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The Diversity of Sacred Lands in Europe

Proceedings of the Third Workshop of
the Delos Initiative – Inari/Aanaar 2010

Edited by Josep-Maria Mallarach, Thymio Papayannis and Rauno Väisänen



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The Diversity of Sacred Lands in Europe

Proceedings of the Third Workshop
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Applicability of the IUCN-UNESCO Guidelines for Protected Area Managers on Sacred Natural Sites: first assessment

Josep-Maria Mallarach

Introduction and context

Since the last World Congress on Protected Areas in Durban, South Africa, 2003, the discussion about the relevance of sacred natural sites on nature conservation in general, and protected areas in particular, has gained momentum within IUCN and related organisations. The efforts undertaken by several working groups within the World Commission on Protected Areas and the Commission of Environmental, Economic Policies of IUCN, in particular the Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas, have already introduced the concept of sacred natural site (SNS) in some significant guidance documents and succeed in mainstreaming this topic in the broader international conservation agenda.

Two guidance documents presented at the 2008 World Conservation Congress deserve special recognition in this respect: the UNESCO-IUCN Guidelines for Protected Area Managers on Sacred Natural Sites (Wild and McLeod, 2008) and the Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories (Dudley, 2008). Among the significant improvements that the last document includes in relation to the previous guidelines for applying protected area management categories (IUCN, 1994) is the inclusion, for the first time, of SNSs in all categories of protected areas, with a large table that provides examples of all of them, and also the inclusion of the governance dimension, which allows the consideration of traditional custodians and religious organisations related to SNSs.

On the other hand, the UNESCO-IUCN Guidelines for Protected Area Managers on Sacred Natural Sites was a milestone, which substantially developed previous IUCN documents dealing with the concept of sacred areas, such as the Guidelines for Mountain Protected Areas (Larry et al., 2006). The Guidelines on Sacred Natural Sites have already been translated into Spanish and Russian and are currently being translated into other major world languages, since the topic is of global interest. They address managers of protected areas that have been established on SNSs, providing guidance on ways to integrate this pre-existing protection, based on spiritual values, so as to avoid potential conflicts, and promote the conservation of both the natural and spiritual heritage.

The Preamble of the Guidelines states that: *'during the process of guideline development, it was recognised that mainstream faiths also care for numerous sacred natural sites and many have profound teachings related to the relationship between humans and nature. We have endeavoured to develop the guidelines in such a way that they are broadly applicable to the sacred natural sites of all faiths. (...) This attempt to incorporate limited experiences of mainstream faiths should be considered preliminary. Further work is needed to analyse and understand the diversity of sacred natural sites revered by mainstream faiths, which comprise the great majority of humankind. Of course, efforts to put such ideas into categories fail at some point'*.

The decision to prioritise the SNSs of indigenous peoples and local communities in the Guidelines was fully justified, since these are the sites, and the peoples, that have been suffering the worst impacts and facing the greatest threats and challenges, deserving, therefore, all possible support and attention from IUCN. As a matter of fact, most members of the Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas are involved in activities supporting indigenous peoples and local communities in impoverished countries.

On the other hand, most of the work that has been done at the international level during the last few years, focussed on indigenous peoples. This was already apparent in the UNESCO workshop of Xishuangbanna, 2003, where the proceedings, entitled 'The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation' (Lee and Schaaf, 2003) do not discuss case studies related to the three largest world religions. Similarly, in the UNESCO-IUCN Tokyo International Symposium on the role of SNSs and cultural landscapes (Schaaf and Lee 2006), sacred natural sites related to Christianity and Islam were also absent.

Within the Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas it was agreed that the purpose and scope of work of The Delos Initiative was well suited to completing the existing UNESCO-IUCN Guidelines on Sacred Natural Sites, so that the complementary guidelines could be better applicable to SNSs related to mainstream

religions, as well as to SNSs where there is an overlapping of religions and/or spiritual traditions. For this reason, during the Inari workshop a session was devoted to discuss the applicability of the existing Guidelines.

Before going further, it is appropriate to briefly ponder the concept of sacred. The English word 'sacred' comes from the Latin word '*sacer*' and its derivative '*sacratum*' which means 'set apart to, or for, some religious purpose', or 'consecrated'. For this reason, sacred sites are separated, protected, from outward, 'profane' influences, and for millennia, on all continents, they have been the predecessors of modern protected areas. The concept of sacred land or water can be found, in one way or another, in most, if not all, the religions of the world; although in some of them there is no specific word for it (Eliade, 1959; Nasr, 1989, 1996). It is also applied, beyond religious frames, in different forms of spirituality (Mann and Davis, 2010)

The IUCN-UNESCO Guidelines provides the following simple working definition of sacred site: 'A sacred site is an area of special spiritual significance to peoples and communities', which was first proposed by Oviedo and Jeanrenaud (2007). Another operational definition is 'a sacred site is a place in the landscape, occasionally over or under water, which is specially revered by people, culture or cultural group as a focus for spiritual belief and practice or likely religious observance' (Thorley and Gunn, 2007). These working definitions are deliberately broad and

open, recognising the limitations of the western words 'sacred', 'natural' and 'site', and, as a consequence, it has been argued that 'it is important that the concept remains open for further articulation' (Verschuuren et al, 2010).

The importance of SNSs for nature conservation is extremely significant and has been widely discussed during the last years (Dudley et al. 2005; Thorley and Gunn, 2007; Verschuuren et al, 2010). It suffices to say that sacred natural sites are the oldest type of protected areas that have been around for many centuries, even millennia in some regions, showing an amazing resilience to different civilisations or religions. In some parts of the world, SNSs continue to effectively protect critical elements of the natural heritage, in some cases more significant or extensive than those protected by legally established modern protected areas, and often more efficiently.

Context of sacred natural sites for mainstream religions

According to the best estimates available, over 80% of humankind is either affiliated to or influenced by mainstream religions. Christianity and Islam alone encompass more than 50% of the world population, and both religions are globally growing in relative and absolute terms (O'Brien and Palmer, 2007).

Although the concept of the sacred, and by consequence, that of SNSs, has continuity across cultures, all over

the world (Eliade, 1959), there are also significant differences among SNSs, which cannot be underestimated if one is to produce guidelines well suited to the characteristics of the main types of SNSs.

Most religions share basic principles towards nature, resulting in the need for respect. However, when we take a closer look we find quite different attitudes towards nature, and natural sacred manifestations, resulting in very diverse types of SNSs. An important distinction can be drawn between 'in-tact' SNSs, where the natural components have not been modified, and access is usually restricted, and sacred sites that have been consecrated, including shrines or sanctuaries, whose shape usually symbolises or synthesises the entire cosmos, attracting faithful, in some cases in limited numbers, in other cases by the millions. Made following the rules of traditional sciences, these sacred buildings often including relics or other sacred objects, which add significant value to the sanctity of the site (Burckhardt, 1958).

Diversity exists not only between religions, but within all of them. Different branches of a single world religion may have quite different views regarding the sanctity of nature. Christianity provides a good example of that. The Eastern, Coptic and Orthodox churches are those that retain the clearer teaching about the sacredness of nature, and, at the other end of the spectrum, the Reformed or Protestant churches are among those that have the weakest links with nature, at least in

the form of SNSs, although many of them have been making significant efforts to recover and reformulate the ancient Christian teachings on nature (Hessel and Ruether, 2000) and some have a better environmental record than other Christian churches. The Catholic Church is in between, usually closer to the eastern branches of Christianity in the countryside and natural areas. Moreover, within each branch another distinction needs to be made between the outward and the inward dimension, the last usually associated with mystical teaching, always much closer to nature and all living beings.

On the other hand, religions are not static. Over the centuries religions change the interpretation of their spiritual teachings and, to an even greater extent, how these are translated into social, economic and environmental policy and practices, to adapt to new circumstances and challenges. The way in which mainstream religions are responding to current global challenges, with increased environmental awareness, and renewed responsibilities towards the natural world, is one example of such a change. It is also important to underline that new SNSs are continually recognised, either because the perception of a place changes, or because the faithful move (Dudley et al., 2005).

Although the exact figures are not known for any of the world religions, and will probably never be known, the number of SNSs related to mainstream religions is extremely high. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, for instance, the number of sacred groves related to

Hinduism has been estimated at 100 000 to 150 000 (Malhotra, 1998), not to mention the numerous sacred mountains, like Mount Khailas, sacred rivers, like the Ganges, etc. In Ethiopia, the second most populated country of Africa, where Christianity has been the main religion for about two millennia, it is estimated that over 35 000 'church forests' have been conserved, usually located next to modest church buildings, huts or caves where hermits have been living, providing vital biodiversity reservoirs in the context of extensive deforestation and deteriorated landscapes (Tree Foundation, 2010).

On the other hand, many countries do not have SNSs related to indigenous or local peoples, but only SNSs related to mainstream religions. This is the case of many European and Middle Eastern countries. However, in most of the world, SNSs related to mainstream religions coexist with SNSs related to indigenous spiritual traditions, in different degrees of harmony.

SNSs related to mainstream religions are found in protected areas belonging to all IUCN categories (Verschuuren et al., 2007). In some countries, individual protected areas or even entire systems of protected areas, are owned and/or managed by religious organisations. A case in point is South Korea, where a large portion of the system of national parks was established over the properties of Buddhist monastic communities (Hugh Kim, personal communication)

A considerable number of SNSs have been resilient to cultural and spiritual

changes, being reused by consecutive religions or spiritual traditions, either historic and/or current, displaying overlapping values which often show complex relationships. Even if the spiritual tradition has vanished, contemporary society often displays respect for ancient SNSs.

Some protected areas include a high diversity of SNSs, which are still highly relevant for the local population and provide powerful incentives for respect and conservation, even if they are related to extinct civilisations, which are still accessible in both tangible and intangible manner.

Last, but not least, one has to recall that mainstream religions and related organisations are among the oldest and more resilient social structures in the world. All world religions have significant teachings on cosmology, and a long experience in nature conservation, in diverse forms, including SNSs, and most of them are increasingly interested in nature conservation in the face of the global losses of biodiversity. Moreover, some religious organisations are significant landowners and their properties include valuable natural areas. For all these reasons they could be significant agents and also influential allies of conservation organisations, as has been widely acknowledged (Palmer and Finaly, 2003).

Validation aims and process

What follows is a brief description of the methodology used in the workshop

to assess the applicability of the existing IUCN-UNESCO Guidelines, followed by the conclusions that were attained.

Some weeks before the workshop, a document was sent to all the participants explaining the purpose and the methodology of the exercise, and asking them to prepare the participatory session. In particular, they were informed that in a previous analysis, during the elaboration of the Guidelines, a number of concepts and related key terms had been found to be missing to be fully applicable to the main world religions, including 'faithful, guest houses, holy people, holy sites, monasteries, monastic communities, religious authorities, religious organisations, religious values, shrines, temples, tombs and worshippers'. During the subsequent exchanges of correspondence, it became clear that additional significant concepts were missing, including those of: pilgrimages, sanctuaries, processions, and religious landscape.

The Inari/Aanaar workshop was attended by some 30 experts from 14 countries, with very diverse experience and backgrounds. They all had in common a working experience in dealing with SNSs in Europe. However, the experience of some experts was based in a limited number of SNSs, of the same type, whilst in others it was based in hundreds of sacred sites related to diverse religions.

The session devoted to this exercise was the first attempt to assess the ap-

plicability of the existing Guidelines for Protected Area Managers on Sacred Natural Sites. Therefore, the validation method itself was put into test. Participants were organised into three groups. The first group dealing with SNSs of indigenous peoples; the second one with mainstream SNSs and the third one with a subset of the former, namely SNSs related to monastic communities. Each participant filled in a table with the existing guidelines, where he or she should indicate, whether each particular guideline was either fully applicable to all SNSs, needing some new wording/language to be applicable to all cases, or needing concepts not included in the existing Guidelines. The participants were also told that they should explore, whether additional guidelines, if any, should be included to cover the diversity of SNSs related to mainstream religions. In each group there was one person able to answer the doubts of the participants. One of them was Rob Wild, co-author of the Guidelines.

As one could expect, the range of responses obtained during this exercise was very wide, reflecting the range of expertise of the participants, their particular experience, and also their different backgrounds.

Whilst some participants considered that most guidelines are applicable, the majority considered that a good number of guidelines are not applicable as they are, and suggested various changes. The most experienced participants considered that between 20–50 per

cent of the existing Guidelines are not applicable as they are to the SNSs in which they have been working.

Results on the applicability of Guidelines

Participants considered that some missing concepts and related key terms would be useful for the guidelines to be fully applicable to the world religions. These concepts include faithful, guest houses, holy people, holy sites, monasteries, monastic communities, religious authorities (only appears once, in table 2), religious organisations, religious values (only appears in two case studies), shrines, temples, tombs, worshippers.

Guidelines for SNSs devoted to mainstream religions and sites with overlapping faiths / spiritual traditions may decide to use alternative concepts. For instance, instead of SNSs, holy natural sites or holy natural places may be preferable to several branches of Christianity and Islam. This nuance may seem minor, but in their respective theologies it is significant, because the concept of sacred is reserved to the divine order. For this reason, guidelines that include new concepts may change their very title.

Next, the results of the first assessment based on the experience of certain countries (Belarus, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Mexico and Spain) have been summarised.

- Based on a large number of SNSs from Lithuania and Belarus, mainly

Christian, and some related to pre-Christian traditions, it was considered that seven guidelines are not applicable as they are, and need to modify their language.

- Based on the diverse types of SNSs of Finland, 16 guidelines are not applicable as they are, and it was suggested to modify the concepts in seven of them.
- Based on the experience of SNSs from Mexico, mainly related to indigenous traditions, with some Catholic and mixed sites, 17 Guidelines are not applicable as they are, and it was suggested to modify the concepts on seven guidelines and there is need to modify the language on the remaining ten guidelines.
- Based on the experience of SNSs of Italy, mostly Catholic, between 16 and 20 guidelines – according to different experts – are not applicable as they are, and it was proposed that the concepts need modification, while in some cases it was also suggested that the language needs modification.
- Based on the experience of SNSs of Romania, mostly Christian Orthodox, 14 guidelines are not applicable as they are, requiring modification of their language.

In addition, a preliminary assessment was done for SNSs tied to specific world religions, with the following results:

- Based on the experience of SNSs related to Christianity and Islam in 20 countries from Europe, Africa and Asia, 13 Guidelines are directly ap-

plicable as they are, eight would require modifying somewhat their language, and 20 would require modifying at least one concept.

- Based on the Christian Orthodox SNSs in several European countries, it was found that 19 guidelines were not applicable as they are, of which five need to modify some concepts.

Other comments:

- The distinction between indigenous and mainstream faiths is an oversimplistic dichotomy. There is a need to include 'cultural' or 'folk' variants and the enrichment of mainstream faiths, and also the inner or mystical dimension of the religions.
- Some custodians fear of 'New Age' spiritual movements, because they may interfere with traditional practices and create disruptions.
- Intellectual property rights (Access and Benefit Sharing, CBD) are not well covered in the existing Guidelines.
- Psychological wellbeing should also be included, because SNSs are considered to be life givers, both biologically and spiritually.
- Landscape symbolism is often very significant, has many implications for nature conservation and should be better discussed.
- The relations between spiritual connectivity (pilgrimages paths and trails) and ecological connectivity should be better explored.
- Identifying, layering and the implicit meaning of local practices is their underlying (but possibly forgotten) ecological or social function.
- The need for protected area manag-

ers to adopt measure seeking for silence, solitude and beauty, as prerequisites for experiencing sacredness of nature in all spiritual traditions.

- In the process of revitalisation it is important to be aware of the cultural appropriation, and to avoid 'theft'.
- SNSs can be social and even political drivers or motivators of conservation by connecting urban people with nature in deeper ways than non-sacred protected areas can.

Discussion and conclusions

The significance of this validation exercise reflects the limitation of the participants to the workshop and their expertise. This was the first validation exercise, which hopefully will be followed by other assessments, in other regions, to obtain a better understanding of the aspects of the existing Guidelines that would be desirable to review or complement.

The existing IUCN-UNESCO Guidelines for Protected Area Managers of Sacred Natural Sites are both relevant and useful. All the participants of the assessment agreed that the Guidelines are very significant. Were they implemented, a large number of the problems and conflicts affecting SNSs in many countries, especially those related to indigenous peoples and local communities, could have been either prevented or addressed and solved.

The main conclusion of the exercise conducted in the workshop is that the existing guidelines have to be further

tested, refined, adapted and complemented. At least about one third of the guidelines were considered directly applicable as such to SNSs related to mainstream religions, and a similar proportion could be applicable with limited adaptation of language of concepts. Taking into consideration the global scope they have, and the extraordinary diversity included, this fact is very positive.

The results attained further prove the need to continue working on analysing additional case studies related to mainstream religions so that either the next version of the Guidelines, or perhaps complementary guidelines that may be produced in the near future, may better cover the existing diversity of SNSs of the world.

When guidelines for SNSs for mainstream religions are produced, it will be necessary to take into consideration representative case studies, carefully analysed, not only from all world religions, i.e. their different branches, their mystical dimensions, as well as their combination with folk religions, and/or other religions or local spiritual traditions, because of the significant differences that exist among them in this respect.

Guidelines related to living SNSs probably have to be better emphasised as a dynamic process. As suggested by ICCROM (Stovel et al., eds. 2005), living religious heritage is a crucial component of SNSs that also has to be safeguarded.

Like any other natural or human organisation, religion and spiritual traditions are a dynamic and evolving, and so are SNSs, at the interface of nature and the deepest aspirations of humankind. Analogously with deteriorated landscapes or habitats, there may be a need of recognition and revitalisation of SNSs that have been neglected. In those cases a holistic approach that embraces all dimensions of heritage seems highly advisable.

Having said all that, one has to acknowledge that the diversity of SNSs of the world is such that any global guidelines, no matter how developed or refined they may be, will always need some degree of adaptation to the regional or national characteristics, or to particular religious or spiritual traditions. Human diversity in this respect is bewildering. A number of key concepts of the existing Guidelines – including sacred and nature – are absent in many of the world languages and worldviews.

Global Guidelines on Sacred Natural Sites could hopefully inspire regional or national guidelines. In some European countries, like Spain, a participatory process is being planned by the national section of the EUROPARC Federation to produce national guidance to managers of protected areas for incorporating the intangible heritage in protected area planning and management.

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