



Sacred Sites Research Newsletter

OCTOBER 2014



FEATURE

On the Trail of the Buddha Tree

by Edward Parker



Prayer flags draped around one of a number of sacred figs grown from cuttings of the tree under which Buddha gained enlightenment, Bodhgaya, Bihar State. Photo: E. Parker

Over the last twenty, years my work of campaigning for the protection of ancient trees and forests has taken me on a journey not only around the world but also through time. I have encountered giant trees whose enormous fluted trunks rise up like cathedrals, and stood in groves of gnarled and wizened trees that were alive before the great pyramids of ancient Egypt were built. Standing alongside some of the World's oldest and largest living organisms it's impossible for me not to feel awe and

to understand why so many cultures around the world have a spiritual connection with great trees.

Few groups of trees have the religious significance of figs, and few have played such an important part in human history. The Romans, for example, venerated fig trees because it was in the branches of a fig tree that the cradle containing Romulus and Remus became caught in the place that was to become Rome. In China and India large fig trees are believed to be the homes of spirits and demons. The sycamore fig (*Ficus sycamores*) was in the Bible Lands 'intimately connected with the rites and worship of ancient Nature worship' as stated in the book *Plants of The Bible* by N. and Alma L. Moldenke. Sycamore figs also featured in Egyptian mythology and were believed to line the road along which the dead processed to the Nether World. While the common fig (*Ficus carica*) was the first plant mentioned by name in the Bible, as the source of the leaves that formed the aprons that covered Adam and Eve's nakedness.

It was against this background that I found myself heading for India last December to realise a project that had first occurred to me more than 15 years earlier. I have always been fascinated by the relationship that cultures all around the world have with trees and how many of the world's great trees are still there because of cultural protection. This was why I headed to Bodhgaya in the state of Bihar in north central India. It was here that Buddha was said to have stared for weeks at a pipal fig (*Ficus religiosa*) as he gained enlightenment more than 2,600 years ago.

The Bodhi Tree is a pipal fig which is sacred not only to Buddhists but also to Hindus and many other Asian religions. In India it is said that no one is allowed to fell a pipal fig without first getting permission from a Brahmin. It is even said that while different warring factions have destroyed the each other's temples and other religious structures, the fig trees at the holy site of Bodhgaya were left unharmed because of some higher understanding and meaning.

By arriving in December I came to the busiest season for Bodhgaya. At this time direct flights rolled in from Tokyo, Bangkok and China, while monks from Bhutan, Myanmar, Tibet and Nepal trekked for thousands of miles to visit too. It is astonishing to think that the location of a single tree, the Bodhi tree, could be the most important and venerated spot for millions of people and for thousands of years. Only 2,600 years ago Buddhism started its expansion from that very spot, radiating like spokes of a wheel – North to the Himalayas, South to Sri Lanka, East to China and Japan and west to the Asian/European border. Today it operates in reverse. Tens of thousands of people fly, bus, train and walk in from the four corners of the planet to the spot where Buddha gained enlightenment and to sit by a descendant of the original Bodhi tree.



Pilgrims gather under the spreading branches of the sacred fig tree that marks the site where Buddha gained enlightenment, Bodhgaya, Bihar State. Photo: E. Parker.

The other reason I went to India was the wonderful story of Princess Sangamitta. She was sent sometime around 288 BP by her father King Ashoka, the great ruler of the Mauryan Empire, thousands of kilometres to Sri Lanka to carry a cutting from the tree under which Buddha had gained enlightenment, as a gift to the island king to mark the arrival of Buddhism. I felt that the remarkable journey of such an unlikely role model (a single woman in her twenties with two children) along with a tree so rich in symbolism (which is still alive today in Sri Lanka) would be the most wonderful vehicle to introduce school children to history, environmental issues and sacred trees in India and Sri Lanka today. And so *On the Trail of the Buddha Tree* project was born.

With funding from The Forest Trust and a partner in the UK (Life Worlds Learning) - to process the images and information I was sending back and manage the online information - around 50 British schools were able to follow me as I retraced the ancient route.

My journey started in Bodhgaya (in Bihar State) and then on to Patna, where the famous city of Patliputra used to be home to Sangamitta. Here I gazed out over the mighty Ganges River where the harbour of this famously beautiful city had once been, only to see a few small boats bobbing in polluted waters, dwarfed by the stanchions of the new 5.7km long bridge that now straddles the great river.

Sangamitta sailed east along the Ganges River past the location of present day Kolkata and out into the vast Delta known as the Sunderbans. Even today the Sunderbans is home to several hundred Bengal tigers and thousands of crocodiles. Here I hoped to get the children to imagine what it must have been like for Sangamitta and her crew to travel through the tiger infested forest and sail across the shark infested sea. En route I stopped to visit a Bengal fig (*Ficus bengalensis*) which is one of the largest trees in the world - the famous Bengal fig in Kolkata Botanic gardens, with a canopy of more than 420m in circumference. That's a single tree large enough to shade the entire running track in an Olympic stadium. Bengal figs are also sacred in India and are offered the same cultural protection as pipal figs.



Women gathered around an energy-efficient wood burning stove designed to reduce fuel wood consumption in a school in a slum area of Bhubaneswar City. Photo: E. Parker.

they travelled the final few hundred kilometres to Anuradhapura in the centre of the island, escorted by a retinue of decorated elephants. The tree is still alive nearly 2,300 years later and is surrounded by a complex of temples.

Rejoining the route of Sangamitta at the very northern tip of Jafna meant we could discuss the effects of the tsunami and the devastating war in Sri Lanka. Eventually, I made my way to the Mahabodhi Temple in Anuradhapura where I could actually meet up with the very tree that had been transported by Sangamitta nearly 2,300 years ago. A tree alive in the Iron Age, a tree now held up by golden supports and the oldest verifiable broadleaf tree in the world, revered by millions. Sitting by this amazing sacred tree I watched emerald green starlings feed on the small black fruit and a large noisy hornbill building a nest in a large hollow in its ancient trunk.

My journey highlighted how many sacred trees are disseminated in India and Sri Lanka even when just considering fig trees – let alone if other species such as mango and neem are also counted. It also highlighted how alive the idea of sacred trees is to the people of Indian and Sri Lanka. Even when building a new house I found that the location of the sacred trees had to be considered: pipal fig seedlings, for example, are to be planted to the east and Bengal figs to the west of the property. Large fig trees punctuate the physical and cultural landscape across the Indian sub continent and I witnessed great trees decorated with offerings throughout my whole journey. I feel that the whole story of sacred trees in the Indian sub continent could be a life time's work for somebody.

For more information on *On The Trail Of The Buddha Tree* visit www.lifeworldslearning.co.uk.

And for more information about the work of promoting sustainable utilisation of better social and environmental responsibility by the Forest Trust visit www.tft-forests.org.

Edward Parker is author or co-author of more than 30 books, including *Ancient Trees: Trees That Live for a Thousand Years* (1999, updated in 2012). He has worked in more than 40 countries with many environmental organisations such as the Forest Trust, WWF International and The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, on campaigns and educational material related in particular to tropical rainforests and ancient trees. He was the Project Manager for the Woodland Trust's 'Ancient Tree Hunt', which recorded over 100,000 trees across the UK, and now runs The Springhead Trust - a residential environmental education centre in Dorset, UK.

NEWS

Sacred Natural Sites at IUCN World Parks Congress

A number of representatives and custodians of sacred natural sites will be attending the conference to present their experiences and participate in meetings aimed at promoting and strengthening the protection and conservation of their sites. The dedicated events at the Congress will include:

- WCPA Best Practice Guidelines: Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature: Guidelines for Application in Protected Areas. November 13th, 20.00-21.30
- Network event and book launch on Asian Sacred Natural Sites: Philosophy and Practice in Protected Areas and Conservation. November 15th, 17.30-19.00
- Wellbeing and Sacred Natural Sites in Protected Areas and World Heritage Sites. November 17th, 10.30-12.00
- Advancing protection of indigenous sacred natural sites and territories within the global protected area agenda. November 17th, 13.30-15.00
- Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature in Protected Areas Management and Governance. November 18th, 10.30-12.00

More information [here](#).

Green Pilgrimage Partnership launched in Canterbury on October 3rd 2014

The partnership brings together 40 sacred sites, pilgrimage routes, food producers and tourism agencies in an effort to make pilgrimages through the region environmentally friendly. Find more information at the websites of the [Alliance of Religions and Conservation](#) and the [Diocese of Canterbury](#).

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ISSUE 3(4) AT A GLANCE:

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NEWS

Sacred Natural Sites at IUCN World Parks Congress

Green Pilgrimage Partnership launched in Canterbury

UPCOMING EVENTS

November 12-19, Sidney, Australia

IUCN World Parks Congress

ON THE BOOKSHELF

List of relevant publications issued in the last three months

OPPORTUNITIES

October 31. Call for symposia, short courses and focus groups deadline

27th International Congress for Conservation Biology and 4th European Congress for Conservation Biology

December 10. Call for papers deadline

Conference Ruling Climate: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Governmentality

1500-1800

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:

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Sacred Sites Research Newsletter

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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

SACREDNATURALSITES

SNSI – The Sacred Natural Sites Initiative



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

EVENTS

November 12-19, Sidney, Australia

IUCN World Parks Congress

Parks, people, planet: inspiring solutions

Event info [here](#).

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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 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.