Aristi Village, †Konstantinos Kyrkos).

Trees in the vicinity of churches are conceptualized as sacred and they are associated with cutting taboos that in the form of punishments could range from warnings or little accidents during the cutting to severe delayed maladies or even death to the wrong-doers, innocent members of their family or the animals for which the sacred foliage was cut for.

*"A woman went to graze her animals in the forest of Virgin Mary. She cut some tree branches and when the animals ate the foliage she brought the branches to the village to use them as firewood. During the night Virgin Mary appeared in her dream and she asked her: - 'Why did you take them? I want them to become earth in my earth'. And the woman took the branches and she returned them to the forest. In the same forest another man cut timber to build a house or a hut, I do not remember well...and his child died. He went again to cut timber. And an old man with a white beard, St Spyridon, appeared to him and he said:- 'Is the bad I have caused to you not enough? Do you call for more?' Then he understood, but it was late. It is a long time ago when these things happened, I was 20 years old".*

(Interview: 18/8/2002, Elaphotopos Village, Athina Dinalexi).

Churches and their trees are conceptualized as interrelated figures in the rural Greek landscapes in a way that allows us to use aged maidens as emblems of the sacred (Kyriakidou –Nestoros, 1989). Such isolated trees or groves around churches serve aesthetic qualities and host local annual celebrations. On the other hand sacred forests function as protection bells for settlements against natural hazards or as sophisticated locally-adapted management systems. This in the recent past could regulate the use of natural resources for the community, serving as a last resort in times of need or even to cover community requirements such as everyday needs of local services or public works.



*Local Informant  
Kalliopi Paliatsou.  
Photo by André Bakker.  
From the exhibition  
Faces in Stone  
[www.andrebakker.com](http://www.andrebakker.com)*





*"I will give you two reasons about the establishment of the forests of the Church, as we call them. These maintained firstly for the priests and their needs in firewood and secondly in order to conserve the forest that was threatened by overgrazing and overpopulation. Today we see a particularly forested area, but it was not always like that. People hardly could find firewood in the past and they used even to remove tree roots to use them as firewood. It is obvious that afterwards the forest has developed and daily the forest grows. Soon it will become a jungle, as we go, because nobody can say if people will return to live in the area... Afterwards locals maximized the supernatural forces of these areas. They began to believe that they should not even take the soil in their shoes from the particular areas, they excessively respected the forest and as a result today at least the one, that of Virgin Mary is a gorgeous forest and we have to think about its management. That is to say to apply a limited logging and that because the old trees began to die and break. We should find an institution to manage it. I do not know if the Church should participate or which institution will manage it, but what I know is that somebody should manage it".*

*(Interview: 19/9/2006, Elafotopos Village, Stavros Tzokas).*



*Photos above: © Kalliopi Stara, 2007, Plane tree in Krystalopigi, Thesprotia. Trees' cavity functions as a chapel.*

After the 60's, changing patterns of land use and population decline had a dramatic effect on the social structure and management practices: abandonment, collapse of local management systems, indifference of the State and tourist development threaten cultural landscapes and their sacred elements.

*[Wife]: -They cut them (The oaks of St. Nikolas monastery). They existed...*

*[Husband]: - They were old trees, very old...*

*[Wife]: -Why? They are frightened by someone? Is there a chairman? Is there a council? Is there something? And who cut them? My nephew, that one who built the hostel! And do you know why? Because the trees obstructed the view from his hostel! Is it allowed to cut them? These are archeological. From thousands of years! He cut them last year and he used them as firewood. Only one has been left".*



(Interview: 7/9/2006, Skamneli Village, Vasileia & †Theophilos Kousiouris).

Sacred Natural Sites in Greece form a largely unrecognized “shadow” conservation network that is threatened. To the younger generation sacred natural sites are frequently unknown and supernatural faiths are often considered as signs of backwardness. Modern ideas about ecological values in Greece have started to emerge, but are not entirely accepted by local communities. In this context the recognition of the bio-cultural value of many forgotten sacred woods could potentially enable their conservation without destroying their aesthetic quality and spirituality.

*“In places where mature prickly oaks grow I would never cut. Not because I am afraid that something bad will happen to me... I would not cut because it is stupid to cut a tree that costs 100 euros, but which takes 800 years to grow big. Neither would I cut a rare tree. The problem is that the others do not respect it. Here, everything that is near the road is cut”.*

(Interview: 22/9/2006, Kato Pedina Village, Panagiotis Magkos).

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*Photos: (Top) Nikolaos Staras accompanied us in “Megala Pournaria”, literally “Big Prickly Oaks” (Quercus coccifera), the sacred grove above Kato Pedina village in Zagori. Protection of the grove was achieved through dedication of the forest to the central church of Agios Athanasios. (Bottom) Chapel dedicated to Transfiguration/ Metamorphosis of Christ and its associated belfry oak (one of the ten largest in diameter of the 327 surveyed) in Vitsa. Kalliopi Stara, 2006*





Hailey McCloskey

## Megalithic Embodiment in Ancient Ireland

### How history and experience join

In Ireland, the presence and persistence of actively used and viewed megaliths and provides a clear yet constantly in flux insight into the ways of life of Irish people. Their association with past lifeways connected to goddess worshipping cultures, the larger group called the Celts, British colonizers, and the tourist industry have stewed together to form melting pot style cultural marriage between the land and spirituality. The ways that the land based customs of Irish people have changed and adapted over time allow us to see both the effects of colonialism upon the way people view and interact with a sacred landscape and how continuity of traditions have survived under extreme change.

The land informs our perceived spiritual place on the earth. Scholar Ingold's concept of dwelling provides a clear link of how these connections are made, and provides an exciting window into Irish megalithic history. He states that meanings are a process of relationships: "with space, meanings are attached to the world; with the landscape they are gathered from it" (Ingold, 155). Pre-Christian Irish peoples recognized the land as a reference to their transitions through life and into death. Ingold's ideas help in the understanding of how megalithic and well sites were representative of the Irish body. He uses the relationship of organism to environment as similar to the relationship between body and landscape.

### Spirit in the material

In ancient Ireland, the body and the landscape were engaged in a cosmology that mimicked the qualities of stone and water. As stone, the body

remained on the earth after death. As water, the body transformed out of or into the earth. Acting bodies upon the landscape embodied a combination of meanings: they are connected to an ever shifting and constantly affirmed cosmology speaks to the very nature of the rituals that were originally related to the landscape. The past and the present coexist in these ancient megaliths and tomb structures. While the ancient models of relating with these places live on, new meanings are also given to them by the people in the present.

The meaning of placing stone megaliths and chambered tombs where water and mountain can be seen was purposeful. The designs on the stone and around the site, stone placement in relation to the sun and moon, the sensory effect of the construction of the tombs all served to produce a site that continually reinforced a deep social and historical relationship. The Boyne valley tradition of design, spiral images on many ancient rocks, megaliths and water sites all reference a sun-worshipping cult in pre-Christian times. As the place of the setting sun was the resting place of the dead, the sun was life. The moon held an opposing place in the cosmological understanding of the person in the landscape. Symbols revering the sun and the moon are common at these sites. While these were often inscribed as purposeful art, rocks used for megalithic structures often showed visual references, such as a wavy appearance, that signified their origination from water sites far from their mountain home. (Fowler and Cummings, 4) The main reference of water at megalithic tomb sites is the placement of water-rolled quartz crystals at the entranceways, at the rear of

*Cloch-Chearcal Agus Cairn also called Dromberg Stone Circle is on of the most frequented sacred sites by tourists located in county Corc in Ireland. The area of the circle has been covered in gravel to protect it from the volume of visitors. Photo: Bas Verschuuren 2006.*





the cairns nearest to the sea. Unlike other stones, quartz is easily transformed. It makes fire-like sparks when rubbed together and is reflective and sparkling when lit by the sun. Quartz crystals were important economic tender for the Neolithic peoples of the Irish Sea area, and were indicative of economic power. Quartz also signified the fluidity of personal relationships and social status at that time. It is interesting to note that quartz is most common at sites of erosion from cliffs or beaches, the prominent place of megalithic tombs in Neolithic Ireland. Sometimes quartz was found with rounded pebbles and shells in layers above or below human bones. These visual features indicative of water emphasized the connection between coastal zone, inland mountains and streams in general. Constant reference to water, especially the prevalence of quartz, served to make megalithic structures “wet”, marking them appropriate for ritual acts of transformation. (Fowler and Cummings, 14) The rituals invoked inside the passage tombs utilized water as a way to access the states of transformation and vessels for water were used to wash the bones of the dead when deposition and redepositions were made.

The importance of the sun and specifically the sunset horizon was present in ritual activity associated with

wedge tombs. The dominant design had an orientation of the chamber facing the southwest horizon. (O’Brien, 161, 162) Sometimes these tombs reflected the position of the setting sun at the time of death of the deceased, or at the time the monument was built. This emphasis was made to highlight the dramatic contrast of light and life and the darkness of death. The famous sites of Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange all have entrances aligned with the suns movement west to east. The journey back through the symbolic night is represented by the temple that was built at the northern perimeter.

### Ritual consciousness

The fluid nature of the passage of life to death, one world to another was often represented through ritual in Neolithic Ireland. In death, one travelled to the land of the setting sun, where darkness began. The sensory experience of entering a tomb when participating in funerary rituals was like being underwater, in the dark water and without sensory perception: lack of reference of gravity, sight, and shift in acoustics all contributed. This loss of perception inside a tomb is said to be like being in a trance. (Cummings and Fowler, 14) This recreated the sensation of the experience of the markers of life. The markers of the life passage are often experienced as death



and rebirth, so it is clear that to have a clear physical experience of this sensation would provide symbolic footing to the real life event. At Loughcrew and Dowth, the passages are short and “when you move down into the chamber the visibility of motifs get diminished and go from visual to tactile” (Tilley, 177) of the stones, and the sound of the moving body is amplified whereas the sound from the outside world is diminished. This gives weight to the bodily associations between water, rock, body and death in Neolithic Irish cosmology.

The referencing of stone and water, or mountain and shore, was also seen through the presence of limpet shells, cockle mussels, scallop and oysters. These were either found covering deposits of amphibians, fish, snake and eel bones at some sites, and at other sites, like Glecknabae in Bute, the actual tomb was built over a shell midden. (Cummings and Fowler, 6) This would have been an odd choice for Neolithic Irish peoples as they did not eat sea creatures. They thought that, seeing as the remains of bodies were deposited in rivers and tributaries that led to the ocean, these animals of the sea were their ancestors. Along with quartz, the features of megaliths referenced the fluidity of water and the permanence of stone as reflecting symbols of one another: while both have inherent qualities they also contain the opposite.

### Social engagement at megaliths

Community rites were performed at these stunning sites of contradiction and reflectiveness. They were places where people could come and leave behind the tone of

their everyday lives to delve into ritual consciousness. Like the sites themselves, these states are permeable like a membrane, like the relationship between land and sea. Not only were the bones and fluids of the decomposing body a prime metaphor for the material qualities of rock and water, but also the social aspects of the rituals were the dispersal of the person into a different state or role within the group’s understanding of the world and cosmos. In life, these parts are combined, but in death they disperse through decomposition. Each body part was associated with a different aspect of personhood. Some of the rituals that took place beyond funerary rites were related to stages of the life cycle, calendric events, and related to different social subgroups: “Changes in communal and personal existence may have been linked to other changes – the seasons, the phases of the moon, and the ebb and flow of tides along the shore-line. In sum, places used to build the bodies of monuments from water and stone may also have been used to build human bodies (or comment on their constitution), and to deconstitute those bodies after death.” (Cummings and Fowler, 12-13)

### Religious structures and change

Perhaps owing to the pure physical grandness of such monuments, and perhaps owing to a ritual culture so embedded in such physicality, the appropriation of the Catholic Church and the terror that Protestant missionaries held for monumental landscapes and their practices thwarted the direction of energies at these sites, but never quite achieved the upheaval that they hoped for. In 1617 a document proclaimed that it was forbidden to gather in woods, at wells and on the plains and hillsides, and that gathering at such sites was inevitably linked to dangerous superstitions that were anti-God, according to King James 1. (Walsham, 41) Over time, this attitude that led to the destruction of such sacred sites eventually was replaced with the Church simply deciding to replace one form of spirituality with theirs. They built churches on these grounds.

The contest of authenticity sits at the forefront of current discussions about the role of sites now named ‘heritage’ in the lives of Irish people and the newly entitled world traveller. At Newgrange, this affects the political economic status of local peoples and their connection to ancient megalithic sites. While tourism used to be led by local shops and guides in this Boyne Valley site, the state has taken over control of Newgrange, and any surrounding areas that could lead to national profit in the area (meaning control over any development that could hinder views of the megalith). In order to control traffic into and out of the site, the state changed the signs and their placement to reflect a ‘traditional’, albeit false, connection to the past. (Ronayne, 155) This



*Cloch-Chearcal Agus Cairn also called Dromberg Stone Circle is on of the most frequented sacred sites by tourists located in county Corc in Ireland. The area of the circle has been covered in gravel to protect it from the volume of visitors. Photo: Bas Verschuuren 2006.*



We are more intertwined in action and thought to our landscapes than our conscious thought may be able to express. The embodied experience holds much knowledge within it. While constant change can be likened to the death and rebirth cosmologies of the Neolithic era, its permanent nature can be likened to the qualities of combining rock and water: while some stories are washed away, others remain as bodies remain through the materiality of bones.

is just one site in the larger picture of an increasingly consumer influenced landscape that transforms the rural inhabitants into low pay workers for outsourced (at least from the immediate area) tourist agencies whose practices and beliefs disperse a questionable version of authenticity. It is ironic that such an industry is so dependent upon seasonality and the whims of the market, as seasonality was linked to concepts of personhood and fluidity in the social world in Neolithic Ireland. And yet the seasonality is not something to engage with on the local level, a ruling force has again taken control of it, only this time the force is not so concerned with the spiritual elements at play. Ingold relates seasons directly to the body, by the very fact that to know a season is to know the way our bodies perceive changes in season: light and dark, temperature, growth and decay etcetera. He states that not only do seasons affect the landscape and buildings built upon it, but they also become ingrained into our development as human beings. We follow patterns in our daily lives that are built upon seasonality that are so embedded into our bodies that we may not be able to even notice them.

In Ingold's words, "Our actions do not transform the world; they are part and parcel of the world's transforming itself. And that is just another way of saying that they belong to time." (Ingold, 164). We are more intertwined in action and thought to our landscapes than our conscious thought may be able to express. The embodied experience holds much knowledge within it. While constant change can be likened to the death and rebirth cosmologies of the Neolithic era, its permanent nature can be likened to the qualities of combining rock and water: while some stories are washed away, others remain as bodies remain through the materiality of bones.

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*Along the rugged coast of Inshmor part of the Aran Islands Neolithic sacred sites have been merged into Celtic defense works. Parts of the original structures have been restored and are currently maintained as heritage that is visited by tourists. The elements of water and quartz are abundantly represented in the structures speckled along this coastal landscape. Photo: Bas Verschuuren 2006.*

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# In Search of Sacredness: Pilgrimage Practices in Kyrgyzstan

Story and Photographs by Cholponai Usubalieva-Gryshchuk

Hills resembling a dragon tail, composed of arenaceous soft mud stretching for several miles, scarce but fresh and lush vegetation, springs with ice-cold water spouting from the heart of the earth, waves of the salty lake gently crashing against the shore, magnificent white clouds soaring up in the sky and the numerous pilgrims, lined up one by one, treading right upon the “dragon tail” and making their pilgrimage through the sacred site *Manjyly-Ata*...

*Pilgrimage at sacred site Manjyly-Ata*



The pilgrimage practice in Kyrgyzstan grew immensely after the disbandment of the Soviet Union. The pilgrimage tradition, as well as other practices, almost faded away under the aggressive Soviet propaganda of atheism. It was only after Kyrgyzstan became an independent state and acquired the right to freedom of religion that people regained their ancient tradition of visiting sacred sites or mazar, although it was not an easy process. Many people, especially elders and bearers of traditional knowledge, had perished, taking their knowledge with them.

*Manjyly-Ata* is one of the largest sacred sites on the southern shore of Lake Yssyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan, a small mountainous country in the heart of the *Tien Shan* mountain range in Central Asia. *Manjyly-Ata* is well known for the magic powers of its seven sacred springs whose waters are believed to heal numerous illnesses and bring luck to those longing to have a child. Most of the time, the guardian of the sacred site leads visitors for a pilgrimage that starts from a joint prayer, after which pilgrims halt at every sacred spring and elderly pilgrims recite verses from the *Qur'an*, and they all fill their cups with spring water, make a wish and then drink it or wash their eyes and faces. A pilgrimage may last indefinitely. Pilgrims may sit by one spring and meditate for hours or make several rounds instead. Each pilgrim chants their own prayers and invokes the Creator and ancestor spirits during their sacred mission, and makes their wishes. Having completed their pilgrimage, they return to the ritual house, utter some more prayers and meditate for a while, and when the day starts to wane they share the food they brought with other pilgrims at one table. There are pilgrims of different ethnicities, belief systems and age united by one goal – finding peace, being in harmony with Nature, oneself and the Creator. Sacred sites bring different people together and create an atmosphere of unity in diversity.

As an old Kyrgyz saying puts it, “If you want a child go to *Manjyly-Ata*, and if you want wealth and prosperity go to *Cholpon-Ata*.” Sacred sites vary in terms of their spiritual power and capacities they are believed to possess. Sacred

sites can also be natural (springs, trees, stones, soil, etc.) and human-made (mausoleums of revered people and graves of innocent people); a combination of natural and human-made sacred sites is not a rare phenomenon either. Therefore, pilgrims visit each sacred site with a different purpose and perform different rituals and ceremonies based on their needs and wishes. There are certain large sacred site compounds, frequently visited by hundreds of pilgrims every month, while there are other sacred sites, tucked away snugly in recondite nooks, with only few devotees visiting them each year. Thus, the pilgrimage practice and sacred sites vary greatly from one another<sup>i</sup>.

Every pilgrim coming to a sacred site follows general unwritten pilgrimage rules and performs certain rituals



*Pilgrims at the sunset*





*Top: Sacred lake, Aikol, at the altitude of 3 000 meters above the sea level in Batken province, one of the hardly acceccable sites*

*Bottom: Pilgrims at the summit of the Jyngalach Bugu*



and ceremonies. One of the important rules that has already transfigured into a pilgrimage ritual is bringing *jeti tokoch*, or seven pieces of round bread, made for ancestor and sacred site spirits in order to receive their blessing and attain assistance with human mishaps and miseries, along with other foodstuffs, which later are shared with other pilgrims at the site. Both men and women ought to cover their heads, while women are expected to wear long skirts and long-sleeved shirts. Before entering the sacred site, every pilgrim must make an ablution, recite verses from the *Qur'an*, jettison their negative thoughts and become attuned to light and peace. As a rule, almost every sacred site is looked after and taken care of by a guardian, who should be quite knowledgeable about the place and have special bonds with it. According to the size of the sacred site, it might have a ritual house with all necessary kitchenware and beddings available to accommodate pilgrims for an overnight stay.

One of the important rituals performed at sacred sites is *tyuloo* (making a wish for something) accompanied by sacrificing a sheep and sharing its meat with other people. *Tyuloo* is conducted in several cases: when something positive happens and a person wants to share their happiness and thank the Creator and ancestor spirits (e.g. birth of a child, good harvest, etc.); or when an undesired incident, severe illness or misfortune takes place, in which case one sacrifices a sheep asking the Creator to bestow his good will and fortune. This ritual is also held during drought, rigorous winters or in case of any other natural disaster. In such instances, the whole community gathers together and sacrifices an animal praying to the spirits and God. Quite often a family comes to a sacred site and makes *tyuloo* along with preparing food and sharing it with other pilgrims. They might spend the whole night without sleeping and walking around the site in prayers and meditation. Before sacrificing a sheep, an elderly person recites verses from the *Qur'an* followed by a collective prayer, after which a younger man, a member of the family, slaughters the sheep. All parts of the sheep, from “head to hoofs”, are boiled in a big grey cauldron for several hours; when the food is ready all the people at the sacred site congregate at one big table, an elder recites verses from the *Qur'an* again and invites guardian spirits of the sacred site, as well as ancestor spirits, to partake of the meal, thus showing respect. Everyone is seated together as one big family, sharing the prepared food. All other pilgrims support the family with their good wishes and prayers.

It is important to emphasize the general attitude of pilgrims towards each other at sacred sites. They act as if they knew each other for quite a while and as if the sacred site was their home. Behavior of pilgrims is full of care, respect and love for the sacred site and each other, and this is truly astounding. Special vibrations of sacred sites create unity and the feeling of oneness, which oftentimes is quite difficult to see and experience in our day-to-day material life.

The pilgrimage practice in Kyrgyzstan grew immensely after the disbandment of the Soviet Union. The pilgrimage tradition, as well as other practices, almost faded away under the aggressive Soviet propaganda of atheism. It was only after Kyrgyzstan became an independent state and acquired the right to freedom of religion that people regained their ancient tradition of visiting sacred sites or *mazars*<sup>ii</sup>, although it was not an easy process. Many people, especially elders and bearers of traditional knowledge, had perished, taking their knowledge with them. Also, the absence of written history contributed greatly to weakening the collective memory. However, the existence of oral history, passed on by word of mouth from one generation to another, helped keep many traditions alive.

Indeed, it is arguable whether or not sacred sites exist at all, and whether or not one place can be more sacred than the other. If we look at it from the perspective of sacredness of everything that exists in the Universe, the idea of sacred sites shrinks to nothing. And yet many people choose to believe in this idea, and their beliefs strike a researcher delving in traditional knowledge with their simple beauty and innocent manifestation. By visiting sacred sites, human beings attempt to escape from that which is mundane and trivial, and re-connect with that which gave them life and form. Naïve as they may seem, these beliefs bring them peace of mind and consolation to their hearts. People open themselves up to the world, and learn to look at it without fears, seeking the truth in nature and transcendental concepts, normally associated with sacred sites. Also, the latter serve as places of gathering, and this helps generate the feeling of oneness among all those embarking on a pilgrimage journey. These are special moments in the life of pilgrims, when they become one with their own selves, other human beings, nature, invisible spirits and the Creator. Therefore, it is important to revive, preserve and develop traditional wisdom and spiritual practices of our ancestors. 🌿

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Story and Photographs by He Ran Gao

## SEVEN DAYS PILGRIM WALK IN TIBET

Last summer my studies took me to Tibet where I stayed with a Tibetan family to conduct research. At the end of my stay the family invited me to join them on a pilgrimage along Mt. Kawagebo. I was happy to accept but I had no idea what was awaiting me.

The pilgrim route around the sacred mountain Kawagebo is about 800 years old and about 250 km. Local Tibetans usually finish it in a week, this time it took us 6 days. The pilgrimage is an annual event. In South-East Tibet the whole village, families, men and women, young or old, all participate. Mt. Kawagebo consists of a series of mountains and is most famous for its 13 snow covered peaks average height of more than 4000m in the shape of a lotus flower.

The walk started in the rain which continued on for the next two and half days. Each day we walked about 35 km. This is not 35 km on the plain ground, but instead the route goes through the high mountains whilst carrying 10 kg of luggage including food and night cover. The Tibetans usually wake up in the morning at 6 or 7 o'clock, depending on the weather and physical conditions. They have hot yak-butter tea, eat a handful of traditional baked highland-barley flour ("Zan Ba") and head out on the path. We walk for 4 hours throughout the morning climbing up and up in order to reach the mountain pass by noon. At each of the mountain passes the men perform a ritual of chanting and offering. After a simple lunch, we walk another 6 hours but this time down to the river valley

to the camping place. During the walk most of Tibetans hold chanting beads in their hands and chant "*Om Ma Ni Be Me Hom*". They only allow themselves to stand still for several minutes in order to catch a breath or to briefly sit on the ground for a drink.

The camping place is mostly a simple hut that consists of no more than a dozen of thin pine trunks which the pilgrims cover with a piece of plastic sheet which during the walk also serves as a raincoat. We sleep directly on the ground in our coats on a bed of pine needles and a plastic sheet. Many of the Pilgrims would skip dinner or simply boil a big pot of noodle soup with several mushrooms or wild vegetables picked along the way. As a vegetarian I didn't share their dry yak ham, but I enjoyed yak butter and cheese very much. Nonetheless, I was seriously exhausted after 2 days on the trail.

I accompanied a group of 15 villagers, aging between 7 to 72 years old. Only 2 of them were men, who took care of the whole group. I walked an average of 10 hours a day and I was the slowest member in the group. The 7 year old always passed me silently while other girls would accompany me with laughter and a kind push. I don't understand Tibetan language but I felt the hospitality from their warm smiles and kind holding or patting me when I needed support. When they were not chanting, they would joke briskly with each other and spread the brightest hard laughter I've ever heard.

Before the trip I asked my host family: "*Should*



*I bring anything?"* They said: *"No need! Just come along and we will go as a family."* So I simply brought a backpack, notebook, camera, a thin sleeping bag and a little compact food only to discover in shame that these were far from sufficient for such a walk. Every day, I shared the others food and drink and at night when the temperature dropped close to zero, I curled up between granny Yangqing and her granddaughter Luotsang. Sharing their thick robes as mattress and using a thick yak-wool blanket. Surrounded by the warm smell of Tibetan yak-butter, I slept like a stone.

From the second day onward my toes and heels were bleeding due to the heavy marching. I had blisters swollen badly that the Tibetans worriedly took my entire luggage on their back. Even without luggage I still could not catch up with them so one man helped me to cut open my shoes in order to release pressure of the wounds but I was still too slow to keep up.

On the afternoon of the third day I felt a sudden pain in my right knee that made me fall to the ground. After several attempts to get up, I realized that there must be something wrong with it. I told Luotsang to keep walking and I would catch up with them later. After the walkers had disappeared on the mountain path, I couldn't help starting to cry. Born a single kid to a chinese family, growing up and spending all my life in the city I had never faced such a hard physical challenge. Many times I really felt I couldn't make it so I cried a bit more, sat for a rest and slowly started to walk. I was trampling along the rocky path, moving with small steps and sobbing until I turned around a corner and saw Mt. Kawagebo for the first time. It was pure white, high up in the sky and solemn in an early evening sunshine that painted it golden with a touch of red. I stood there for a long time looking at it, the scenery so great, much greater than my pain or even a possible death. I stopped sobbing and quickened my pace.

Not long after both men from the group rushed back to me. They said: *"We heard that you were crying! We are so worried"*. I replied: *"How come? I didn't cry until you were gone!"* They both laughed at me for weeping at my age and one of them took me on his back. First I firmly refused but then Gongbo, the younger man, explained that I walked too slow to reach the camp by sunset. As they would not leave me on the mountain I gave in, crawled on his back and let him carry me through the valley of Wei Qie.

The local people use a thick canvas belt as carrying belt. Sealed in a circle one side of the belt holds their luggage at their back and the other side is strapped across their forehead. Gongbo carried me the same way carrying my whole weight on his forehead. As he leaned forward facing down and marching fast, sweat dripped from his head. At first Gongbo took a break from time to time, but later as it was getting dimmer and more dangerous to walk on the mountain, he just ran down the valley



*Photos: Mt. Kawagebo, and various stages along the journey through the pilgrimage.*





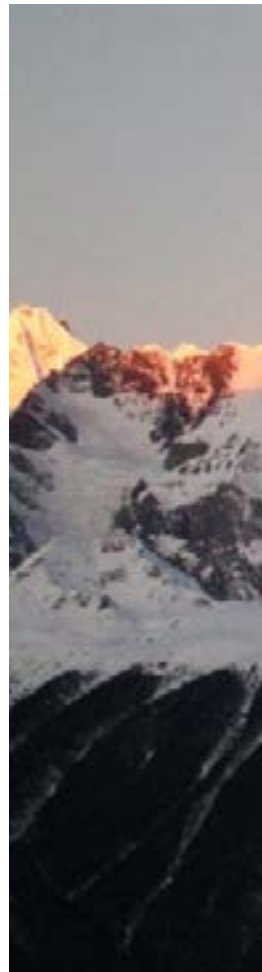
like a horse. We went along a thin mountain path with thorny plants on the left and a steep cliff on the right. He looked worried as stones were falling down the side. I said: *“Gongbo, I can walk, let me down and you go first!”* but he replied, *“Just be quiet, we can pass together or we fall and die together!”*. This is Tibetan culture, they have known you for one week only and they readily risk their life for you. Gongbo carried me down the high mountain across rocks, and over creeks whilst his sweat soaked my entire jacket until it touched my skin.

The next days other group members also offered their help. On the fourth day when I was climbing down at an embarrassing slow pace, Luotsang, my loyal 12 year old friend, stopped and turned around and told me firmly: *“Come on to my back and let me carry you!”* Although I had to turn down her offer I was deeply touched...

At the times when I felt hunger lagging far behind my group and my backpack I folded my hand and asked for food from the other pilgrim groups along the trail. I was always kindly offered bread, cheese and butter. It was a life changing experience that I’ll never forget.

I followed the group to the Flying Temple of Mt. Kawagebo where people worship the Prince Kawagebo. He is the most important local deity being bestowed with offerings of yak butter and money. I prostrated myself wholly with my Tibetan friends, and when I got up, I felt a great peace. How rare an experience for a Chinese city born woman. In the big capital Beijing you can get any excitement and sensory gratification but not this sort of peace. As a single kid growing up in Beijing, traveling across the world, I’ve never even thought that one day I would witness something as sacred and divine as I did that day.

The pilgrim path has been visited for the last 800 years and yet many parts of it still remain part of an untouched landscape, carefully protected and aligned with the religious flags, paintings. All of these are signals that keep indicating that this river is sacred or this tree is sacred and in fact the very land we are walking on is sacred. It is due to the pilgrim’s respect and worship that the land remained so beautiful.





We marched in this pristine landscape, among the solemn mountains, the crystal clear creeks, the majestic trees and colourful plantations. Silently these create an atmosphere of awe so alive that it belittles all human intelligence and emotion and puts me back to my very existence. During the walk life is reduced to simple inhalation and exhalation, step by step, up and down, just walking. My mind got quieter and quieter with each step. The simplicity of this walk slowly removed the veil of ego and revealed something deeper. From time to time I raise my head, breathing deep and gazing into the endless mountains, to the infinite sky and the vividly moving clouds whilst listening to the running water and smelling the fragrance of mountain herbs. I felt everything around me. There's an awesome beauty in it that makes you forget everything about daily life and trouble. There were moments that I felt a sudden stillness, almost timelessness as if everything is eternal. I felt as if I was solely existing independent from everything, yet being one with everything. These moments, so beautiful, were worth the physical sufferings I endured.

In Chinese there's an old saying: *"When the virtue is lost, search it in the wilderness"*. In Tibet, this vast land of

wilderness - through plain walking - I found something that I can hold onto for the rest of my life. It starts from the deep understanding that we are part of nature, that man and earth are not separated but are one with each other. Life on earth exists not by chance, but is instead a great wonder. Tibetans showed me all of that in a simple one-week walk.

Tibet is a wonderland, not only because there exists many sacred mountains and rivers nor because of the monks that perform rituals to bring the rain. For me, it is a wonderland because its people still hold strong faith. The Tibetans see the world as spiritual, divine and one. We are part of this world and only quickly passing by. Therefore we have to respect and pay homage to our host. The way I see this is that nature conservation and ecological restoration should be done, not by cost-benefit analysis, not by payment for ecosystem services, not by any environmental laws, but from this deep and inner understanding of ourselves, our environment, and our life. 🌀







# SACREDNATURALSITES

## “Protecting, conserving and revitalising sacred natural sites together”

The Sacred Natural Site Initiative (SNSI) is emerging out of 15 years of work of the IUCN Specialist group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas. SNSI is an international initiative that aims to build a focused programme of work to support the protection, conservation and revitalization of sacred natural sites. To achieve this, the Initiative works with partners in the nature conservation community and more widely to promote an enabling environment for better protection, support, management and policy of sacred natural sites, landscapes and territories.

The Sacred Natural Site Initiative works through the empowerment of their custodians and communities. Their knowledge and practices guide the conservation of sacred natural sites at the local community level but also in management and policy up to the national and international level. In support of this the Initiative aims work towards creating a network of organisations and custodians active in the conservation of sacred natural sites. This way it seeks to engage with stakeholders, sectoral interests and the wider public to promote awareness and respectful relationships as well as to provide practical support for conserving sacred lands.

Custodians, their supporters and conservation organisations with an interest in the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative are welcome to contact us at [info@sacrednaturalsites.org](mailto:info@sacrednaturalsites.org). You can learn more about the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative on [www.sacrednaturalsites.org](http://www.sacrednaturalsites.org) and join us for news updates or become part of our facebook community.

*Photo: Tibetan Buddhist praying flags along the pilgrimage trail circumambulating Mt Kawegabo. The five colours represent the elements; blue for sky, white for water, red for fire, green for air and yellow for earth.; He Ran Gao, 2011*



**Below are a list of just a few organisations working to support sacred natural sites and their guardians.**

## **IUCN**

The International Union for Conservation of Nature seeks to achieve improved understanding, recognition, and conservation of sacred natural sites worldwide. IUCN aims to (1) gain knowledge and promote awareness about sacred natural sites in the world, (2) promote and support development of legal and policy frameworks at the global level, (3) mobilize legal, political, financial, and technical support for the long-term protection and effective management of sacred natural sites at the national level and (4) help build the capacity of those involved in management of sacred natural sites.

[http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/social\\_policy/sp\\_themes\\_sns2/](http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/social_policy/sp_themes_sns2/)

## **CSVPA**

The Specialist Group on Cultural And Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) is a volunteer expert specialist group within the World Commission on Protected Areas one of the six commissions of IUCN. CSVPA seeks to identify, define, and provide guidelines for managing the Cultural and Spiritual dimensions of protected areas. This work is accomplished through e-mail communication among the network participants, working sessions at major events, such as WCPA meetings, and through individual projects.

[http://iucn.org/about/union/commissions/wcpa/wcpa\\_what/wcpa\\_governance/wcpa\\_cultural/](http://iucn.org/about/union/commissions/wcpa/wcpa_what/wcpa_governance/wcpa_cultural/)

## **The Gaia Foundation**

Gaia works with partners in the Colombian Amazon, Sweden and Altai, to support local and indigenous communities to strengthen their traditional knowledge, practices and governance systems in order to protect their sacred sites and territories. Together, we are developing legal strategies to reinforce the protection of these vital sanctuaries. This is important not only for the local communities but also for the rehabilitation of the planet's ecosystems, which are essential in building resilience to cope with climatic instabilities.

[www.gaiafoundation.org/sacred-sites-networks](http://www.gaiafoundation.org/sacred-sites-networks)

## **The Sacred Land Film Project**

Earth Island Institute's Sacred Land Film Project produces a variety of media and educational materials - films, videos, DVDs, articles, photographs, school curricula materials and Web site content - to deepen

public understanding of sacred places, indigenous cultures and environmental justice. For the last decade we have focused on the production and distribution of the documentary film, *In the Light of Reverence*. We are currently in post-production on a four-part series on sacred places around the world, entitled *Standing on Sacred Ground*.

[www.sacredland.org/](http://www.sacredland.org/)

## **Delos Initiative**

The Delos Initiative focuses on the sacred natural sites in developed countries throughout the world (such as Australia, Canada, the European countries, Japan, New Zealand and the United States of America). Its main purpose is to help in maintaining both the sanctity and the biodiversity of these sites, through the understanding of the complex relationship between spiritual, cultural and natural values.

[www.med-ina.org/delos/index.htm](http://www.med-ina.org/delos/index.htm)

## **SANASI**

The world database on sacred natural sites (SANASI) aims (1) to collect and provide data to analyze whether sacred natural sites harbor species that are especially valuable for biodiversity conservation and the provision of livelihoods, (2) to collect and provide data on the underlying values and institutional arrangements of sacred natural sites to analyze the parameters that are crucial for their successful management, and (3) to foster interdisciplinary research on these issues by developing a network of scientists and common research protocols that will facilitate collaborations and exchange of data.

[www.sanasi.org](http://www.sanasi.org)

## **DiversEarth**

DiversEarth has been established to assist the custodians and communities of Sacred Natural Sites and other areas of important bio-cultural diversity in their own quests to protect their places. Its mission is to enhance the protection, management, and restoration of such special places by understanding and celebrating their bio-sanctity and providing custodians with practical solutions to deal with the challenges they face. DiversEarth's current geographic focus is South and South East Asia and the Mediterranean Basin.

[www.diversearth.org](http://www.diversearth.org)





# Terralingua

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**Individual Memberships.** Individual membership is **free of charge** and open to all those who support our purposes and want to further Terralingua's work. Our goal is to encourage as many people as possible to join, so we don't require the payment of membership dues. However, for those who can afford it, we suggest a minimum donation of US \$50 per year to support our operations.

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Submissions due April 1, 2012

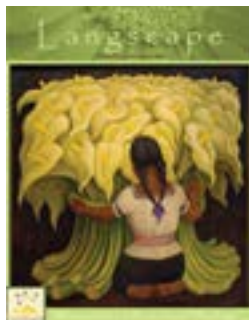
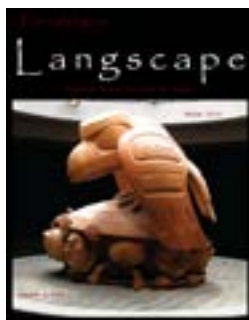
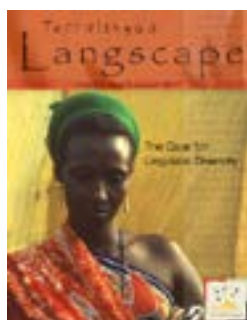
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*Photograph: The praying ritual at one of the hot springs in Kyrgyzstan.  
Cholponai Usubalieva-Gryshchuk*