Sacred Species and Sites

Advances in Biocultural Conservation

It is being increasingly recognised that cultural and biological diversity are deeply linked and that conservation programmes should take into account the ethical, cultural and spiritual values of nature.

With contributions from a range of scholars, practitioners and spiritual leaders from around the world, this book provides new insights into biocultural diversity conservation. It explores sacred landscapes, sites, plants and animals from around the world to demonstrate the links between nature conservation and spiritual beliefs and traditions. Key conceptual topics are connected to case studies, as well as modern and ancient spiritual insights, guiding the reader through the various issues from fundamental theory and beliefs to practical applications.

It looks forward to the biocultural agenda, providing guidelines for future research and practice, and offering suggestions for improved integration of these values into policy, planning and management.

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Sacred Species and Sites
Advances in Biocultural Conservation

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Foreword

AHMED DJOGLAF

There is clear and growing evidence of strong links existing between cultural diversity and biodiversity, between sacred sites and a concentration of often unique species. There is in effect an intrinsic relationship between culture, religion, spirituality and the environment.

Sacred sites often provide sanctuaries for rare and endangered species, and contain important reservoirs of genetic and species diversity. They play an important role as a potential gene pool that can be used to restore degraded environments and can help protect ecosystems against other environmental threats.

In many societies, traditional sacred sites fulfil similar functions to protected areas. Due to the spiritual values attributed to these sites, restrictions on access and use often apply, and many such sites remain in a natural or near-natural condition. In sacred sites, human disturbance has usually been reduced or prevented, often for long periods of time, resulting in high levels of biodiversity. We can then say that sacred sites represent the oldest protected areas of the planet.

Because of their cultural and interdisciplinary character, sacred sites are also means for environmental education, cross-cultural learning and the intergenerational transmission of spiritual and biocultural knowledge. For example, at the Tibetan Phags Mo Gling Lamasary in China’s western Sichuan Province, lamas regularly survey the land by walking on paths lined with prayer flags and other offerings. They conduct trail maintenance and monitor bird diversity, floral health and soil composition, among other activities. The lamas have also developed a bird guide and regularly lead tourists on bird-watching treks on the sacred mountain.

In many ways and in many places, sacred sites, beliefs, faith groups and protected areas meet. For example, the Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary, in Ghana, is considered as a sacred grove because it supports populations of black and white colobus monkey (*Colobus vellerosus*) and mona monkey (*Cercopithecus mona*), both of which are revered and strictly protected as sons of the gods of the people of Boabeng and Fiema villages. Another example is Argentina’s Lanin National Park,
famous for its monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*), which is sacred to the Mapuche Indians, or the ‘Earth people’.

Many natural sacred sites are associated with indigenous cultures. Historical, cultural and spiritual aspects of indigenous peoples’ lives are grounded in the biodiversity, ecosystems and land that surround them. Traditional knowledge and practices often make indigenous peoples highly skilled and respectful stewards of biodiversity. Thus, indigenous peoples are most important to consider in exploring the relationships between sacred species and sites, biodiversity and conservation.

Biological diversity is intricately linked to cultural diversity. The traditional songs, prayers, names and languages associated with sacred sites reflect the deep knowledge and spirituality of indigenous cultures. For example, of the 6000 human languages counted by UNESCO, more than 2500 are threatened with extinction, and thousands of others are suffering a gradual loss of functionality because their environmental dimension is becoming impoverished. More than 80% of countries that have great biological diversity are also places with the greatest number of endemic languages. In fact, biological, cultural and linguistic diversity are co-evolved, interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Each culture possesses its own set of representations, knowledge and cultural practices which depend upon specific elements of biodiversity for their continued existence and expression. Many of the world’s endangered species today are known only to certain peoples whose languages are dying out. As they die, they take with them all the traditional knowledge associated with these species.

Cultural groups develop and maintain significant ensembles of biological diversity, with knowledge and practice as the media for their management. Together, cultural diversity and biological diversity hold the key to ensuring resilience in both social systems and ecosystems. The Convention on Biological Diversity has recognised this important link, amongst other things, through its work developing the *Akwe Kon* guidelines for the conduct of cultural, environmental 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.

Sadly, sacred species and sites are under major threat. They are subject to a wide range of pressures, such as illegal extraction of timber and wildlife, impacts from extractive industries’ operations, encroachment by outsiders, disrespectful tourism, poverty and population dynamics, and degradation of neighbouring environments. Moreover, the close interconnections of many sacred areas with cultural and biological diversity mean that, if any one of these three is threatened or endangered, then the others may be as well. There is an urgent need to help indigenous people and local communities safeguard their heritage, which in turn can do much to conserve the biological diversity upon which we all depend. Biocultural
conservation is a successful and cost-effective approach to protecting biodiversity, strengthening traditional systems, and helping to preserve culture in a holistic and synergistic way.

In order to truly protect biodiversity, we need to think outside of the economic model of asking how much a species is worth, or of what use it is to humans. The value of certain sites and species is often not quantifiable in monetary terms. Yet, does that give us the right to abuse these natural resources? Understanding and conserving biodiversity has to come from values and respect. Thus, at a time when the current rate of species extinctions is higher than at any time since the disappearance of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, the recognition and protection of sacred species and sacred sites are needed more than ever before for the survival of biodiversity, and accordingly that of humans. Hence, the publication of the book *Sacred Species and Sites: Advances in Biocultural Conservation* is extremely timely and truly encouraging. I would like to congratulate and thank all those who contributed to this important book.

*Dr Ahmed Djoghlaf is the former Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Dr Djoghlaf has lectured frequently on topics related to biodiversity and is the author of a number of articles on topics ranging from the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the environment to the environmental dimension of peace and security.*
Preface

For us Indians there is just the pipe, the Earth we sit on and the open sky. The spirit is everywhere. Sometimes it shows itself through an animal, a bird or some trees and hills. Sometimes it speaks from the Badlands, a Stone or even from the water. That smoke from the peace pipe, it goes straight up to the spirit World.

Lame Deer

At a time when many animal and plant species, as well as long-established cultural traditions, are threatened by the homogenising effects of modern society and its globalising economies and value systems, this book provides an in-depth investigation of the interaction between traditional spiritual beliefs and practices and nature conservation. Spiritual and cultural values have developed as part of people's relationship with their natural environment. Nature, culture and spirituality are in turn interdependent dimensions shaping our understanding of the existence on this planet. Therefore, the consideration of traditional practices can offer valuable guidance for the future preservation of biological and cultural diversity.

The need to consider ethical, cultural and spiritual values of nature has been increasingly recognised by conservation programmes around the world. International institutions and initiatives are starting to develop legal and policy frameworks based on the integration of such values, together with guidelines for implementation. The recognition of the role of sacred natural sites is one aspect of the holistic conservation approach, as awareness of the cultural and spiritual values of the species and sites of our planet can certainly help to sustain biological and landscape diversity. Despite these recent developments, the specific consideration of the role that sacred species might play in conservation efforts has not yet been comprehensively explored. There is certainly a dearth of studies on species – in terms of plants and animals – which are considered sacred, and on the interrelation between sacred species and sacred sites.
Cultural and biological diversity are indeed deeply linked, and the rich diversity of human cultures, with their knowledge, beliefs and practices related to the natural environment, is fundamental to global sustainability, their interactions contributing to the resilience and health of our planet. However, effective integration of biological and cultural diversity in conservation and development is still a challenge, and much remains to be done.

The research illustrated in this volume demonstrates that human perception of nature, ecosystems and species embrace both material and non-material perspectives, within tangible and intangible realms, including the ethical, cultural and spiritual values mentioned above. It also shows some of the efforts currently being made to increase awareness of the importance of integrated approaches to nature conservation.

The chapters bring together efforts and learning from IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and CCLP, the Cambridge Centre for Landscape and People, a research group of the University of Cambridge. IUCN encompasses projects and working groups dealing with social, economic and cultural aspects of nature conservation; CCLP supports research on biocultural and spiritual values of landscape and nature conservation, among which is the 3S Initiative on Sacred Species and Sites under CSVPA, the IUCN’s Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas of WCPA, the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas.

This volume is the combined result of the work of CSVPA members and of other scholars, practitioners and spiritual leaders from different affiliations and disciplines working in related subjects around the world. Several participated at the 3S Conference on Sacred Species and Sites organised by CCLP in Cambridge in 2007. Two of the editors, Gloria Pungetti and Gonzalo Oviedo, are part of the Steering Committee of CSVPA.

The goal of this publication, and of the continuing liaison between those involved, is to facilitate cross-organisational and interdisciplinary dialogue on the spiritual values of species and sites, discussing recent research findings and improving their recognition and understanding globally. It provides a comprehensive look at their sacred dimension, with regard to their natural and cultural values and the people who interact with them. The cases presented demonstrate their importance to nature conservation across the globe.

Following varied illustrations of the connections between biological and cultural diversity at different levels, suggestions are offered for improving policy frameworks and action programmes. It is therefore hoped that this publication will contribute to strengthening the bonds between biological and cultural diversity in nature and landscape conservation, further developing the biocultural
agenda and, finally, promoting the integration of biocultural values into policy, planning and management.

The chapters include conceptual topics as well as case studies, with a structured sequence of seven parts of four chapters each, aimed at guiding the reader through the various issues, from fundamental theory to practical applications. An account of each chapter is provided in the Introduction. Chapters have been clustered in the seven parts according to their main area of focus as follows:

1. discussion on the topic of sacred species and sites, and on relevant concepts and know-how;
2. sacred landscapes;
3. the bond between sacred sites and people;
4. sacred species in general, further specified in Parts V and VI;
5. sacred animals;
6. sacred groves and plants; and
7. the implementation of the principles and conclusions, followed by words of wisdom from spiritual leaders about humans and nature, and the need to care for the planet.

As editors and authors, our thoughts come from different perspectives, but all share a common mission: the preservation of the earth’s well-being through a holistic approach that is cross-organisational, multicultural and interdisciplinary. We advocate that the consideration of cultural and spiritual values, and the consequent conservation of biocultural diversity, is a new paradigm in nature and landscape conservation. With this book, we trust to facilitate the establishment of new procedures for further investigation in this regard.

GLORIA PUNGETTI, GONZALO OVIEDO AND DELLA HOOKE
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