

# Sacred Natural Sites

## Monastic Communities Conserving Nature

### Key points

- Monastic communities are based on principles and follow rules that are deeply coherent with nature conservation and environmental sustainability
- 80% of the earth's populations is known to adhere to mainstream religion's which govern, 7% of the earth's surface. A small proportion of this percentage is covered by monastic communities.
- Tens of thousands of monastic communities worldwide have developed distinctive natural resource management systems, including some of the best practices in forestry, animal husbandry, agriculture, fish farming, water management, etc.
- Principles and practice of Monastic asceticism may provide lessons towards ecological life styles and sustainable use of natural resources.

### Introduction

This information sheet focuses on Buddhist and Christian monastic communities because monasticism has been a characteristic feature of Buddhism and Christianity more so than of other mainstream faiths. Monastic communities have existed for over 2000 years in Asia, and for more than 1000 years in North and Eastern Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Monastic communities vary from a few to a few hundred individuals (males or females) where the principle of self-sufficient life is widespread. These are resilient, self-organized democratic communities with a continuous positive impact in nature conservation and sustainable land management.

### Monastic communities and conservation

Most monastic lands have been carefully managed long before the recent establishment of some modern protected areas on top of them. Tens of thousands of monastic communities have developed distinctive natural resource management systems, including some of the best practices in forestry, animal husbandry, agriculture, fish farming, water management, etc, while creating and maintaining beautiful and harmonious landscapes. Many are also involved in nature conservation practices all over the world, managing lands, forests, crops, pastures, lakes, rivers, lagoons, etc. Monastic lands are found in all ecosystems: from the Arctic to the tropical forests, from deserts to lakes and other wetlands, from coastal areas to the high mountains. In some regions, for example in the biodiversity hotspot of



His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa advises:

*"The more interest we take in learning about the environment, the more we will cherish and care for it. It is our responsibility that everyone becomes educated and protects the pure, clean natural environment there. We must consider this, especially within each of our monasteries. I am not an expert on environmental issues, but there are a few points we should understand and follow. If you can practice these in your monasteries and provide education to the monastics and householders associated with your monasteries, it will bring benefit to us as communities and individuals".*

## Issues Paper

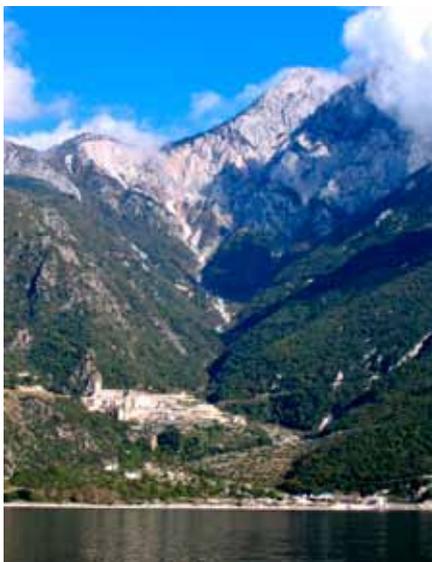
the Mediterranean basin, monastic communities have been responsible for the management of over one third of the land for several centuries.

Most monastic lands and waters should be considered protected landscapes or seascapes (IUCN category V). Many of them, however, include hermit domains, used for hermits or solitary retreats, which are equivalent to nature reserves (IUCN categories III and IV). Depending on the countries,

**“Be gentle with the earth.  
Then nature will tender  
you spontaneously”**

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama

protected areas including monastic communities may have very diverse ownership and governance systems concerning boards, planning, management, public use, etc. With



The only self governed monastic state of the world, Athos (now within Greece), stronghold of the ancient Byzantine Orthodox tradition for over ten centuries, and conserves some of the best coastal and forest Mediterranean ecosystems

very few exceptions, new monasteries are very committed towards environmental conservation. Hence, when they are not included in legally established protected areas, monastic lands should generally be

considered community conserved areas.

### Some significant facts:

- Over one hundred monasteries have been declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, usually attracting large numbers of visitors.
- Some large monastic lands are located inside protected areas of international value, like Natura 2000 in Europe.
- Some protected areas have been promoted or created by monasteries, e.g. the National Parks system of Korea was established on Buddhist monastic properties.
- Land ownership is being devolved to monastic communities in some protected areas, where they are responsible for large portions of existing parks, like in Romania.
- Some monastic communities maintain associated pilgrim routes, some of which constitute significant landscape linkages and biological corridors.

Despite the general trend on secularization in technologically developed countries, new monastic settlements and hermit domains are still actively created in several parts of the world, for example; new Christian and Buddhist monasteries in the Americas, Africa, Europe and South-East Asian countries and the Recovery of ancient pilgrimage ways, connecting old and new monasteries in Asia (e.g. Mount Khailas) and Europe (e.g. Ways of Saint James, a World Heritage Site)

### Values and principles

Monastic communities are based on principles and follow rules that are deeply coherent with nature conservation and environmental sustainability like:

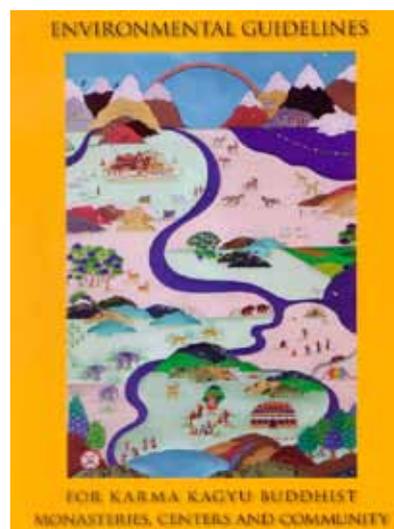
- Stability, discipline, asceticism, frugality, sobriety.
- Not to material profit oriented, but to spiritual benefit.
- No private property, but communal property: custodians or stewards, never owners.
- Aspired values include: the love for

sacred, silence, solitude, harmony, and beauty.

- Aiming for perfection, or excellence, at both the spiritual and material domains.
- Systematic application of precautionary principle in all domains of life.
- Long term view: natural assets valued as gifts to be bestowed to future generations.

### Educating monastic communities, pilgrims and visitors

Although few monasteries have explicit communication strategies related to nature conservation, the values they communicate have a general positive impact on increasing respect for nature and adopting simpler lifestyles to their audiences. A good example are the Environmental Guidelines for Karma Kagyu Buddhist Monasteries, Centres and Communities (2008). Monastic communities use a variety of tools and strategies to communicate their values to society. Monastic communities often aim at exclusive audiences, i.e. guests to their communities and pilgrims. Nonetheless, traditional religious tools, like retreats, seminars, counseling, publication of books, articles, sacred art (icons, etc) are often combined with modern tools, like symposia, web pages, DVD, CD, guided tours, interpretation centers, etc.



Environmental Guidelines for Karma Kagyu Buddhist Monasteries, Centres and Communities (2008)

*This information sheet has been developed by Josep-Maria Mallarach, mallarach@silene.es (Joint co-coordinator of the Delos Initiative) with support from Bas Verschuuren (Co-Chair IUCN Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas) and Vita de Waal (Chair, United Nations, NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns).*