



FEATURE



Eco-cultural mapping with VhaVenda communities in South Africa – with members of Tshidzivhe community, Dzomo la Mupo and The Mupo Foundation. Photo: Will Baxter / The Gaia Foundation.

Eco-cultural mapping is something quite different! It goes much further than charting the location and physical terrain of an area. It is a collective process where communities map the ecological, social, cultural and spiritual meaning of the landscape as part of an ongoing process of reviving and enhancing their indigenous knowledge and practices. It is about using these tools for reconnecting with the past, understanding the present, and visioning the future.

Tools for reviving traditional knowledge and building resilience

The purpose is to enable local communities to create a shared vision of their territory and to chart a way forward for themselves. No technical skills are required, nor GPS or high technology – just big tables, sheets of blank paper, coloured pens or crayons, and time. The process is simple and community-led. Those who hold the most traditional knowledge take a leading role, and everyone gets involved.

A series of maps are drawn. The first reflects the past, the way the ancestors used to live, the customary laws and ecological integrity of the landscape. Then a map of the present, with the harsh reality of transformations and changes suffered over time, and the disorder that has been created. And finally, a map of the future where the communities envision what they are already doing and can do to ensure a resilient, bio-diverse and culturally vibrant future.

Alongside the maps, the process involves drawing eco-cultural calendars – cyclical charts that bring movement to the maps, showing seasonal changes. The calendars capture many levels of traditional knowledge: the cosmos, the stars and lunar phases; the climate – rainy, dry, windy or other seasons; the breeding cycles of animals and fish, fruiting trees and shrubs; also the domesticated crops and livestock, the time for preparing the fields, planting and harvesting; and the rituals or ceremonies for each of the seasons.

Eco-mapping Key Principles

- The maps and calendars are tools, not an end in themselves. They help communities to revive ancestral knowledge and practices, to analyse the challenges of the present, and to develop a common vision of how to rebuild their future now.
• It is a process-oriented methodology and should be situated within the context of ongoing community dialogues.
• The process triggers reflection on ecological, social and cultural knowledge. It fosters a creative space in which communities can take back control of their own lives, livelihoods and governance systems.
• It is community-led. Facilitators are there simply to motivate, accompany, or give some basic clues, hints or ideas when asked – not to intervene or impose ideas.
• The focus is on qualitative data, the relations between culture and nature, territory and people, time and space. Specifics, such as boundaries of areas, are not necessary in the early stages – they can be covered by formal mapping procedures later on.

The origins – in the Colombian Amazon

Some ten years ago, The Gaia Foundation organised a series of learning exchanges between African partner organisations and 'Gaia Amazonas' in Colombia. We took more than 20 community leaders and environmental practitioners from Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Botswana and South Africa to the heart of the Colombian Amazon, where they were hosted by indigenous communities along the Miriti, Apaporis and Lower Caquetá Rivers. They heard directly from the elders and shamans how they had been reviving and enhancing traditional knowledge, language and traditions. They witnessed how the Colombian government was decentralizing education and health into the hands of indigenous traditional authorities, making these services appropriate to local and cultural needs, more cost-effective and transparent. And they learned how a simple technique – eco-cultural mapping and calendars – has been a powerful catalyst in this process of reviving traditional knowledge, gaining autonomy and protecting sacred natural sites.

Gaia Amazonas has been evolving eco-cultural mapping with Amazon communities since the early 1990's – a blend of cartografía social (social mapping) and Participatory Investigative Action (PIA), inspired by the teachings of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda. It has been a key element of the award-winning COAMA programme working with indigenous cultures to protect the tropical forest of the Colombian Amazon. More than 26 million hectares of Colombian Amazon territory have been handed back to its indigenous inhabitants in the last 20-30 years, and Amazon communities have gained autonomy and make decisions based on their own 'life plans' – including the inter-generational transfer of knowledge, safeguarding sacred natural sites, and strengthening traditional governance systems. Most recently, maps and calendars were the basis for UNESCO registration of Intangible Cultural Heritage and a Special Safeguard Plan for the traditional knowledge and sacred natural sites of the Pirá Paraná River.

From the Amazon to Africa

In 2009, we invited indigenous leaders from the Colombian Amazon to the Venda region in northern South Africa, to share their experience and provide a training workshop on eco-cultural mapping. Indigenous leaders and community mobilisers from Kenya, Ethiopia, Botswana and the Altai Republic of Russia also took part. Two years later, a second training was held in Kenya, where local communities along the Kathita River have begun mapping and reviving their culture.

In South Africa, Kenya and Ethiopia, local communities are now applying what they first learnt through exchange visits to the Amazon. They have adapted the maps and calendars to their own local contexts, to revive traditional knowledge, strengthen food sovereignty and protect sacred natural sites. They call them "talking tools".

"The seeds of our knowledge and life are still with us and Nature is still alive. These maps are our life-plans, they have emerged from us. After understanding the fragmentation of our present we are here to build a common shared future. Let's transform the present with hope and guidance from our ancestors." – MAKHADZI, WOMAN ELDER FROM VENDA, SOUTH AFRICA

Find out more

- The Gaia Foundation • Gaia Amazonas • The COAMA programme

The Gaia Foundation will soon publish a guide to Eco-Cultural Mapping and Calendars. In the meantime these links may be of interest:

- "Reviving our Culture, Mapping our Future" – a film about eco-cultural mapping in Venda, South Africa
• Mapping Sacred Sites on the Kathita River
• Intangible Cultural Heritage – Safeguarding the Pirá Paraná

Eco-Cultural Maps and Calendars: "talking tools" that travelled from the Amazon to Africa

by Fiona Wilton, The Gaia Foundation 3 April 2013

Chanting, gestures, inscriptions on papyrus, stone or wood – are just some of the ways that humans communicated the meaning of their surroundings during our history. Nowadays the increasing use of mobile devices means that global positioning systems (GPS) and mapping "Apps" are a part of many people's everyday experience.



Example of an eco-cultural calendar from a community in Bale, Ethiopia, where MELCA-Ethiopia uses a range of participatory mapping processes. Photo: The Gaia Foundation.

In April 2012, the African Biodiversity Network organised a gathering of African Sacred Natural Sites custodians, in Kenya, where strategies including eco-cultural mapping were shared. Photo: The Gaia Foundation.

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ON THE BOOKSHELF

List of relevant publications issued in the last three months

ABOUT SSIREN

The Sacred Site Research Newsletter (SSIREN) was conceived at the symposium "Conserving nature at sacred sites", held at the University of Zurich on the 25th October 2011, as a means to inform and aggregate the community of researchers working on sacred natural sites. It is aimed not merely at scholars but also practitioners and policy-makers coping with specific issues, as well as anyone with a general interest in the interaction between people and nature.

SSIREN is an acronym from the title Sacred Sites Research Newsletter, but as a creature a Siren is also a convincing symbol of the connection between beliefs, culture and nature, which is characteristic of sacred natural sites.

The Newsletter is issued quarterly and is literally "made" by its members: everyone is warmly encouraged to submit news, events, opportunities, and recent relevant publications, or to introduce their work in a feature article. Relevant contributions from all academic disciplines, as well as NGO practitioners and other institutions, are warmly welcome.

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FRIENDS



SANASI – World Database on Sacred Natural



ARC – The Alliance of Religions and Conservation



ISSRNC – The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture



SNSI – The Sacred Natural Sites Initiative



Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas CSVPA – IUCN-WCPA Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values

NEWS

Statement on the use of ivory for religious objects approved by the Society for Conservation Biology

An important policy statement was recently crafted by the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group (RCBWG) of the Society for Conservation Biology, and approved by the Society for Conservation Biology. The statement reached to address the new dramatic heights aimed by elephant massacre in Africa, often driven by "the demand for ivory for religious artifacts, trinkets, and other purposes in Asia", and argues that "[...] the requirements of religion and conservation [...] can be complementary in reaching the best possible outcome whereby religious faith is respected and the future of elephants safeguarded".

The statement has already received attention from scientists and media around the world, and efforts are currently being made to initiate a partnership amongst the RCBWG, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), National Geographic and other concerned organizations to address religious ivory in Asia.

The full statement can be downloaded from this location. For further info, please contact the Chair of the Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative (RCRC) of RCBWG, Stephen Awowoyemi.

PUBLICATIONS

Gao, H., Ouyang, Z.Y., Chen, S.B., van Koppen, C.S.A., 2013. Role of culturally protected forests in biodiversity conservation in Southeast China. Biodiversity and Conservation 22, pp 531-544.

Gunaga, S., Rajeshwari, N., Vasudeva, R., 2013. Tree diversity and disturbance of kaan forests: Relics of a community protected climax vegetation in the Central Western Ghats. Tropical Ecology 54, pp 117-131.

Nadeau, R., 2012. Rebirth of the Sacred: Science, Religion, and the New Environmental Ethos. University Press, Oxford.

Ross-Bryant, L., 2012. Pilgrimage to the National Parks: Religion and Nature in the United States. Routledge, London.

Scharper, S.B., 2013. For Earth's Sake: Toward an Ecology of Compassion. Novalis, Toronto.

Westerman K., Gardner C.J., 2013. Adaption of socio-cultural norms to increase community compliance in permanent marine reserves in southwest Madagascar. Journal of Conservation Evidence 10, pp 4-9.

EVENTS

4th International Conference of the European Forum for the Study of Religion and Environment

May 22-25. Sigtuna, Sweden

The conference is organized in association with the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture and entitled Nature, Technology and Religion: Transdisciplinary Perspectives. More info here.



You receive this newsletter because you have previously participated in initiatives on sacred natural sites. Tired of it? Please contact the Editors. Think it's fantastic and would like to involve a colleague or a friend? Contact the Editors all the same.