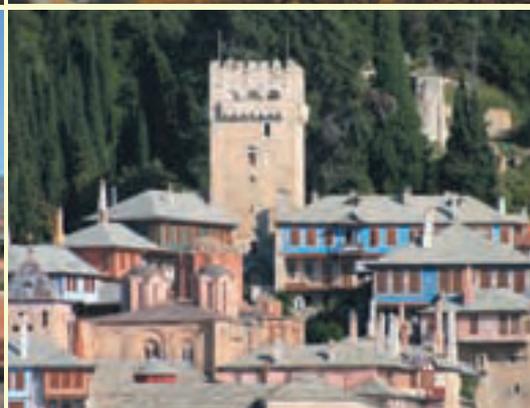
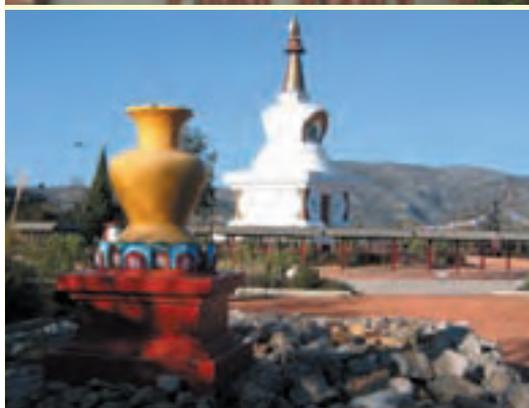




The Sacred Dimension of Protected Areas

Proceedings of the Second Workshop
of the Delos Initiative - Ouranoupolis 2007

Edited by Thymio Papayannis and Josep-Maria Mallarach





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Ouranoupolis, Greece, 24-27 October 2007

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Initiatives taken by the Cistercian Monastery of Poblet to improve the integration of spiritual, cultural and environmental values

Catalonia, Spain

Josep-Maria Mallarach

Lluc M. Torcal

Purpose

By means of a description of some of the actions already undertaken and some of the proposals suggested for the coming years, this paper discusses the main initiatives aimed at improving the integration of spiritual, cultural and natural values in the activities of the Monastery of Poblet in Catalonia, Spain. The process began during the first Delos Initiative workshop, which was held in Montserrat in 2006, and has continued to evolve during the preparation of the Delos Initiative case-study.

Background

The Monastery of Santa Maria de Poblet is located in southern Catalonia, Spain, so-

me 130 km west of Barcelona in a mid-altitude Mediterranean landscape (image in p. 162). Founded in the 12th century, this impressive monastic citadel complex is an outstanding example of mediaeval Cistercian architecture. The Monastery was active for 7 centuries, and had enormous spiritual, cultural and political influence throughout most of its history; indeed, in its heyday, Poblet was one of the most important Cistercian monasteries in Europe.

The Cistercian Order is a branch of the Benedictine family of Latin Christian monastic orders. Established in the 12th century, it was well known in Western Europe during the Middle Ages for *inter alia* promoting advanced sustainable techniques in agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry, and, in particular, for its work



Summer view of the Monastery of Santa Maria de Poblet and surrounding landscape

in reclaiming wasteland. It was also renowned for its plain ascetic life-style, and the simple but extremely beautiful architecture of its buildings. Although there were some precedents in Europe, its farm-based organisation is a distinctive feature of early Cistercian agriculture (Lekai 1987).

The place name 'Poblet' is a Catalan derivation of the Latin *populetus*, which refers to the riparian white poplar (*Populus alba*) forest that grows along a nearby stream. Since this tree has white bark, there may also be a symbolic relationship with the white habits of the Cistercians, who are also known as 'white monks'.

As a result of donations, the Monastic community came to own and / or manage vast areas of land with distinct ecosystems in the Eastern Iberian Peninsula, ranging from alpine meadows in the Pyrenees, where sheep flocks spent the summer, to productive croplands and forests in central Catalonia and the lagoons on the Mediterranean coast that provided the monks with fish during peri-

ods of fasting. The basic productive and organisational unit was the Cistercian farm where a small number of lay brothers worked and followed a life-style similar to that of the fathers – i.e. the monks who devoted themselves, above all, to prayer and contemplation.

Monastic life at Poblet ended in 1835, when Spain's 'liberal' government suppressed all the country's monastic orders for a second time and the Monastery was abandoned. The Spanish Government took over all Church properties and in the years that followed the forests of Poblet, which had been managed in a sustainable manner for centuries, were overexploited. In just a few decades, this extraordinary forest had been razed to the ground by people from nearby villages, while the old monastery and its facilities were completely devastated (Altisent 1974).

Fortunately, this lack of control lasted only a few decades. Mindful of its outstanding cultural value, various government bodies slowly began to restore the



Gothic cloister and bell tower

Monastery's buildings in the mid 19th century. By 1871, most of Poblet's forests had become state property: the forestry department implemented a very successful restoration process and the Monastery had regained much of its former splendour a century later (Martínez 2001).

In 1940, a group of four Cistercian monks returned to Poblet and revived the monastic community: the community grew slowly, and there are currently some 30 monks under an Abbot living in the Monastery. A brotherhood of the Monastery — whose numbers will soon reach 400 — has also been established, and the key elements of this great medieval monastery are again being put to the very uses they were built for six or seven centuries ago.

Like most other historic monasteries in Spain, Poblet is currently the property of the Spanish government. The monks are allowed to use the buildings and are charged with its maintenance, but the community owns just 6 ha of gardens and vineyards in the vicinity of the monastery, plus

a further 25 ha of forestland within walking distance of the Monastery. The old Cistercian farm, used by groups of monks at certain times of the year, is almost entirely powered by solar energy, while water is pumped from a nearby mountain stream.

Spiritual, cultural and natural values of the Monastery and the Park

The Monastery of Santa Maria de Poblet is a unique artistic achievement and one of the most perfect expressions of 12th-, 13th- and 14th-century Cistercian architecture (image in p. 163). The abbey contains architectural masterpieces from many historical periods, although its Romanesque and Gothic elements are of particular note (image in p. 167). Poblet, one of the largest and most complete of all Cistercian abbeys, also served over the centuries as a royal palace and residence. It is a Royal Monastery, since it was chosen by the kings of the ancient House of Aragon as home to their pantheon during the 13th and 14th centuries.

The important archives of Montserrat Taradellas i Macià and the Casa Ducal de Medinaceli are kept in the former Abbot's Palace, which was built outside the Monastery's perimeter walls during the 17th and 18th centuries. In addition, the Monastery's museums offer a virtual tour of the Monastery's past and explain how the Monastery operates today. These museums also boast a large number of recovered exhibits and bequests of great historical and artistic value. The Monastery archives, which encompass almost eight centuries of its history, are still almost intact, although most of the original documents are now kept in the National Archive in Madrid. They include extremely interesting documents relating to every aspect of community life and details on how the Cistercian monks managed their natural resources.

Poblet Monastery currently receives over 150,000 visitors per year (image in p. 168), the majority of whom are attracted by its cultural heritage. And while only a small minority are drawn by its spiritual life, the number of people willing to go on retreats in the Monastery is growing. As a result, a new and larger guest house is currently under construction outside the walls which will supplement the limited capacity of the two male guest houses within the walls with accommodation for another 50 families.

The main natural values of the Park are linked to the surrounding Mediterranean forests, which include 2 types of evergreen oak forest communities, 3 different deciduous oak forest communities and one pine forest community. The dominant tree species are Holm or evergreen oak (*Quercus ilex*), various deciduous oaks – Lusitanian oak (*Quercus faginea*), (*Q.x.*

cerrioides), Algerian oak (*Q. canariensis*), sessile oak (*Q. petraea*), Pyrenean oak (*Q. pyrenaica*)– and accompanying trees such as the smooth-leaved elm (*Ulmus minor*), black poplar (*Populus nigra*), aspen (*Populus tremula*), large-leaved lime (*Tilia platyphyllos*), holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), common yew (*Taxus baccata*), hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and the true service tree (*Sorbus domestica*). Over 35 rare plant species are found in the forests of Poblet, including a number of Iberian endemics, while the forest fauna is quite diverse, the largest mammals being the Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) and Badger (*Meles meles*).

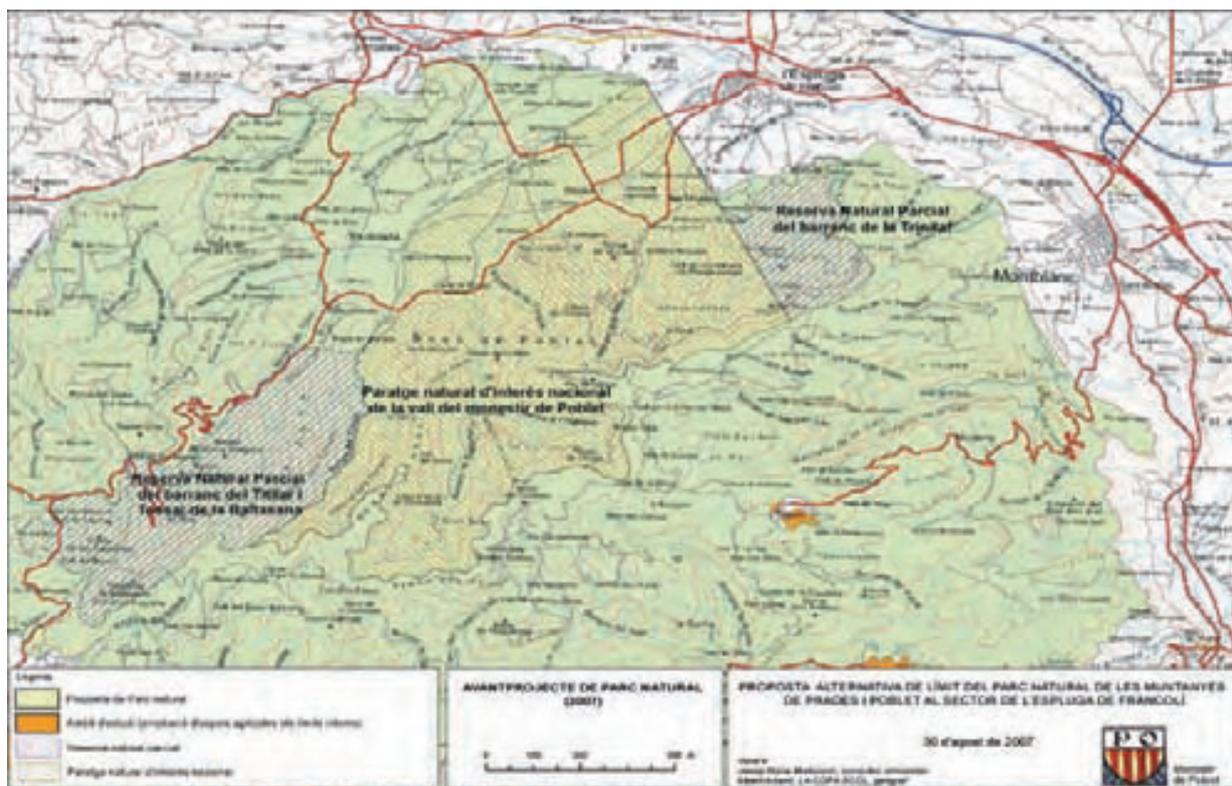
Natural and cultural heritage conservation and education efforts

Following suggestions from the former Abbot of Poblet, Father Maur Esteva¹, the Catalan Parliament passed a law in 1984 declaring the landscape around the Monastery (c.2500 ha) to be a Natural Site of National Importance². This protected area (henceforth: the Park) includes the most valuable forests as well as some vineyards in the lower-lying areas around the Monastery. Four years later, a Decree established two managed forest nature reserves covering some 900 ha, one of which includes the only Pyrenean oak forest in Catalonia³.

1 Father M. Esteva is now the General Abbot of the entire Cistercian Order.

2 Law 22/1984. A Paratge Natural d'Interès Nacional (PNIN) is a type of protected area created by Catalan law 12/1985 in natural areas. Current management practices correspond either to IUCN categories IV or V, depending on the zone.

3 Decree 279/1998 established the managed nature reserves of Barranc del Tillar and Barranc de la Trinitat.



Partial map of the proposed larger protected area including the Monastery

Although 70% of the Park area is publicly owned (a situation rare in Catalonia), active management did not begin until 1999. Since then, the protected area has been looked after by a small management team of four people plus four rangers; its 2007 budget was €772,000. The Park Board first met in 2001 and includes representatives from the Catalan government, the two local municipalities, local NGOs and the Monastery itself. The guiding service is used by around one thousand people a year⁴.

In 1991, at the behest of the Spanish government, UNESCO classified the entire monastic complex of Poblet, including its surrounding gardens, courtyards and walls, as a Cultural World Heritage Site. According to Catalan legislation, the site is a National Monument of Cultural Interest⁵.

In summer 2007, the Catalan Ministry of the Environment and Housing presented a long-awaited plan that will establish a new and much larger natural park in the area, namely the Muntanyes de Prades and Poblet Natural Park, which will include the existing Park [Map 1]. A consultation process to which the Poblet monastic community has made a number of contributions began in the summer of 2007.

In 1991, the Catalan Department of Education launched a workshop on the 'Mediaeval Cistercian Monasteries of Catalonia' in a youth hostel in the Park. This facility welcomes some 5,000 schoolchildren aged 8 to 18 every year from all over Catalonia who stay for 3-5 days to learn *in situ* about the cultural, spiritual and –more recently– natural heritage of Cistercian monasteries⁶. They follow a very

4 Source: minutes of Park Board meetings.

5 Bé Nacional d'Interès Cultural.

6 Camp d'Aprenentatge dels Monestirs del Cister. Alberg de Joventut l'Espluga de Francolí.

thorough educational programme which includes a number of pre- and post-stay activities. This facility is staffed by six teachers, four of whom are devoted to cultural heritage and two to natural heritage.

Strategic aims

The Poblet Monastery initiatives address three broad issues and seek to:

- i) Improve the management of all the Monastery's facilities and lands through the gradual application of criteria that comply with concepts of environmental and social justice. This strategy has to be based on both secular principles of sustainability and Christian Cistercian principles. Only when every possible effort has been made to define, develop and implement these criteria will the Monastery feel that it has the moral authority to tell others how to implement changes in their life-styles.
- ii) Promote the effective protection of the rural landscape around the Monastery as well as quality forest management that seeks to improve the Monastery's ecological integrity and standards of silence and beauty. The Monastery's direct responsibility is limited in this case, although its representatives can influence the Park Board and other governmental bodies.
- iii) Develop – whenever feasible – an outreach strategy aimed at educating interested visitors in environmental values relating to spiritual principles. This entails improving coordination with the existing Cistercian Monasteries Workshop and the Park educa-

tional services, as well as developing its own facilities and programmes.

A number of meetings have been held with bodies including the Park Board and its management director, the Natural Heritage Directorate, the Tarragona Provincial Council (Diputació de Tarragona), the teachers employed in the education facilities, the University of Barcelona and the Catalan Institute of Energy with a view to achieving these aims. The meetings have opened up new vistas of potential cooperation through which the Monastery can promote many of the actions discussed in the following section.

Actions

The main actions carried out to date are as follows:

- The Monastery has requested the Park Board for permission to proffer itself as a case-study for the Delos initiative, and sought the Board's cooperation in preparing the case-study.
- The Monastery has insisted on a solution to the long-standing problem of the sewage that spills into a stream downstream of the monastery. As of last summer, sewage has been piped to the nearest municipal sewage treatment plant (L'Espluga de Francolí).
- A Memorandum of Understanding has been drafted between the Monastery and the Diputació de Tarragona for the preparation of an environmental audit for the Monastery, which will combine the methodology of the local Agenda 21 with Cistercian principles. The draft includes a detailed method-

ology adapted to the monastic community, the first of its kind in Spain.

- An agreement has been reached with the University of Barcelona's Institute of Water Research to study the monastery's historic water systems (visible and covered) and its water resources. A proposal for improving the Monastery's water management (by recycling waste water and collecting rain water) is to be prepared to allow the Monastery to manage its water resources in a sustainable manner.
- Several meetings have been held with the authorities of the Directorate of Catalan Natural Heritage to discuss and explain the community's concern over some current forest management practices. On July 4th 2007, an agreement was reached that will enable the Park's management team to prepare guidelines for forestry activities.
- In 2006, the Catalan Institute of Energy (ICAEN) prepared two proposals for the use of solar energy in the Monastery at the Monastery's request:

- The first concerns solar photo-voltaic panels for producing electricity, which are to be located discreetly in the coach park outside the Monastery, where they will screen vehicles from the sun. Some 2000 m² of photo-voltaic panels will produce 250 kW; any excess will be sold.
 - The second relates to thermal / solar panels to produce hot water, which are to be located in selected parts of the Monastery's facilities (the guest houses and monks' dormitory, for example) and cover most of the Monastery's hot water needs.
- The Monastery has petitioned the Catalan Ministry of the Environment and Housing regarding the draft plan for the proposed Muntanyes de Prades and Poblet Natural Park, addressing the following issues:
 - The Park's concept and name
 - The Park's boundaries
 - The composition of the Park Board and Steering Committee

Main cloister, in which the Romanesque and Gothic styles are combined





Group of students entering the monastery

- The inclusion of intangible values in the concept of cultural heritage
- Park management goals and criteria related to spiritual values
- Park facilities
- Forest management in the Park

More specifically, regarding the concept and name, the Monastery supports the new enlarged Natural Park (a IUCN category V protected area) and the inclusion of 'Poblet' in its title.

Concerning the boundaries of the proposed new Natural Park, the Monastery has included a report in its petitions, which proposes an alternative boundary that will enlarge the new Park by including the area under greatest pressure from the growth of the nearest urban centre —l'Espluga de Francolí. Three criteria were identified: (i) the need for the Monastery to be protected visually, (ii) landscape quality, (iii) the importance of equating the boundary with easily identifiable physical features (Mallarach & Albertí 2007).

Another report has highlighted the importance of including intangible cultural and spiritual values among the Park's objectives (Silene 2007). Three main themes have been developed:

1. A new definition of natural heritage that includes all significant intangible cultural values and, in particular, religious and spiritual values. For seven centuries, these values have formed the basis of the life of the monastic community and the existence of the Monastery and a number of shrines and hermitages found within the boundaries of the proposed Natural Park.
2. Specific proposals aimed at including spiritual and intangible cultural values in the draft plans at all relevant levels: diagnoses, goals and objectives, management areas, facilities, educational programmes, public use and signposting.
3. A set of proposals that will take the scope of the new definition of cultural heritage into consideration in all new

legal and planning instruments developed by the Natural Park⁷.

Regarding the composition of the future Park Board, the monastic community has requested to be formally represented on both the General Board and Steering Committee.

The main current aims of the Monastery include:

- Preparing a strategic proposal for improving the integration of spiritual, cultural and natural values into the environmental education and information provided by the Monastery of Poblet. The Father Abbot has requested that the Silene Association formulate a proposal with regard to this aim, which will also include a draft plan for a new interpretation centre.
- Including a new section on the Monastery's website (www.poblet.cat) addressing nature, environmental conservation and sustainability.
- Addressing the erosion in the gully that crosses the Monastery's property from north to south and –most importantly– restoring the white poplar riparian forest.

The main actions to be undertaken over the next five years include:

- The gradual implementation of all the projects and actions included in the environmental audit (ranging from so-

lar energy plants and waste-water recycling to an organic vegetable garden) as soon as funding and other constraints allow.

- Promoting the recovery of the riparian forest along the stream using native plant species.
- Establishing an organic vegetable garden using local organic seeds and local varieties of fruit tree once water shortages are solved. The garden will help conserve agro-biodiversity, produce healthy food for the monks and their guests, and provide tasks for interested guests to undertake.
- Preparing a forest management plan, which seeks both to restore the integrity of the forests that have been over-exploited in the past and to gradually transform the forests into more mature structures with greater biodiversity and scenic value.
- Building two interpretation centres, one in the outer walls, the other inside the Monastery. The former will be devoted to the history of the Monastery and the management of its extensive natural resources prior to the nineteenth century; the latter will focus on explaining the meaning and significance of monastic life and its related values (silence, beauty, serenity and interiority) in today's social context.
- Establishing a botanical garden with 128 plant species from the Holy Land, 110 of which have been identified in the Bible by Professor Michael Zohary (1982). The garden will include fruit trees, crops, forest grasses, shrubs and trees, wetlands plants and a

⁷ The two key planning instruments for natural protected areas in Catalonia are the so-called 'Special Plan of Protection' (*Pla especial de protecció*), which defines the zoning and regulations applying in each zone, and the Master Management Plan (*Pla rector d'ús i gestió*), which defines management strategies and goals.

number of species used in the preparation of medicines and perfumes.

Conclusions

The Poblet case-study could play a significant role within the Delos Initiative as a good example of a monastic community's willingness to undertake a series of nature conservation and sustainability actions that enjoy the support of an international initiative aiming to integrate intangible values into nature conservation.

Poblet also exemplifies the historical coherence of a community of monks with its Christian, Benedictine and Cistercian origins. The monks have a clear desire to work to foster respect for God's Creation and appreciate the surroundings of the Monastery not only as a resource to be carefully exploited, but also as a gift to be passed on to future generations of monks.

Seeking through its current and planned activities to encompass every area of interaction between the Monastery and the natural world, from water to energy and forest protection to waste treatment, the Monastery has nurtured an array of collaboration agreements in all these aspects. In order to obtain support for these actions, representatives of the Monastery have held meetings with bodies including the Poblet Park Board, the Natural Heritage Directorate, the managing director of the Protected Site, the Diputació de Tarragona (provincial government), the teachers in charge of the environmental education facilities, a research team from the University of Barcelona and the Catalan Institute of Energy. As a result, new fields for cooperation with the Mon-

astery have opened up, most of which will be promoted in the years to come.

It is worth underlining the fact that the implementation of these policies will satisfy Spanish and international recommendations that intangible cultural and spiritual values should be taken into account in the concepts, goals, objectives, management areas / guidelines and facilities both of the current natural protected area (especially via the specific activities that the Monastery wants to promote) and the future Muntanyes de Prades and Poblet Natural Park.

Of these planned activities, the most relevant to the Delos Initiative, apart from conservation, is the education of visitors to the Monastery, where the aim is to inculcate in visitors a greater respect for nature stemming from spiritual criteria and values that seek to be consistent with those deeply-held beliefs that give life its essential purpose. We believe that this unobtrusive but ever-present mission could be one of the greatest contributions of monastic life to the men and women of our times.

Since the Delos2 Workshop in 2007, the Monastery of Poblet has undertaken a number of actions, so as to improve its environmental coherence, mainly as far as energy and water-use are concerned. However, the most significant action, perhaps, has been a binding Declaration, adopted by the monastic community after a long time of reflection during July 2009, which summarises both the theological and scientific reasons for the 'ecological conversion' and details the strategic goals and practical objectives. The Declaration, translated in many languages, can be downloaded from the website of the Monastery.

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- UNESCO World Heritage Sites: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/518/documents/>

The inner wall and royal towers in winter



Reflections on the management of monastic lands and facilities

Josep-Maria Mallarach and Thymio Papayannis

Monastic lands and protected areas

In recent years, there has been a noticeable trend towards the secularisation of land in many parts of the world. In spite of this tendency, monastic communities continue to own and manage large tracts of land, many of which contain important habitats and species. This is commonly the case in countries with Catholic or Orthodox Christian traditions, as well as in those where Buddhism is a major religion. Land management by monastic communities is less frequent in the case of Hinduism, Islam or Jainism.

A section of this land – which in most cases had been bequeathed by pious rulers or wealthy landowners to monastic communities – was traditionally set aside to

fulfil the monasteries' everyday needs. It included areas reserved for habitation, cultivation and the supply of timber, water and other necessities. The rest of the land, which often covered a considerable area, was left untouched and, in many cases, remains in a state verging on natural. Much of this land has since evolved into nature protection areas.

In most European countries, monastic land has been expropriated at some point by the state for social and / or political reasons. An example of this was the mass confiscation of land belonging to religious institutions after the introduction of Socialism into many countries in central and Eastern Europe. However, this changed with the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was followed

by a resurgence of religious worship and a revival of monasticism in Eastern Europe. At that point, efforts were made to reclaim the land that had been lost, and in some instances these proved successful. In another case, monastic lands in Greece were expropriated after 1922 to house Greek immigrants from Asia Minor; these, however, were never returned.

Regardless of what has happened to monastic lands to date, they remain significant for nature conservation for three main reasons. Firstly, a large number of protected areas (usually IUCN category V) are to be found in Europe and Asia on former or current monastic lands. Secondly, in many cases it was the monastic communities themselves that instigated and promoted the safeguarding of many areas that are now under protection. In many instances this occurred as a result of concern about the deterioration of the natural environment around their monasteries. Thirdly, many new monasteries have been built on existing protected areas, usually natural parks – this is the case in several natural regional parks in France, for example. A number of cases were presented at the Delos workshops at Montserrat and Ouranoupolis in 2006 and 2007 respectively, which touched upon noteworthy examples of these different scenarios.

Prerequisites for sound management

The beliefs and practices of most monastic communities help prepare them for, and guide them in, the sensitive and

wise management of their lands and facilities. As a result, they often develop, implement and maintain practices favourable to nature conservation. Arguably the most important of these is the profound respect for tradition that characterises monasticism. This is related to a unique sense of time, which ensures continuity and stability since the past is not lost and the future is to be gained; this view makes change acceptable – but at a manageable rate.

Specifically, monastic communities follow time-tested rules of living that ensure sustainability by cultivating a long-term vision. Christian monasticism, for example, is based on principles and rules laid down by saints Basil and Benedict 16 and 14 centuries ago respectively. In the case of Buddhism, the seeds are to be found even further back, despite Tibetan Buddhism being only six centuries old.

One of the key principles involved is asceticism, which implies the use of natural resources to cover only essential needs. It is often associated with the absence of private property and, as a consequence, is linked to poverty, thus encouraging the personal traits of sobriety and temperance. In a number of monastic orders – particularly in Orthodox Christianity – asceticism is reinforced by the pursuit of self-sufficiency, which encourages the development of skills for the frugal management of locally-available resources. Consequently, in many countries of Europe, monastic communities have a long-established tradition of using natural resources prudently and of developing technologies based on renewable energy.

One such example would be the Camaldoli monks of Foreste Casentinesi (a national park in central Italy), who developed efficient, sustainable practices for the forests of the Apennine Mountains, and in so doing laid the groundwork for modern forestry regulations in Italy (Hughes 2009).

Monastic communities are usually vegetarian, although fish may be consumed on major feast days. In Catholic monasteries, meat is permitted for the weak and sick. Another benefit of a vegetarian food regime is that it is generally accepted that it significantly reduces one's environmental footprint.

Most monastic communities take part in such practices, and in doing so contribute to the sound stewardship of monastic lands. The majority of monasteries are governed according to a judicious and balanced decision-making system rooted in ancient traditions. This system usually applies the precautionary principle (the cardinal Christian virtue of *prudentia*), and procedures move slowly, thus avoiding haste and undesirable developments. A high level of discipline complements this diligence in decision-making, and the entire undertaking is seen as an attempt to approach freedom through obedience. As a result, once a decision is taken, all members of the monastic community implement it without hesitation.

A further principle shared by most monastic communities is hospitality to guests. By allowing personal contact with pilgrims and visitors, this provides an opportunity to raise guests' aware-

ness of environmental issues and to disseminate sound nature protection practices, mainly by example through the practices and lifestyle adopted by monastic communities.

In addition, many monastic communities include a number of hermits living in isolated locations outside the monasteries. Over the past two decades, hermitism has experienced a revival in countries in Western as well as Eastern Europe. In France, for example, which is considered a highly secularised country, there were over 200 Catholic hermits and three schools to prepare individuals for this kind of lifestyle in 2001 (Muizon 2001). The hermit is the quintessential example of a deeply religious individual who lives and prays in solitude with minimal resources and in profound harmony with nature. St Francis of Assisi and St Seraphim of Sarov are well-known examples of people who loved nature in general, and large mammals in particular.

Monastic lands as protected areas

As a consequence of this positive approach and its results, many of the Christian monastic lands could be classified, along general lines, as protected landscapes falling within IUCN category V (Mallarach 2008). Hermitic domains, on which most extractive and other land uses are not permitted, could be characterised as nature reserves in most instances, as stipulated by IUCN category III. According to both the CBD and IUCN definitions of a protected area (Dudley 2008), as long as the land is managed in



Refectory in Megalo Meteoro Monastery, Meteora, Greece

adherence with the principles that apply to such protected areas (as laid down for each category), it should be recognised as protected land, even if the protection status has not been formally established.

In contrast, in countries where monasticism has been constrained or abolished for a period of time – as in the Protestant countries of Europe¹, in France and in Spain – the impact on nature conservation has been extremely negative. For example, there are cases of exceptional forests managed wisely for centuries by monastic communities being levelled within a few years of being transferred to private owners (as the case of the forest of Poblet illustrates [Altisent 1974]).

In the USA, the Amish (Protestant Mennonite) communities established in Pen-

nsylvania, Ohio and Indiana present a somewhat different picture. These communities have systematically and prudently applied the precautionary principle to new technologies and renewable energy. What has emerged is a distinctive, rural society, which is both socially and economically resilient and very close to nature. Although they consider themselves ‘plain people’, they use efficient technologies most of the world would consider advanced. The Amish communities have succeeded in conserving large areas of beautiful and diverse landscapes in the heart of the American Corn Belt without receiving governmental subsidies or adopting complicated strategies (Légeret 2000). Amish communities have even hosted US national solar conferences in recent years.

In countries where Buddhist monastic communities have traditionally been supported through alms provided by members of their local society, monastic

¹ For example, the Dissolution of the Monasteries in England and Wales between 1536 and 1540 by Henry VIII, and in Austria in 1782 by Joseph II, the son of Maria Theresa (Johnston 2000; Cannon 2004).



Vineyards at Solan Monastery, France

lands tend to include high-quality living quarters, which are usually very well maintained. Tibet and the area of Ladak are considered very fine examples of this. Bhutan, a country which has kept the Tibetan Buddhist tradition alive, has one of the best-planned protected area systems in Asia.

South Korea stands out among the countries that have decided to create protected areas in recent times. The national park system in that country was mostly established on monastic lands in agreement with monastic authorities (Kyun-Koo Han, oral communication, 2007). Jirison National Park, the first such park in the country, is considered to include the birthplace of Korean Buddhism. Today, the park entrance fees go to the monastic communities involved.

Many of the new Buddhist monasteries established over the past forty years in Europe and North America also aim to serve as examples of sound environmental policy (Semkyre 2008). A good

case is that of the Zen Buddhist monastery of Plum Village, where walking meditation in nature is taught.

It should thus not come as a surprise that several contemporary thinkers maintain that monastic communities – through their enduring principles and practices – can provide us with important lessons in how to deal with the global environmental and sustainability crisis, and that asceticism could become one of the core concepts of the new ecology (Canon 2004, Dubos 1974).

Existing contradictions

Any objective assessment must, however, also take negative realities into account. One cannot fail to recognise that not all the land managed by monastic communities is in a sound state with effective protection in place for its natural, cultural and spiritual heritage. The reasons this is so vary with the context, but it could be argued that the major prob-

lems faced in such cases have come about as a result of adopting modernity in its various aspects without critically examining it first. Thus, deciding to employ modern technologies, production methods or facilities may not always be suitable for the specific environmental or landscape context or conditions, and may lead, for example, to the abandonment of traditional handcrafting practices and their replacement by highly mechanised systems which often have a negative impact on the environment. Machines powered by fossil fuels, such as automobiles, are perhaps the most characteristic examples.

These newly-introduced practices are often encouraged by the temptation to generate revenue quickly through the adoption of unsustainable management practices with regard to natural resources (felling trees for timber, for example) or through the sale of real estate. The temptation is stronger in countries where religious organisations are recovering after years of oppression and funds are required for the restoration or construction of religious facilities. Such examples have been noted in Eastern Europe, and particularly in Romania².

For similar reasons, a misinterpretation of the monastic duty of hospitality has sometimes opened the gate to an excessive flow of visitors. In extreme cases, this can degrade the natural environment, debase the cultural heritage and

even erode the spirituality of monastic establishments, compromising the quality of the visit for pilgrims and other visitors as a result. Examples would include the Monastery of Montserrat in Catalonia, Spain, where traffic jams mar major feast days, and the Meteora monasteries in central Greece, which are crowded with hundreds of buses and thousands of visitors at peak times.

On another level, as monks are individuals drawn from contemporary – and often urban – society, they may be tempted to yield to pressures exerted by the materialistic society surrounding them. Some may even go so far as to adopt behaviour patterns based on unnecessary consumption and unsound waste disposal which have clear negative implications for the environment.

A careful look at these imprudent tendencies reveals two major contemporary weaknesses that may be responsible for this situation. The first is weak spiritual guidance within the monastic community, which permits deviation from firm monastic principles. Abbot Elissaios of the Simonopetra Monastery on Mount Athos once remarked that a monastery is not a museum, but a contemporary institution, which knows very well what it needs from the modern world and can adapt it to its spiritual needs (Papayannis and Elissaios 1992). The second shortcoming is ignorance, which does not allow some monastic communities to fully understand the negative environmental and social impact of their actions. An example of this would be the use of fossil fuels or non-renewable resources and materials. The

2 “The churches have already begun to take steps to use their new freedom to revitalise their communities and transform their nation in the light of their own particular perspectives” (Poppe 1991).

Delos Initiative and similar efforts can provide help in this area.

Contemporary challenges and responses

It is clear that the custodians of sacred natural areas and conservation leaders must encourage and adopt a more serious approach to educating monastic communities in relation to the environment. Such an effort would have to take into account every aspect of environmental management, including monastery facilities and sustainable production practices like organic farming, the raising of livestock, timber certification and fishing.

On the positive side, there are a number of monastic communities that have set a fine example through the sound practices they have adopted from the outset. These include the Orthodox Monastery of Solan in southern France, which specialises in high-quality organic products like wine and organises activities to pro-

mote organic farming methods; the Orthodox Monastery of Chrysopigi on Crete; and the Catholic monastery of Rieunette, which is also in southern France. All three are also good examples of monastic communities that show concern for the environment.

Many monasteries have responded to contemporary challenges by increasing their production of high-quality, organic food products (including beverages, cheese, jam and other goods) and traditional handicrafts. These products are increasingly being marketed under distinct monastic labels, as in the case of items produced by French and Romanian monasteries. The excellence of monastic products has been widely acknowledged in Europe; indeed, in Belgium, for instance, most beer and alcoholic beverage producers market monastic brands under the name of abbeys that do not even exist.

Any environmental education in monastic communities should also be aimed at the pilgrims and visitors to these areas.

Vineyards near Iviron Monastery, Holy Mountain



Ideally, it should teach them to respect nature and become prudent guardians of the environment, employing spiritual criteria and values related to deeply-held beliefs that give life its ultimate purpose. Such teaching by the monks themselves would not only strengthen their own beliefs, but also promote the notion that monastic lands are not a 'resource' to be exploited, however carefully, but rather a manifestation of God — a gift to be passed on in its entirety to future generations of monks and the faithful. The activities organised by the Monastery of Camaldoli in Italy provide a fine example of the influence that a committed monastic community can have in this field (Hughes 2009).

It is very interesting to note that the third Catholic and Buddhist interreligious / intermonastic encounter held at the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky (where Father Thomas Merton lived for many years) in 2008 was dedicated to the environment. We can thus conclude that a large number of monasteries, especially ones located in protected areas, could follow this path, and that in doing so they could foster a wide-ranging, interreligious monastic dialogue on the ecological management of monastic lands and facilities focused on common principles, mutual support and the dissemination of best practices and know-how.

It could be argued that a common aim for monastic communities and visitors alike should be to maintain — or restore, when necessary — the harmonious relationship between monastic facilities, buildings and productive activities on the one hand, and the environment on the other. This would involve paying careful attention to the integrity and beauty of the surrounding landscape, as well as to the invisible impact of actions on the local environment.

Thus, in order to become — or remain — respected role models in the sphere of nature conservation in addition to carrying out their religious function, monastic communities need to strive to act in a manner which is fully consistent with their beliefs vis-à-vis nature and creation. This is even more challenging — and pressing — in the midst of a global environmental crisis exacerbated by contradictions on many levels. Such action should include not only sound land management, but also interaction between the monasteries and the natural world in areas ranging from water to energy and from species protection to waste reduction and treatment. The fact that some of the most environmentally-aware monasteries in Europe also number among the world's fastest-growing monastic communities can definitely be seen as an encouraging sign for the future.

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