

# Sacred Natural Sites

## Conservation of Biological and Cultural Diversity

### Key points

- Highlight the importance of sacred natural sites and landscapes as a broad concept in providing ecosystem services, biodiversity conservation and continuation of cultural practices
- Advocate endogenous development approaches and best practices to support custodians and their communities to exercise their conservation commitments
- Create recognition for custodians and communities rights to biocultural conservation in the context of national and international regulatory and legal frameworks.
- All these actions will contribute to halting biodiversity loss and climate change.

### Summary

Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) are considered nodes of biological and cultural diversity that form a global, natural as well as a social conservation network. SNS are not sufficiently understood or recognized, generally under-funded and increasingly under threat.

The Millennium Ecosystems Assessment and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) studies show the earth's biodiversity and ecosystems are seriously threatened and many are beyond or almost at their tipping points. The resilience of interconnected biological and cultural systems underscores the vitally important role local and indigenous communities and faith groups in maintaining Sacred Natural Sites. These areas, as part of territories, land and seascapes, encode important ethical and moral behaviours related to sustainable ways of living and therefore hold very important lessons for wider humanity in the face of global change.

Sacred mountains, rivers, forests and groves, caves, wells and islands are the world's oldest conservation areas known to mankind. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recognises the importance of SNS and has developed the Akwé Kon Guidelines. Several high level symposia have been organised on sacred sites and landscapes by the CBD with UNESCO, FAO and IUCN. The current CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA), including Indigenous Communities Conserved Areas (ICCAs) has made progress to support the recognition, protection, conservation and restoration of sacred natural sites. Yet, their potential should also be made more explicit in future refinements of the programme.



Custodians and supporters at the 2008 Custodian Dialogue (see Custodian Statement 2008 in Verschuuren et al. 2010).

Custodians of SNS bear unique responsibilities within local, indigenous and religious communities. They are also guardians of biological diversity and knowledgeable about healing, livestock breeding, plant diversification, agricultural cycles and systems. They play a vital role in the governance of their community and their relationship to the earth. Before all, many custodians are shamans, monks, ascetics, religious and spiritual leaders and keepers of unique cultural and spiritual wisdom and traditions. They contribute to universal values that maintain human relationships with the earth.



NATURAL JUSTICE



**SNS, a global conservation network**

Today a network of undetermined magnitude and importance in terms of biocultural diversity spans the globe: a network of nodes of sacred natural sites (SNS). These sites are found in every country, also in Europe and USA, though some are more acknowledged than others. Although overlap exists, SNS make a significant contribution to extending the global conservation network. Approximately 80 % of the world biodiversity and 95% of the world's cultural diversity is found on indigenous lands that constitute 20% of the earth's surface (7% of which is legally owned by indigenous peoples, but not necessarily included nor recognised in conservation designations (Sobrevila 2008 ; UN Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2009). An additional 7% of the earth's surface is governed by mainstream religion's organisations to which over 80% of the earth's populations is known to adhere (O'Brien & Palmer, 2007). Protected areas cover around 12%, and according to some estimates Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas possibly would add up to an approximate 20% (Chape et al., 2008). As these designations may overlap, SNS networks exist throughout and beyond these designations and serve as a vehicle for nature conservation (Montserrat Statement, in Mallarach & Papayannis, ed. 2007).

**Biodiversity benefits of SNS**

SNS have drawn attention from the conservation movement as reservoirs of biodiversity (Dudley et al 2005; 2010). They provide for the protection of biodiversity but also for continuation of cultural practices and as such provide many unique conservation benefits:

- SNS in indigenous societies have especially trained custodians who are responsible for the guardianship of the sites and related customs and practices (Custodian statement, 2008 in Verschuuren et al. 2010).
- SNS protect a wide variety of habitats (including coasts, agricultural landscapes, forests, mountains etc.) in all continents, but Antarctica (Dudley et al.

**Policy recommendation to the CBD**

Sacred natural sites have to be fully integrated in the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas through the following strategies:

- Recognise and support custodians' and communities' contributions to conserving biological diversity,
- Strengthen protective measures and application of the precautionary principle and Free and Prior informed Consent (FPIC),
- Dialogue with and give support to the custodians of SNS from the indigenous and faith communities to develop protective cross-sectoral policies and legislation that properly recognises the values and customs which their SNS and landscapes embody,
- Best practice management and policy guidance based on sound knowledge of custodians and communities, with support from policy makers, conservation experts, lawyers and academics,
- Create spaces for of policy dialogue, from the local to the international level, about protection, management and reconciling sacred and other values of SNS,
- Recognise SNS as being suitable indicators of biocultural diversity and traditional knowledge from custodians under article 8j, 10c and in the ABS negotiations where appropriate,
- Improved understanding of and support for indigenous and local community-led endogenous and academic action research to demonstrate the biological and cultural diversity values of SNS, their resilience mechanisms, their governance structure and how they can adapt to ecological and socioeconomic changes,
- Develop guidelines for researching, documenting and inventorying SNS that respect fundamental rights of indigenous peoples and religious freedom.
- Promote public awareness of the unique contribution of SNS to human culture and biodiversity conservation,
- Support the creation of a cultural appropriate Fund for SNS and develop solutions for sustainable finance.

- 2005).
- SNS occur in all IUCN categories of protected areas (Verschuuren et al., 2007).
- Sacred groves provide biodiversity benefits to many local communities and indigenous peoples in the face of climate

- SNS provide powerful incentives for mutual respect and conservation (Aanaar/Inari Statement, Mallarach et al., in press).

**Threats to SNS**

Globally, SNS are increasingly under

**Recognizing SNS and territories as valuable to biodiversity conservation could support custodians efforts to reduce loss of culture and nature.**

- change (Wild et al. in press).
- Many local and indigenous communities understand SNS and landscapes to be interdependent networks or systems, which maintain the resilience and integrity of the sacred territories in which they are embedded (Custodian Statement, 2008 in Verschuuren et al 2010; Dobson and Mamyev 2010.).

pressure from intensifying contemporary development activities and social change (Schomaker et al 2008), in particular materialism and secularisation. Although to indigenous people and mainstream religions the whole earth is sacred, the SNS networks are especially sensitive (Barcelona dialogues statement, 2008). Examples of threats are: tourism, industrial forestry,

infrastructure development, extractive and energy industries, large scale agriculture, industrialisation, urbanisation, inappropriate archaeological research, inappropriate representation by national museums, cultural and religious subordination, neoliberal market approaches. Many SNS are hotspots of biocultural diversity (Verschuuren et al, 2010b). As most threats to SNS affect both cultural and biological values (Persic and Martin, 2008), they weaken the resilience and interconnectedness of humans with nature.

**Legal recognition**

In many cases, there is a clear lack of support for communities and custodians to exercise their traditional cultural, spiritual and religious responsibilities that they are entitled to



Gagxanul Volcano (3772m), named Santa María in the Spanish language, is an active volcano in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, close to the city of Quetzaltenango. A large area of the mountain is heavily forested with cloud forest and has been declared a protected area. This has helped to secure the cultural and spiritual use of this sacred natural site which contains a pilgrimage from the surrounding villages through the forests onto the mountain's summit.

**Best practice guidelines and precedent**

Conservationists, academics and lawyers should work with faith communities indigenous and local peoples to conduct appropriate and culturally sensitive forms of research and respectful, reciprocal intercultural work to support other cultures and faith groups to help conserve their SNS and landscapes. Examples of guidelines developed so far include guidance for conservation managers, planners and decision makers on SNS and landscapes has been developed in the international arena:

- **CBD: Akwé: Kon Voluntary Guidelines** for the Conduct of Cultural, Environmental and Social Impact Assessment Regarding Developments Proposed to Take Place on, or which are Likely to Impact on, Sacred Sites and on Lands and Waters Traditionally Occupied or Used by Indigenous and Local Communities.
- **IUCN/UNESCO: Best Practice Guidelines No.16** “Sacred natural Sites, Guidelines for Protected Area Managers” (Wild and McLeod, 2008).
- **The Delos Initiative:** Focusing on guidance for SNS in technologically developed countries, has published various proceedings and statements containing lessons learned from the initiatives work (Mallarach & Papayannis, eds. 2007; a Papayannis & Mallarach, eds. 2009).
- **Sacred Natural Sites; Conserving Nature and Culture** (Verschuuren et al, 2010). The research for the book also informs this Issues Paper and contains a detailed action plan for work on SNS it also includes a Custodians statement.
- **The Custodians Statement** is issued by custodians of SNS from four continents who participated in a dialogue organised by IUCN CSVPA. The statement voices issues of importance to safeguarding SNS (Custodian statement 2008 in Verschuuren et al 2010,).
- **UNEP-WCMC’s ICCA Registry** can include SNS in order to ensure their appropriate recognition by policy makers and conservation planners. Custodians and communities choose, if, and the degree to which their information is made available to the database and to the public.
- **CBD’s Code of Ethical Conduct** to ensure respect for the cultural and intellectual heritage of indigenous and local communities relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity (under consideration by the CBD in 2010).
- **Community Protocols**, when part of an endogenous process in which communities outline their aspirations for well-being are labelled Biocultural Community Protocols (Jonas & Bavikatte 2010), to facilitate an interface between their traditional ways of life, their rights and external entities such as private companies and governments (under consideration by the CBD in 2010).

rights under national and international law. Free and Prior Informed Consent, the right to self determination, right of religious freedom and of confidentiality of sacred sites and related knowledge, would be key concepts to such support and it is therefore essential that they be implemented and further championed by the CBD.

**Challenges in documentation and registration**

Most SNS are guarded by their custodians who determine the code of conduct for these places. Indigenous custodians often receive such teachings from their ancestral traditions, which are born of their territories. Religious custodians derive conduct from their spiritual teachings but are often also institutionalised and hence closely related to formal governance structures. Whilst respecting secrecy and protocol, local custodians and their (religious) communities can assist with documentation of their SNS but for any such development, Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) should be exercised, respecting the rights of self determination, religious freedom and cultural continuity including the right to refuse action.

Central documentation of SNS in local, national or global databases or registries could aid to their protection and management if they help to empower their custodians and communities and the process is clearly agreed by them in order not to undermine their knowledge, rights and practices. There is a need to create

understanding and respect for different cultural and legal systems and worldviews as well as a responsibility to recognise the dangers in exposing information which can enable unscrupulous interests. Synergies, agreements and procedures must be established on this basis between rights holders of land and knowledge and external or governmental organisations and institutes involved responsible for mapping and in designations, recognition, registration and data management.

### Need for a policy review and national law

To date, a review of existing laws and policies (international and national, plus local political realities) that assist with the conservation of SNS and landscapes is still lacking. The review should include existing rights, but also of those laws that contravene with laws that help protect SNS. The review should also address gaps,

- 1989,
- World Heritage Convention - Cultural Landscapes (1992),
- UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere's (MAB) Seville Strategy for Biosphere Reserves (1995),
- UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001),
- UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003),
- UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions 2005
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP; 2007)
- Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), article 8j., 10c & Akwé Kon Guidelines,
- The Ramsar convention on wise use of wetlands (1971). Resolutions VIII.19 and IX.21.
- Declaration on the rights of Pacha

## Sacred Natural Sites form a global, biological as well as a social conservation network which is largely unrecognized, underfunded and under threat

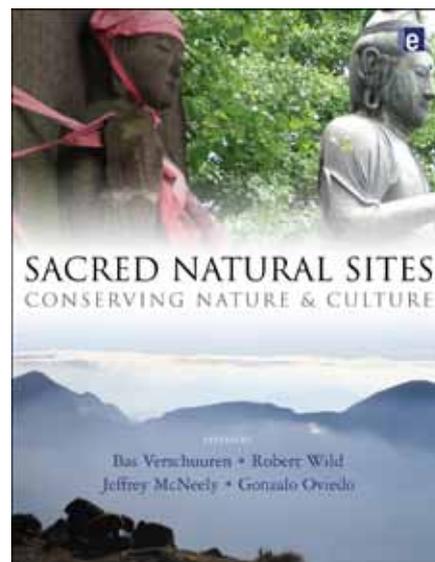
strengths and weaknesses (e.g. community/nation specific) as well as implementation of existing rights and provide specific legal/rights-based strategies for the protection of SNS and landscapes. Formal recognition that sacred sites form an interconnected and interdependent network is also lacking. Current international treaties that can support the protection of SNS and their custodians are:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948),
- International Labour Organization Convention (No. 169) concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, adopted

Mama (Mother Earth) (2010),

### SNS Alliance

An alliance with a wider network of traditional knowledge holders, conservationists, academics and others at this time of growing threats can be supportive of the protection of SNS and landscapes if it does not undermine the capacity of these systems to protect themselves and they maintain their integrity. Such alliance as well as individual researchers should, in addition to FPIC, not only follow research protocols applicable to their discipline but also contribute to creating new protocols that are in line with the wishes of the custodians and other best available information.



“Sacred Natural Sites; Conserving Nature and Culture” (Verschuuren et al, 2010). The research for the book informs this policy brief and contains a detailed action plan for work on SNS it also includes a Custodians Statement.

The CBD can play a key role in supporting this alliance and assist with developing protocols that need to be established to assure equity and respect for diversity and synergies of – cultural, religious and legal principles for example under article 8j. In addition a better understanding is needed of the biological and cultural diversity values of SNS, their resilience mechanisms, their governance structure and how they can adapt to ecological and socioeconomic changes. In return this can help to effectively mobilise religious and spiritual motivations for stewardship and custodianship of SNS custodians and faith leaders in order to motivate deliberate and mindful protection of biodiversity.

### References

The references in this paper including a more elaborate version of this Issues Paper can be obtained from [www.csvpa.org](http://www.csvpa.org)

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