

Culture for Nature

Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas



Photo by Gilles Havik Buddha statue in a garden.

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Cultural and Spiritual Values
of Protected Areas

Specialist Group of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas

Editorial

- Radhika Borde & Jason Brown

Dear Friends,

Next year marks the 100 year anniversary of the United States Parks Service, which has been called by documentarian Ken Burns, “America’s best idea.” This idea has been spread throughout the world by conservation, preservation and wilderness advocates. In her excellent book *Pilgrimage to the National Parks*, Lynn Ross-Bryant recounts how the idea of protected nature areas played a powerful role in the formation of the US-American identity. National Parks became the Sacred Natural Sites of America. Yet ironically, for many Native and First Peoples, the US’s love affair with protected nature areas was founded on the expropriation of their ancestral and traditional territories. For many First Peoples, their landscapes are neither ‘sacred’, ‘natural’ nor ‘sited’. By this we mean that they are not easily compartmentalized into sacred and profane; they do not conform to what Westerners often mean when we think of ‘natural’; and they certainly do not always fit into the convenient bounds of a ‘site.’ For most of our planet’s First Peoples, sacred landscapes are the world, visible and invisible, where we dwell among beings and forces that exert powerful wills for both good and ill.

As CSVPA members continue the important work of engaging government and resource management professionals in recognizing and appropriately managing the sacred sites of our precious planet, and making our work on promoting the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in protected areas more publically visible through publication and internet presence; let us keep in mind this sometimes overlooked ontological disconnect. This disconnect is one that informs the whole idea of ‘protected nature areas’. This is a concept that can be taken to

imply that certain bounded areas or sites need to be set aside for protection because they are aesthetic, they possess high biodiversity value etc. and that (arguably) as a corollary, nature found outside these areas can be exploited for the economic benefit of humans, as long as such exploitation does not have the side-effect of proving detrimental to human health.

Of course, the argument that nature must not be put to use at all is one that is hard to make. What may be needed is a reconsideration of the dichotomous thinking behind the idea that certain natural areas are worthy of being set aside for recreation, worship and appreciation, and that this somehow justifies natural resource exploitation fuelled by a hard-nosed profit motive, in other areas. Perhaps, what is needed is for protected areas to be re-conceptualized as places where people can change their attitudes to nature in general, rather than places where people can take refuge from the collective damage we are causing our planet.

Designating a natural feature or area as sacred, does not necessarily mean that we cause it less harm, as can be seen from the example of the pollution of the sacred Ganges River in India. Protecting a specific natural area, does not mean that nature as a whole is harmed less, as can be seen from so many examples in the world’s industrialized countries. As a group, perhaps it is important that we allow the complexity of these issues to be present in our minds, as we go about working on our many worthy projects, in which themes of nature and culture intersect.

This edition of the Newsletter features several provocative ideas, but it starts with an update from CSVPA’s

co-chairs Edwin Bernbaum and Bas Verschuuren, and an overview of training modules and the new IUCN Best Practice Guidelines. We see that CSVPA is moving toward a greater focus on the broader cultural and spiritual significance of nature.

In Manisha Gutman’s article we learn that the sacred landscape can be dangerous. And yet, again and again, ecologists are finding out just how important large carnivores are to ecological health. Learning to dwell in sacred places is also about learning to manage risk and our fear.

Gilles Havik offers a deeply biocentric approach to the question of whether landscapes themselves prefer to be left alone, or to be kept company by human beings. Gilles offers more questions than answers, but raises a good point: there is no one size fits all solution to managing sacred sites. Some have been occupied by humans for thousands of years, others left relatively un-disturbed. While in the West we might assume that the less disturbed a place, the more sacred, members of CSVPA know that this is certainly not the case.

Minoo Hassani Esfehiani’s work brings to light the fascinating case of Qeshm, the largest island in the Persian Gulf. Here is a wonderful example, of how the rhythms of a place have woven themselves into the very fabric of a people through their livelihoods, craft and festivals.

We hope you enjoy this issue of the Newsletter, and invite your responses to this editorial, and future submissions.

Yours,

Jason Brown, Radhika Borde

Update from the Co-Chairs

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Picking up speed on our work plan!

Since the World Parks Congress in Sydney, Australia, in November of last year, the CSVPA has stepped up its commitments to its workplan significantly – in particular, projects that came out of workshops that the CSVPA conducted at the Congress.

Work on the development of training modules and best practice guidelines on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in protected area management and governance has continued and is well on its way. Engagement with the World Heritage Programme has led to several desk reviews of nominations, monitoring of existing sites and other projects with CSVPA members involved. Members have also represented the CSVPA and its work at several international conferences and workshops, and a new website where people interested in the project on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature can share experiences and knowledge, is currently under development.

Along with the new website, the contours of a network that offers support for the development of the best practices guidelines, training module and other follow-up activities

are increasingly becoming visible. Recently at the International Congress of Conservation Biology (ICCB) in Montpellier, France, Josep-Maria Mallarach and Bas Verschuuren have taken the work a step further in the spirit of fostering a long-term project. Based on the feedback and experience from WPC Sydney they identified four model training modules and developed a strategy for further engagement of interested people and organisations that might benefit from or contribute to the work.

The first fruits from earlier work along these lines also appear to be ripening, as a promising collaboration with the German Ministry of Nature Conservation, the IUCN World Heritage Programme and the IUCN Programme on Protected Areas is leading up to a series of international workshops to further develop the best practice guidelines and training modules.

At the ICCB in Montpellier, collaborations with the Society on Conservation Biology's Working Group on Religion and Conservation have led to Bas and Josep-Maria presenting the work of our Specialist Group. In addition, both CSVPA members took part in a round table discussion on the opportunities for collaboration between conservation and faith with representatives of various organizations, including the Vatican Pontifical Council on Peace and Justice.

Earlier this year Ed Bernbaum was asked to deliver a plenary presentation on "The Spiritual and Cultural Significance of Nature: Inspiring Connections between

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People and Parks" at the Science for Parks, Parks for Science conference at the University of California at Berkeley – the first major event kicking off the 100th anniversary of the US National Park Service. The presentation included a report on the CSVPA project initiated in Sydney on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in protected area management and governance. Ed's talk can be viewed online.

Finally with the World Conservation Congress in Hawaii ahead of us, CSVPA is aiming to make a solid contribution to further develop and present its work on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in protected area management and governance. We are interested in developing sessions, training workshops and learning events for which we will need partners and supporters. Let us hear from you if you are interested to contribute help or collaborate!



Photo courtesy of The Gaia Foundation. Sacred forest in Ethiopia.

What's More Sacred, the Tended or the Wild?

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When talking about sacred sites in nature, people make a distinction between sites that have been kept unharmed and sites that are maintained, enhanced or even designed by human interference.

Ask a Winti sacred leader from Suriname if you may trespass a sacred ground and the answer most likely will be: 'no, you would upset the spirits'. In the Winti view, the spirits of the forest are housed in their sacred natural sites, and the more you disturb them, the more you damage the fragile balance between man and nature. They are not the only people who ensure that areas remain restricted in order to preserve their sacredness. Similar beliefs exist among indigenous tribes all around the world. Even forest managers in modernized countries sometimes restrict passage into an area in order to preserve its pristine value.

Such beliefs seem to contrast with the equally omnipresent idea that the sacredness of a site exists mainly in the eye of the beholder. More precisely, some believe that sacredness is expressed during the worship at a site by the one who appreciates its divine qualities. The Byzantine monks, known for their deep respect, care and responsibility for their natural surroundings, are a vivid example of that idea. And what about the concept of the Japanese garden, where nature is shaped into miniature ideal landscapes in order to facilitate the act of meditation and contemplation?

This philosophy certainly also seems embedded in the views of pilgrims and other travellers who regularly visit sacred sites in order to stay in touch with the divine. Some of them would say that without regular worship, a holy land's sacredness could slowly fade.

Could it be that just like people, some sites like to be visited often, while others prefer to be left alone? Is it the role of sacred leaders to know which site prefers what? Is a

sentient approach appropriate here, a different form of communication that allows us to find out what the site's spirits would prefer?

Or would that very attempt be an arrogant intrusion into a sacred domain, and should we humans know our humble place by accepting there are things we will never know? Should we sense that our ability to experience and interact with the sacred is limited by the fact that we are only human? Are nature and mankind of equal value or is one of them somehow more divine? If we are honest with ourselves, who is caring for whom?

Such questions are no doubt at the root of peoples' relationship with sacred land. It may be wisest not to distinguish between different types of sacredness in different types of land, and respect all of them in equal measure. But then again, our own survival is at stake here. How would we know how to treat the land, if not by being closely involved in its evolution? Maybe sacredness is like fire: we need it to stay warm, but if we get too close we might get burned.



The Sanctity of Shared Space: Leopard Conservation

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Much before the Indian government declared protected areas, there were no separate spaces for wild animals including tigers and lions who roamed this landscape freely, even in the minds of the people.

There was reverence for wildlife and people shared living space with them. Tribal cultures deified large wild cats and Waghoba, the tiger deity, was to be appeased through ritual sacrifice. The depiction of wild animals in Hindu mythology spoke of a co-existence rather than of domination. Hindu deities are often seen riding an animal who is their 'vehicle' or vahana. The vehicle is not subservient to the deity rather it most accurately represents the energy of the particular deity and magnifies it. So while the tiger as a vehicle may represent fierce forces, the swan represents grace and beauty, the elephant patience and longevity and the mouse quick wittedness and sharpness of mind.

Yet if we come back to the most basic tenet of sharing space with a wild animal, we need to explore the psychology of fear. Fear creates reverence but sharing space and prolonged observation also increases understanding and lessens this fear. Populations that live in close proximity understand the limits of the animal and respect these, often converting them into codes of conduct and rituals of worship.

Vidya Athreya, a wildlife research scientist and expert in human-wildlife conflict, points out that the same process of observation and understanding also seems to work for the animals who may understand what to expect from the humans they live amongst. The tolerance of the Indian culture towards wildlife has allowed it to conserve populations of four large wild cats – the tiger, the lion, the leopard and the snow leopard. Considering that India is densely populated it is surprising that even though interface between humans and wildlife is a common occurrence, these wild cats have survived, sharing the Indian landscape.

In sharing space, both parties recognize the power the other wields and respects it. From the human perspective, loss of livestock due to attack by wildlife is minimal as compared to death by diseases, and many rural communities tolerate this minimal loss, often acknowledging that wildlife has as much right to survive as humans do.

Recently India declared dolphins to be 'non-human persons' recognizing their high level of intelligence and prohibiting their 'use' for recreation. This path-breaking move hit the core of Indian sentiment around other species. In a study on wolves, social scientists found that although pastoralists lose livestock to wolf attacks, some of them consider the wolf to be a 'brother' – who helps them wean out weak livestock. This manner of 'relating' is typically Indian. Relating another anecdote, Vidya shares how a village in Junnar prevented the forest department from taking away a leopard that had fallen in a well, saying that it was a cub and

its mother would be around, and they forced the forest department to release it in the same location it was found in.

In the present day scenario, as shared space is being reduced, these attitudes are fast changing. Fear results in the desire to control, either by elimination or relocation. Wildlife and forest management is not informed by scientific study and landscapes are transformed without understanding the ecology where once wildlife thrived.

Religion could possibly create empathy amongst people through a revival of traditions that respect and worship wild animals. While reverence at the spiritual level does not necessarily mean protection/reverence in reality, these processes might provide the people a way of including the animals in their cultural space, says Vidya. So little is known of these processes and it is important that they are studied before they are forgotten altogether.

The codes of conduct prescribed by some of these traditions either advocated the inviolability of wild spaces or taught people about the behavior patterns of these animals so that the fear of sharing space was overcome. The recognition of the intelligence of wildlife is also crucial to the perception of the value of wildlife to human living.

In the Indian context, Vidya notes that often political leaders who come from rural backgrounds and have had firsthand experience of living with wildlife are more informed in the policies they make. In a country where religious beliefs affect policy making, it is important to highlight this aspect as well.



Photo courtesy of Josep-Maria Mallarach. First Session of the Bethlehem conference.

CSVPA at International Conferences

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International Conference on Religious Tourism: Fostering Sustainable Socio-economic Development

The United Nations World Tourist Organisation and the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Palestine organised an International Conference on Religious Tourism: Fostering sustainable socio-economic development in host communities. It was held on the 15th and 16th of June in the town of Bethlehem. Josep-Maria Mallarach, CSVPA Steering Committee Member represented IUCN at the conference.

The political significance of the event is that it was the first international conference organised by an agency of the United Nations in Palestine, after UNESCO recognised the state of Palestine in 2014. Soon after, UNESCO included in the list of World Heritage Sites, the Church of the Nativity of Bethlehem and the Cultural Landscape of Battir, south of Jerusalem, as being in danger. Additional cultural landscapes have also been included in the tentative list of World Heritage Sites of the State of Palestine. For this reason, two advisory bodies of the World Heritage Programme were present at the conference. Dr. Yonca Kösebay Erkan, represented the International Scientific Committee on Places of Religion and Ritual (PRERICO).

Despite the serious difficulties that Palestine is experiencing, the conference was a great success and very well attended. It included speakers from sixteen countries, and participants from some forty countries. The Conference was structured around four topics: 1) Global trends shaping religious tourism and the development of competitive products and experiences; 2) Challenges and opportunities for the development and promotion of religious tourism routes; 3) Innovative approaches to

tourism management at religious sites, balancing heritage preservation and tourism development; and 4) Promoting the participation of host communities and enhancing the socio-economic benefits of religious tourism at local level.

The second day of the conference included four sessions with dialogues among four to six speakers and one moderator for each session. The representatives of IUCN and ICOMOS participated at the first session: ‘Understanding Religious Tourism: Motivations and Trends’, bringing in a global approach, and criteria for conserving heritage and providing quality experiences. At the end of the conference, a draft of the conclusions was read, which is under revision at the moment. It is expected that the final conclusions will be soon available on the web pages of the WTO.

International Congress for Conservation Biology: Choosing New Paths for Conservation

The Society for Conservation Biology in collaboration with Agropolis international and the French Foundation for Research on Biodiversity, hosted the 27th International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB) and the 4th European Congress for Conservation Biology (ECCB), August 2-6, 2015 in Montpellier, France.

The joint meeting brought together conservation professionals from over 100 countries to address conservation challenges and present new findings, initiatives, methods, tools and opportunities in conservation science and practice. It featured a symposium devoted to *Exploring outcomes of interacting religions, spiritualities and conservation communities*, followed by a round table on the same topic, chaired by Fabrizio Frascaroli. Bas Verschuuren and Josep-Maria Mallarach, from the CSVPA Steering Committee participated in the session and round table.



Photo by Majid Yassini. Chah-kuh geosite in Qeshm Geo-park

Qeshm Geo-park (QGP), Iran

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I was born in an ancient city in the west of Iran, very close to a famous ancient monument called Bisotun (521 B.C.). As a child, my Father took me there regularly. Each time I touched the rocks, and gazed at those ancient monuments, I felt something strange in my heart; the presence of my ancestors' souls around the site.

As a child, I could imagine the people in Bisotun, from thousands of years ago, while they were practicing rituals by the mountain to value the spirituality associated with four sacred natural elements; water, fire, air and soil. In the world of childhood, Bisotun was a place beyond its prehistoric caves, rock carvings, tall trees, springs, and beautiful natural landscapes. However, even now that many years have

passed, I still feel the same about Bisotun which is now identified as a World Cultural Heritage Site.

There are numerous natural sites across Iran which are tightly, and deeply associated with the cultural and spiritual values of the local communities who have lived there over time. This was the major reason that I decided to go back to my country from New Zealand in order to conduct my PhD research fieldwork in a globally known region in Iran, the Persian Gulf, with its specific cultural and natural features. My project is an attempt to study the relationship between the three concepts of culture, protected areas, and tourism. More specifically, my thesis is titled, 'The Role of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Ecotourism Development in Natural Protected Areas (NPA)'.

Currently, I am involved in the last stages of the empirical phase of the project, which commenced in Qeshm Geo-park (QGP) – the first Geo-park in the Middle-East. The national protected area of QGP is located in Qeshm Island, the biggest Island in the Persian Gulf. The Gulf is identified

...Qeshm Geo-park provides the world with a magnificent example of the relationship between nature and human endeavour.

as one of the most culturally rich seas in the world, and is recognized as a significant location in the study of human history and culture because the oldest civilizations in the world have developed along the Persian Gulf.

Almost all the criteria of ICH from traditional natural knowledge (TNK) to performing arts have been identified in Qeshm Geo-park. For example, 'Traditional skills of building and sailing Iranian Lenj boats, Qeshm Island' was added to UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2011.

Additionally, Qeshm Geo-park provides the world with a magnificent example of the relationship between nature and human endeavour.



Photo by Majid Yassini. Birds near the mangrove forest in Qeshm Geo-park

Centuries before the arrival of Islam, Iranians respected and valued water as a sacred natural element. Following this cultural and spiritual belief, the local communities in Qeshm Geo-park created different traditions and customs related to the sustainable use of water – how not to waste it, and how to store it for times when they would need more. Consequently, the water supply of villages has been usually secure over time, even in seasons of drought.

Similarly, the same is true for the mangrove forests in the north of the park. Through TNK and religious beliefs, locals have successfully preserved most parts of the natural resources of the mangroves, and have protected its valuable wildlife. This

is because traditionally, mangroves have been a critical source of food.

Women of Qeshm Island produce elegant artistic handicrafts such as embroidery, and clothes for daily use and traditional events. QGP spends nearly half of the year in various types of festivities. There are many Indigenous celebrations such as the Fishing Festival, and the Date Festival, which are inspired by the various natural phenomena of the island. The festivals include praying, singing, and dancing, and are aimed at reminding the local community of the importance of natural resources such as the sea and trees in their life.

On the other hand, there are many legends, tales, and even superstitions

that are mainly associated with some of the heritage inside the park. These oral traditions have kept many people away from the sites over the years, protecting them. Some animal species, especially birds in the park, have been protected based on a set of cultural values, since they are believed to be the carriers of good or bad luck. Qeshm Geo-park is a famous winter eco-tourism destination in Iran, and receives large numbers of domestic as well as international visitors every year.

News & Events

Culture-nature Linkages at World Heritage Sites

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A large number of World Heritage sites are recognized purely for their cultural values and others for their natural elements, but there are many sites where the cultural and natural elements are interdependent. There is a growing understanding that nature-culture interlinkages are far more prevalent than previously thought. Issue 75 of World Heritage magazine (April 2015), reviews recent findings in the field, takes stock of ongoing work, and charts out ways to work better with both nature and culture together. Among the World Heritage sites featured in this issue are the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras, the Socotra Archipelago (Yemen), the Rio Abiseo National Park (Peru) and sites in Europe and North America.

World Heritage is a quarterly, full-colour magazine devoted to sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, and their conservation. It targets a wide international readership, particularly the ever-growing number of people sensitive to heritage and environmental issues, but also experts in the field. It is published in English, French and Spanish, and features in-depth articles written by experts on cultural and natural sites.

Full page version of issue 75:
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/review/75/>

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Sacred Seeds Sanctuaries Network: Call for New Sanctuaries

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It is recognized that custodians of sacred natural sites hold knowledge about the botanical resources of these natural areas. Many sacred sites contain medicinal plants not found elsewhere. To preserve biodiversity and plant knowledge, the Sacred Seeds Sanctuary network was formed. This network provides support for the conservation of these sanctuaries or gardens, through publicity, natural resource management advice, and training opportunities. If you know of a potential sanctuary or garden, please consider applying to join the network.

We will be holding an ethnobotany training workshop October 1-2, 2015 at the Goldenseal Sanctuary in Rutland, Ohio, USA. In the future, we hope to hold similar workshops in Ethiopia, India, Rwanda, and Ghana. Sanctuary members can attend the workshop at a very reduced rate.

For more information, contact Alison Ormsby, consultant (ormsbyaa@gmail.com), or Susan Leopold, Executive Director, United Plant Savers & Director of the Sacred Seeds Sanctuary (susan@unitedplantsavers.org). Register.

8th Ecosystem Services Partnership World Conference

9th-13th November

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The 8th World Conference of the Ecosystem Services Partnership (ESP) will be held in Stellenbosch, South Africa, 9-13 November 2015. In addition to around 45 sessions organised by the ESP working groups on a wide range of topics, the conference will focus on the use of ecosystem services “for Nature, People and Prosperity”, including its role in Conservation, Livelihoods and Business. The conference will be held at the Spier Conference Centre & Wine Farm near Cape Town.

For information on the conference:
<http://www.espconference.org>

For information on ESP:
www.es-partnership.org

Archipelago of Hope: Stories from the Edge of our Changing Planet

A new book - in progress - from journeys amongst Indigenous communities around the world, innovating and implementing creative solutions to the many challenges of climate change. Though culturally and ecologically fitting to their specific circumstances, their responses are ultimately relevant to the rest of us.

Read more and support this exciting new publication:

<http://www.gleb-raygorodetsky.com/archipelago-of-hope-book/>

News & Events

Revival: Celebrating Customary Law and Sacred Natural Sites in Bale, Ethiopia

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'Revival', a film from MELCA Ethiopia and The Gaia Foundation, follows a meeting of African Sacred Natural Site Custodians in the stunning highlands of Bale, Ethiopia. They gathered to celebrate MELCA Ethiopia's ten years of work to revive Sacred Natural Sites and customary law in Ethiopia, to exchange knowledge, stories and experiences.

Featuring interviews with Sacred Natural Site Custodians and Earth Jurisprudence practitioners, and with vibrant footage from Ethiopia's unique highland ecology, Revival takes us to the heart of efforts to regenerate biocultural diversity and restore a respectful relationship with Earth in Africa.

Watch the film at: <https://youtu.be/6AFvvK7MajQ>

Religion, Science and the Future

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The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture is pleased to announce additional details and opportunities regarding its 10th Anniversary Conference with the theme "Religion, Science and the Future".

Previously announced featured speakers include: Environmental Philosopher, J. Baird Callicott; Political Theorist, Daniel Deudney; Evolutionary Biologist, David Sloan Wilson; Native American scholar/activist, Winona LaDuke; Religion Scholar, Kocku von Stuckrad; Environmental Historian, Tim LeCain; Religion Scholar, Graham Harvey; Potawatomi Philosopher, Kyle Powls Whyte.

For more information on the society see www.religionandnature.com/society

The Salish Sea Spiritual Ecology Alliance (SSSEA) plans second annual 'Convergence'

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After a successful turn out last year for the Spiritual Ecologies and New Cosmologies Convergence, the newly formed Salish Sea Spiritual Ecology Alliance (SSSEA), based in Vancouver, BC, is planning its second Convergence. This year the group will focus on creating more of a workshop style. As 'Spiritual Ecologists' SSSEA seeks to stand witness to both the pain and beauty of the world, through engaged inter-spiritual dialogue and active solidarity with ecological and climate justice movements.

Planned as a series of four workshop sessions, this year's Convergence will take participants on a pilgrimage through the domains of Ocean, Forest, Farm and City. Entitled 'Place-based Activism and Spiritual Practice', we will focus on grappling with the problems and passions that activate us, and the spiritual practices that sustain us. Sessions will occur on four separate days in September and October. Each session will engage with the issues facing each domain, grapple with the grief we feel at loss, and seek entry points for hope. We will explore strategies that work, and spiritual practices that energize and recharge us.

Details and registration at: www.spiritualecologyalliance.org

RECENT PUBLICATIONS shared by CSVPA members

Hamilton, L.S. and Benally, J. 2015. 'Can Metaphysical Values Protect Mountain Wildlands from Development Damage?' IN USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMRS-P-74.

Skandrani, Z. and Prévot, A-C. 2015. 'Beyond green-planning political orientations: Contrasted public policies and their relevance to nature perceptions in two European capitals.' Environmental Science & Policy. 10:52, pp. 140-149.

'Science and Stewardship to Protect and Sustain Wilderness Values: Tenth World Wilderness Congress Symposium; 2013, 4-10 October, Salamanca, Spain.' Proceedings RMRSP-74.



Photo by Majid Yassini. Indoor wall painting by locals, Qeshm Geo-park.

For enquiries or contributions to CSVPA *Culture for Nature*
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For more articles, discussion and the latest news relating to Cultural and Spiritual
Values of Protected Areas, please visit the CSVPA website - www.csvpa.org