

UNESCO / IUCN DRAFT GUIDELINES

FOR THE CONSERVATION & MANAGEMENT OF SACRED NATURAL SITES

1. Introduction

In many societies, traditional sacred natural sites fulfill similar functions as government-declared protected areas. Due to spiritual values attributed to these sites, access restrictions often apply, and such sites (groves, mountains, rivers and lakes, caves, even entire landscapes) are therefore natural or near-natural ecosystems and biotopes where human-induced disturbances and impacts are minimal. In many cases, these sites have survived environmental degradation because they are deeply embedded in local cultures and traditional belief systems. They can provide sanctuaries to rare or endangered species and therefore can play an important role as potential gene pools that can be used to restore degraded environments.

Natural ecosystems cannot be understood, conserved and managed without recognizing the human cultures that shape them, since biological and cultural diversities are mutually reinforcing and interdependent. Together, cultural diversity and biological diversity hold the key to ensuring resilience in both social and ecological systems.

Sacred natural sites often epitomize such cultural and biological diversity and importance due to their dual character in reflecting cultural worldviews and environmental significance. Sacred natural sites are areas where nature, the divine and remembrances come together in special combinations that are particularly meaningful to a community, society or people. They can be the abode of deities, nature spirits and ancestors. They can be feared and secret places or they can be benign areas for ceremony, contemplation and meditation allowing communication with the transcendental. Common to most sacred natural sites is that they are areas removed from everyday access and resource use.

If properly managed, these special places can contribute meaningfully to both the conservation of biological diversity and the maintenance of cultural identity.

In this vein, sacred natural sites can be very important reference places of cultural identity. A group of people, a tribe, or entire nations can relate to natural sacred sites as their points of origin, the realm of their ancestors, the abode of their gods, their destinations of pilgrimage and worship, and overall, as the embodiment of their spiritual beliefs.

The term “sacred natural site” is used in this document in a generic sense as a place that is venerated and held in awe. Thus, while the term may refer to sites of religious importance, it also encompasses places that are of symbolic significance — where space, place, memory and spiritual meaning come together.

Sacred natural sites can be contained within legally protected areas or they can lie outside the legally designated protected area system. In both cases, sacred natural sites pose particular challenges with regard to their recognition and management.

In the first case, it must be recognized that many protected areas have been superimposed over traditional use areas of indigenous and traditional peoples. In setting up protected areas around the world, the values and importance of sacred places and traditional uses have often been ignored, thus affecting the fundamental rights of those local cultures. This situation has many times led to conflict and mistrust, creating obstacles to the development of constructive relationships and cooperation between indigenous or traditional peoples and conservation agencies.

In the second case, sacred places may be jeopardized by desecration of trespassers who simply ignore the sacredness of the area, which has a transcendent meaning for a certain group of people relating to that place. Worse, a sacred natural site could be jeopardized by its transformation into an economically “more productive” area (e.g. logging, agriculture, mining) if the sacred natural site does not benefit from inclusion in a legally protected area.

The purpose of these guidelines is to distill the experiences of field practitioners who have managed sacred natural sites in different parts of the world, in order to share their experiences — and recommendations derived from them — with others involved in the management of these special places. This particular document is a first, preliminary attempt at developing the guidelines. It has been written as the basis for discussions on this topic at the Vth World Parks Congress (WPC), which was held in Durban, South Africa in September 2003. The World Parks Congress then served to further revise the guidelines, which are reflected below.

2. Management and Conservation Challenges

Those managing sacred natural sites (SNS) face a variety of challenges, though each site is unique and has its own combination of challenges and opportunities (UNESCO, 2001; UNESCO, 2003). Some of the most common challenges are the following:

2.1 Multiple Stakeholders: SNSs may be sacred or important areas for more than one group. In such cases, multiple stakeholders with differing perceptions, uses of a site, nomenclatures, practices and traditions must be taken into account if conflict is to be avoided. Traditional custodians, pilgrims, local residents, tourists and recreationists may all have differing demands for the site.

2.2 Visitor Pressures and Access: Designation of an important SNS as a protected area at the national level, or designation as a biosphere reserve and/or world heritage site at the international level, can popularize a site and cause increased visitor pressures for which managers and traditional custodians are unprepared. With increased visitation, rights of access and demands for infrastructure development can become significant issues that conflict with

sacred values and negatively impact the site's quality and integrity. Pilgrimages and pilgrimage routes can also cause conflicts with local land use and/or property rights.

2.3 Culturally Sensitive Activities: Many activities normally engaged in by visitors or local groups may be culturally inappropriate in SNSs. Some examples of such activities are the climbing of sacred mountains or rock formations, entering into sacred caves or forests, bathing in sacred rivers, lakes or springs, participating in sacred ceremonies without permission of the celebrants, hunting of sacred animals, scattering of cremation ashes, leaving of "New Age" offerings, or entering into sacred areas without permission or without culturally appropriate preparation.

2.4 Development Pressure: Encroachment, agriculture, pastoralism, hunting, logging, road-building, tourism and mining are development pressures that can have significant adverse impacts on SNSs. Such pressures are particularly difficult to deal with if the SNS is not officially recognized or if there is secrecy regarding the site or the rituals associated with it.

2.5 Environmental Pressure: Anthropogenic and natural disasters such as pollution, climate change, fires, floods, erosion, and other related factors can create stresses that negatively impact sacred values and practices, as well as the physical integrity of sites.

2.6 Buffering: SNSs which are not properly buffered from surrounding activities, such as population increase, residential development, agriculture, grazing, hunting or tourism, can be negatively impacted.

2.7 Ownership: SNSs located in areas not owned by the traditional custodians, and not within established protected areas, create extraordinary challenges for management.

2.8 Political Access: SNSs recognized by minority groups or the powerless in a society are often unable to marshal the political support needed to gain national recognition or install sympathetic management regimes. This is particularly true of sites recognized by minority ethnic or religious communities.

2.9 Economic Considerations: Balancing the material and non-material values of an area is always difficult, but especially so in the case of SNSs.

2.10 Seasonal Differences: Some SNSs may be of cultural importance during limited periods, as when the area's values are associated with pilgrimages or festivals at specific times of the year. This may lead to increased demands or peak usage during specific periods that may be incompatible with uses the rest of the year.

2.11 Conflicting Jurisdictions and Integrated Approaches to Management: SNSs may contain cultural resources managed by traditional custodians or government agencies that differ from the natural resource management entity. This may cause conflicts between the management perspectives or philosophies of the different entities, and make integrated approaches to

management an ongoing challenge. The charging and allocation of visitor use fees is often a particularly divisive issue.

2.12 Different Ways of “Knowing”: Modern and traditional management entities often have conflicting views as to the means for acquiring the knowledge needed to make informed decisions on site management. While for modern management agencies science is the basis for acquiring information, traditional custodians may have greater confidence in knowledge and understandings that have been passed down through the ages, or which are acquired through spiritual revelations. Finding ways to balance these different approaches to knowledge and understanding can be extremely challenging.

2.13 Historically Sacred Sites No Longer Associated with Traditional Custodians: Sites which were historically considered sacred (e.g. Machu Picchu, Peru), but which are no longer associated with traditional custodians, present a series of difficulties for management. There are no traditional stakeholders to consult or to include in participatory management schemes. The value of a historically sacred site to modern societies is often difficult to establish and defend, especially when there have been multiple custodians over the centuries.

3. Management and Conservation Opportunities

3.1 Conservation Value: Many SNSs have a high degree of biodiversity and are often important areas for freshwater conservation. Due to access restrictions, they are often found in a natural or near-natural state in virtually all the world’s ecosystems and landscapes, thus serving as sanctuaries and gene pools for rare, endangered and endemic species. In areas suffering from excessive human impact and environmental degradation, SNSs can serve as “indicator sites” for the restoration and rehabilitation of degraded systems. Based on species inventories in SNSs, strategies can be formulated for the reintroduction of native and endemic species in a wider spatial context beyond the area covered by a SNS itself.

3.2 Sustainable Dimension of Conservation: As SNSs are mostly community-based conservation areas, and are usually fully in line with traditional belief systems and values, their protection tends to be more sustainable than established legally protected areas. Traditional custodians and local people often manage SNSs in ways that have proven to be effective over long periods of time.

3.3 Model Sites for Integrated Management: SNSs reflect a more holistic view of human-nature interactions. They integrate cultural, natural and social values in a single management system.

3.4 Model Sites for Community-Based Conservation: Many SNSs can be considered as model sites for participatory conservation strategies and practises. As local people recognize the importance of protecting “their” SNS, such culturally important sites facilitate community participation in overall resource management and conservation.

3.5 Traditional Knowledge: Custodians of SNSs often also perform the function of traditional healers who have intimate knowledge of local plant and animal species. With a plethora of traditional ecological knowledge on ecosystem structure, functioning and dynamics, custodians can be important resource people for overall ecosystem management. The integration of traditional ecological knowledge and modern environmental science can be beneficial for sustainable land management.

3.6 Cultural Identity and Diversity: As carriers of culture-specific worldviews, traditional belief systems and languages, SNSs have tremendous cultural value. Many SNSs are reference areas of cultural, religious and national identity. Cultural rites and practices (including music, song, dance, poetry, folklore), which should be preserved in the context of maintaining cultural diversity, are associated with SNSs. The recognition of SNSs offers a possibility to support endangered and vanishing cultural systems.

3.7 Eco-Tourism: SNSs are both a cultural and natural heritage for local people. At the interface of culture and nature, they can provide important opportunities for eco-tourism development, assisting visitors in experiencing new cultures while also learning about nature. If practised well and managed with a guiding set of ethical principles, eco-tourism linked to SNSs can benefit local people directly, but only if due respect is paid to indigenous and local peoples' value systems.

3.8 Intercultural Dialogue: SNSs can provide a valuable intercultural space to experience human-nature relationships from different cultural perspectives. As such, they can serve to build bridges for intercultural dialogue, understanding, tolerance and peace.

3.9 The Value of the Sacred: To many people, the “sacred nature” of a SNS has an intrinsic value, which should be respected and preserved. There are many shared, fundamental religious/spiritual/philosophical values that exist between different cultures illustrating that cultural and biological diversity are intertwined and reinforced by such unique and long-established relations between people and place as embodied in SNSs.

4. Guidelines for Conservation and Management

The following guidelines are based on basic concepts, which refer both to respect for the environment as well as respect for traditional and spiritual belief systems.

4.1 Recognition: Sacred natural sites should be officially recognized. If sacred natural sites occur within established and legally protected areas, their recognition by government authorities will help to increase the overall protection of the entire area through an added cultural value. Such recognition will, therefore, also benefit the “natural” part of a protected area. The official recognition will instill a sense of pride and ownership for the local population of “their” sacred site. It will also help to safeguard against the desecration of sacred sites by visitors who may not know that they are on sacred lands. Finally, it will contribute to avoiding friction among local communities, conservation agencies and government institutions over land use practices.

Obviously, official recognition of a sacred natural site should only be effected if the custodians of the site, the chiefs and elders and the community at large, agree to and express their willingness for such official recognition. If a sacred natural site occurs outside established and legally protected areas, their official recognition by government authorities can greatly help to increase the overall protection of the environment. The cultural values tied to sacred places could pave the way for the recognition of an area as a sacred monument or landscape, which in turn will reinforce conservation of the environment at large. This will be particularly useful in cases where the natural environment may be subject to transformation into “productive” land uses, such as for mining, logging, agricultural or residential purposes.

4.2 Inclusion: The management of sacred natural sites must involve all relevant stakeholders. Sacred natural sites are not relevant to one or a few individuals only, but to an entire group of people. Many sacred sites are significant to a number of different cultures. Therefore, the entire community for whom the sacred natural site has a specific value must be considered, especially the custodian(s) of the sacred natural site, the tribal chief and elders, but also women and children. In addition, the community which inhabits the wider area and which may not necessarily share the same belief system as the “sacred site community” should also be consulted with regard to the overall usage of the sacred natural site as a special conservation area. Local and national authorities in charge of the overall administration of the area must be involved for the provision of special designations for the conservation of the site if needed. Only the widest possible participation of all stakeholders can ensure the safeguarding of a sacred natural site.

4.3 Voluntary Participation: The conservation of sacred natural sites can only be effected through the voluntary participation of local people. The voluntary participation of local people in conserving sacred natural sites is the fundamental principle on which the integrity of a sacred area relies. It is therefore essential that local people be consulted on their willingness to accept assistance from outside to help strengthen the conservation of their sacred natural site. For fear of a sacred site’s desecration by the uninitiated, local custodians and other members of a community may not always consent to outside assistance on area management. If such fears or concerns exist, they should be fully respected and no pressure whatsoever should be exerted on the local community.

4.4 The Secrecy of the Sacred: No outside pressure should be exerted on local communities to compromise the secrecy of their sacred natural sites. Many sacred natural sites are also “secret” sites to a community at large, or to a specific gender or age group, and their existence cannot be revealed to the uninitiated. As an overriding principle, every precaution should be taken not to exert any pressure on a community that may compel it to disclose information or violate the secrecy of their sacred natural site. When confidential cultural information is shared, all necessary means should be taken to ensure privacy and to prevent disclosure to the public.

4.5 Use of Plant/Animal Species for Ritual Purposes: Selective usage of biotic resources for ritual purposes should be permissible in sacred natural sites if the overall quality of the environment is not jeopardized. While the respect of sacred natural sites is generally beneficial to environmental conservation, some traditional belief systems not only require the conservation of the area but may also require offerings and sacrifices of plant/animal species that live within a

sacred natural site. While such traditions are often a classic source of conflict between protected area managers and local communities, efforts should be made to explore mechanisms by which the selective usage of such plant/animal species may be permissible for ritual purposes (while excluding the use of species for commercial purposes). If such mechanisms prove to be successful, they could also help in building trust and confidence between protected area managers and local communities and may help to reduce land use conflicts over the protected area in general. The selective usage of biotic resources could be spelled out in a “social contract” between all parties concerned. Great attention, however, should be given to avoid any negative impacts on the environment that such selective usage of biotic resources could have on the environment, and priority should be given to retaining the special qualities of the area.

4.6 Conservation Approach: An extended concept of conservation is needed in preserving and managing sacred natural sites. The classical western approach to conservation is based on scientific knowledge, while the traditional approach in sacred natural sites is based on values. In managing sacred natural sites, a rethinking of the most appropriate approach is needed to skillfully develop a sound multicultural system of conservation. The merger of a values-based approach and an approach based on scientific knowledge would seem to be most appropriate when managing sacred natural sites.

4.7 Integrated Management: Sacred natural sites require an integrated management system. Since sacred natural sites combine the preservation of the environment and its biotic resources as well as the living cultural manifestations of local and indigenous communities with their belief systems, a truly integrated management system is needed that must care for both the natural and the cultural space. In this vein, a holistic management scheme must be put into place that satisfies conservation aims, cultural preservation objectives, and expression of spiritual belief systems. Ecologists, cultural anthropologists and traditional practitioners should combine their efforts to ensure integrated management of the natural environment and the socio-cultural specificity of the area.

4.8 Modern Science and Traditional Knowledge: Modern science and traditional knowledge should be fully utilized for the conservation and management of sacred natural sites. Integrated management schemes will have to call upon the use of modern science as well as the use of traditional knowledge. As regards traditional ecological knowledge, many custodians of sacred natural sites have a wealth of knowledge on the biophysical environment in their roles as protectors of sacred species, traditional healers and herbalists, or as decision-makers in the context of the agricultural calendar. While respecting and protecting the intellectual property of indigenous cultures, the sharing of modern science and traditional ecological knowledge should be beneficial for all stake holders in the sustainable management and conservation of a site. Scientists — including conservation ecologists, cultural anthropologists and socio-economists — and custodians of traditional knowledge should be encouraged to work together to ensure the sustainable safeguarding of sacred natural sites.

4.9 Zoning: Buffer zones and transition zones should be created around sacred natural sites and monuments. Many sacred natural sites are subject to encroachment due to population pressure and economic forces. It will be useful to create buffer and transition zones around sacred natural

sites that will enhance the conservation of the sacred site itself while at the same time ensuring alternative incomes for the local population. Ideally, the buffer zone should consist of the same vegetation found at the sacred natural site. In areas that are prone to fire, shelterbelts should be established around the buffer zone. These shelterbelts could also help to “designate” with its boundaries the general area considered to be sacred. The transition zone could be earmarked for economic activities that further help to conserve the site while allowing the generation of incomes for the local population (e.g. cultivation of crops, fruits, firewood production etc.). This zone would help to reduce pressure on the sacred site for economic reasons.

4.10 Consultation: Frequent and regular consultations must be held among local communities, site managers and government officials on the conservation of their sacred natural site. As culture is dynamic, and as traditional belief systems are an expression of culture, so also are traditional belief systems dynamic and likely to change over time. This may entail younger generations no longer sharing the same values as older generations with regard to the preservation and maintenance of a sacred natural site. Also within a community, different views may exist on the continued need for the preservation of a sacred natural site regardless of age (or gender). Therefore, regular consultations must be held within the local communities and with site managers and government officials that will allow them to determine linkages between the status of conservation and the prevailing traditional belief systems. The monitoring and evaluation of such linkages should lead to regular reassessment of the need to reinforce, maintain at the same level, or perhaps reduce the conservation of the sacred natural site.

4.11 Training and Capacity-Building: The study and management of sacred natural sites must be embedded in long-term training and capacity-building programmes. The complexity of sacred natural sites in terms of socio-cultural structure and environmental repercussions necessitates special training and capacity building for protected area managers that can only be obtained through close interaction with the community in charge of a sacred natural site. The experience of protected area managers in handling sacred natural sites should be compiled and disseminated to other site managers, such as through IUCN and UNESCO. Similarly, and if they so wish, traditional custodians of sacred natural sites should also benefit from training in “state of the art” environmental management and conservation techniques.

5. Conclusion

The erosion of genetic resources, the shrinking of wildlife habitats, and the loss of biological diversity are accelerating at unprecedented rates. At the same time, the diversity of cultures with their languages, ways of life and specific belief systems is jeopardized by globalization. As every ecologist knows, diverse systems tend to be more resilient than mono-structured systems. We therefore need to maintain cultural and biological diversity in a sustainable manner. As regards the environment, its conservation can only be sustainable if it finds leverage in local cultures. Sacred natural sites can play a vital role in ensuring the sustainable conservation of both nature and culture.