



FEATURE

International Conference on Experiencing, Recognizing and Protecting Sacred Sites of Arctic Indigenous Peoples

by Leena Heinämäki and Thora Herrmann

In September 2013, nearly 80 sacred site guardians of indigenous communities, indigenous peoples' organizations, scientists, policy makers and members of civil society gathered together in the capital of Finnish Lapland, Rovaniemi, as well as in Pühätunturi, a sacred mountain of the ancient Forest Saami people. The reason for this gathering was the first international, multidisciplinary conference on Arctic sacred sites *Protecting the Sacred: Recognition of Sacred Sites of Indigenous Peoples for Sustaining Nature and Culture in Northern and Arctic Regions*. Participants came from six Arctic countries, as far away as Yakutia, Eastern Siberia, Canada and Alaska to attend the event. For many indigenous delegations it was the very first time ever in Finland.



Some of the participants in the Arctic sacred sites conference in Rovaniemi. Photo: Francis Joy/Arctic Centre.

Arctic Sacred Sites – Why do we care?

Sacred sites play a key role in traditional cultures and lifestyles across the Arctic. They contribute to universal values that maintain mankind's relationships with the earth. They can be found in mountains or springs, rocks or places where reindeers have been slaughtered. Today these sites are not sufficiently understood or recognized. Legal protection of these ancient sites and related policies are still often insufficient or absent. Many but not necessary all indigenous communities have expressed a strong interest to protect these sacred sites as an important component of their traditional culture. It becomes, however, increasingly difficult for indigenous communities to protect these ancient sites from outside interference, due for example to economic developments (tourism, mining, forestry) or infrastructural development (roads, dams, etc.). At the same time the need for protection may be challenged by some protection measures (identifying of location, mapping) and may raise the question of keeping intimacy and sensitivity of these places. Many of these sites are only known by the community members and it is very important to respect this privacy. Many of these sites are, however, publicly known. Some of them are legally recognized as a world heritage. At international level, sacred sites have been receiving increasing legal attention; they are now mentioned in several international legal instruments (e.g., CBD, UNDRIP). Yet, effective and culturally appropriate implementation is often still lacking. In all cases, it is crucial that all discussion and planning concerning these sites involve local indigenous peoples. Recognition of these sacred sites can be also used as a cultural revitalization and educational process. This conference put a lot of emphasis to invite representatives of many Arctic indigenous communities to have a fruitful and open dialogue. The Conference was colored by sacred ceremonies led by Innu and Naskapi people, and a guided tour to the mountain areas' sacred places.

The conference

The conference was co-organized by the Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law (NIEM) at the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland, the Université de Montréal (Canada), and the University of the Arctic /Thematic Network on Arctic Law, and hosted a range of wonderful Key speakers from around the world and a variety of disciplines and backgrounds. The aim of the event was to increase the voice of Sacred Sites custodians and enhance a dialogue between communities, scientists and decision-makers to assure that social, cultural, religious and spiritual in addition to biological diversity are taken into account in law, policy and field action related to sustainable development in the North. Over three days, participants came and spoke related to the entire circumpolar area. Many speakers underlined that the safeguarding of sacred sites requires universal involvement. The multidisciplinary approach of the Conference established themes dealing with multiple meanings of the sacred sites, including questions related to identity, ethnicity and transmission of the culture, education, arts and economics. Sacred sites were discussed as a part of the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples, including themes around mythology, spiritually relevant practices and the role of sacred sites for indigenous cosmologies. One crucial theme of the conference was to view sacred sites as an important means for the conservation of biological and cultural diversity. The conference raised up discussions concerning nature-culture interlinkages, ecosystem conservation and socio-ecological resilience. Additionally, the legal recognition of the sacred sites was an important part of the discourse, since an objective of the Conference was to develop strategies towards more effective protection and management of the Sacred Sites in Northern and Arctic region, as well as taking into account indigenous peoples' own practices and customary laws.

The Conference succeeded to create a platform to establish a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to tackle multiple issues of the Sacred Sites in the North and to raise broader public awareness of the challenges and threats faced by Sacred Sites and their custodians. The media, including regional press of Lapland, Nunavut's territorial newspaper (Canada), and the Finnish national television showed a wide interest towards, and broadcasted, this warm-spirited event that emphasized the mutual partnership and respect between participants with different backgrounds.



Closing ceremony and presentation of the Conference Statement. Photo: Arctic Centre.

The Conference also acted as a platform to establish a participatory educational research project to advance the transmission of spiritually relevant culturally embedded knowledge and practices related to sacred sites to younger generation, and advance effective legal recognition and sustainable development planning. A book that includes 23 chapters with a high quality articles written by the participants of the Conference is currently being developed.

Besides starting a research project, the Conference participants joined to issue a Statement and Recommendations for policy-making and management related to sacred sites in the Arctic. This Statement calls for better recognition, legally protection and management of the sacred sites and sanctuaries of indigenous peoples in the Arctic region. The Conference Statement and Recommendations acknowledges the urgent need to address growing threats to sacred natural sites such as: climate change, industrial development, extractive industries such as mining, forestry, hydro-electrics, oil and gas, and their associated operations (such as helicopters and transport corridors), unsustainable tourism, military operations and (related) infrastructural developments (such as low level flying), State dominated educational curricula, religious imposition and vandalism. It reaffirms the need for respect for indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and their view that any measure for the protection of indigenous peoples' sacred sites must be seen under self-determination and the principle of free, prior and informed consent. It includes a variety of recommendations to State governments, general public, civil society and media as well as environmental and conservation organizations, religious associations and faith groups, business, corporations and academia, researchers and the education sector.

For more information, please visit [the conference website](#).

NEWS

Asian Sacred Sites Network introduced

[Sacred Natural Sites Initiative](#), [Biodiversity Network Japan](#) and the [IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas](#)-Japan have launched the Asian Sacred Sites Network. The aim of the Network is to help keep a focus on Asian sacred natural sites which are significant features in Asian landscapes. More information [here](#).

Project On the trail of the Buddha Tree launched

A [new initiative](#) to highlight the environmental, cultural and economic importance of trees in India, Sri Lanka and the wider world was promoted by writer-photographer Edward Parker, in collaboration with [The Forest Trust](#) and [Lifeworlds Learning](#). In a 40-day journey, Edward Parker retraced the steps of Indian princess Sangamitta from the Bo Tree (the very tree under which Buddha gained enlightenment, as well as the oldest broadleaf tree still alive today) to Sri Lanka. Interviews, stories and stunning images were collected during the journey and will become the core of educational resources and photographic documentaries in the next months.



EVENTS

February 17-23, world wide Hindu Environment Week

The annual Hindu Environment Week will see a programme of Hindu environmental events and celebrations of the natural world within Hindu communities around the world. Click [here](#) for more information and to get involved.

March 14, world wide Sikh Environment Day

The 4th Sikh Environment Day (Vatavaran Diwas) will be held on the day marking the New Year in the Sikh calendar and the Gurgaddi Diwas of Sri Gurur Har Rai Ji, a figure especially revered in Sikh history for his sensitivity to nature. To find out more visit the [EcoSikh website](#).

March 25-27, Cambridge, UK Student Conference on Conservation Science

The 15th annual meeting is open to all young conservation researchers. It aims to "help young conservation scientists gain experience, learn new ideas and make contacts that will be valuable for their future careers". More information [here](#).

March 26-28, Castell de Castellet, Spain Club of Rome meeting: Systemic Solutions for a Systemic Crisis

As part of the [ValuesQuest project](#) between [Club of Rome](#) and [Alliance of Religion and Conservation](#), the initiative aims to understand how the organisations can work together to create a more sustainable and equitable world, to explore the causes of the troubles that face them and to develop holistic and integrated solutions.

New website on African sacred groves

A new website dedicated to African sacred groves and forests was developed by Gerard Chouin, Dominique Juhe-Beaulaton and Matthieu Salpeteur. [The website](#) is in French and offers indications on the history and biocultural significance of African sacred groves, news updates and a rich bibliographical repository.

Islamic Green Awards launched for mosques

The Muslim Agency for Development Education (MADE) have launched the *Green Up! Award*. MADE describe themselves as "a Muslim-led movement of young people who want to see our community leading the fight against global poverty and injustice." The *Green Up!* scheme aims to encourage mosques and Islamic groups to adopt more environment-friendly practices, including recycling, banning plastic water bottles and collecting rainwater to use in the garden. More information [here](#).

PUBLICATIONS

Bell, C., Chaplin, J., and White, R. (Eds.), 2013. Living Lightly, Living Faithfully: Religious Faiths and the Future of Sustainability. Faraday Institute for Science and Religion and the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, Cambridge, UK

Bergmann, S., Blindow, I., and Ott, K. (Eds.), 2013. Aesth/Ethics in Environmental Change: Hiking through the Arts, Ecology, Religion and Ethics of the Environment. LIT Verlag, Münster

Blicharska, M., Mikusiński, G., Godbole, A., and Sarnaik, J., 2013. Safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystem services of sacred groves – experiences from northern Western Ghats. International Journal of Biodiversity Science, Ecosystem Services & Management 9(4): 339-346

Brandt, J.S., Wood, E.M., Pidgeon, A.M., Han, L.X., Fang, Z., and Radeloff, V.C., 2013. Sacred forests are keystone structures for forest bird conservation in southwest China's Himalayan Mountains. Biological Conservation 166: 34-42

Geering, L., 2013. From the Big Bang to God: Our Awe-Inspiring Journey of Evolution. Polebridge Press, Salem

Groenfeldt, D., 2013. Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis. Routledge, London

Hageneder, F., 2013. Yew. Reaktion Books, London

Juneja, S.K., and Sobti, N., 2013. Restoring ecosystems through sacred groves strengthened by inclusive government and community approaches. Annals of Biology 29(3): 439-442

Litfin, K., 2013. Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK

McKay, J.E., Mangunjaya, F.M., Dinata, Y., Harrop, S.R., and Khalid, B., 2014. Practise what you preach: a faith-based approach to conservation in Indonesia. Oryx 48(1): 23-29

Mikusinski, G., Possingham, H.P., Blicharska, M., 2014. Biodiversity priority areas and religions – a global analysis of spatial overlap. Oryx 48(1): 17-22

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NEWS

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UPCOMING EVENTS

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Hindu Environment Week

March 14, world wide
4th Sikh Environment Day

March 25-27, Cambridge, UK
15th Student Conference on Conservation Science

March 26-28, Castell de Castellet, Spain
Club of Rome meeting: Systemic Solutions for a Systemic Crisis

ON THE BOOKSHELF

List of relevant publications issued in the last three months

OPPORTUNITIES

March 1. Application deadline
Adamah: The Jewish Environmental Fellowship

March 10. Call for abstracts
51st Annual Meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation

ABOUT SSIREN

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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.

All past issues of SSIREN are currently hosted by the [Sacred Sites Research Initiative's website](#) and are available for download.

CONTACTS

For inquiries about the newsletter, to submit an article, or to contribute in any other way, please contact the editors:

Emma Shephard-Walwyn
es307@kent.ac.uk

Fabrizio Frascaroli
fabrizio.frascaroli@ieu.uzh.ch

Sacred Sites Research Newsletter
ssirennewsletter@gmail.com

FRIENDS



SANASI – World Database on Sacred Natural Sites



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 of Protected Areas

OPPORTUNITIES

March 1

Adamah: The Jewish Environmental Fellowship.

Application deadline

The fellowship is a three-month leadership training program in Falls Village, CT, for Jewish adults aged 20-32 that integrates organic agriculture, farm-to-table living, Jewish learning, community building, and spiritual practice. Fall program runs August 27 - December 8. Deadline for applications is March 1. Further details [here](#).

March 10

51st Annual Meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation
Call for abstracts

Abstract submissions are open for the [Association for Tropical Biodiversity and Conservation's 2014 meeting](#) entitled *The Future of Tropical Biology and Conservation*. Abstracts must be received by March 10. For more info and to submit an abstract please [click here](#).



We warmly thank the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale and Alliance of Religions and Conservation for their precious updates and contributions to this newsletter

You receive this newsletter because you have previously subscribed to 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.