

Conserving sacred natural sites in Estonia

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Introduction

In 2008, the Estonian Ministry of Culture approved the national conservation plan 'Sacred Natural Sites in Estonia: Study and Maintenance 2008 – 2012'. The conservation plan indicates that nowhere else in Western Europe have sacred natural sites (SNSs) and the traditions associated with them been preserved so well and vividly as in Estonia. SNSs are a distinguishing and valuable part of Estonian native culture, forming a part of Estonians' national identity.

According to mainly historical data, there are approximately 2500 SNSs known in Estonia. Of these, about 500

are sacred groves (*hiis*) covering larger areas. According to regional fieldwork data gathered so far, the total number of SNSs is likely to be as high as 7000. This is heritage of great significance, helping to maintain both biological and spiritual diversity in Estonia.

Sacred natural sites in Estonia

Even though the total area of Estonia is only 47 000 square kilometres, it includes a number of unique native linguistic and cultural regions. There are regional differences also in the types of SNSs. For example, stones and trees that have been used for healing

< A grove-basswood, West-Viru county. When praying or thanking gods, healing or asking blessing for marriage a ribbon or yarn is given as an oblation to the sacred trees.

purposes are more common in western Estonia, and groves for communal prayers are more common in northern and western parts of the country. The unique funeral tradition of cross-trees has only survived in southeast Estonia.

Sacred groves (*hiied*; *hiis*) are probably the best known and popular of the SNSs in Estonia. The users of a sacred grove have historically been the inhabitants of a village, sometimes of a parish or county. There can be found many different traditions, beliefs and folklore that are connected to the sacred groves. Till nowadays a warm attitude towards the sacred groves has been preserved as well as the knowledge that looking at a sacred grove or praying to it gives support.

According to historical data, about 500 sacred groves are known in Estonia. The area of a grove can reach from 1 to 100 hectares and several significant spots can be found within its bounda-

ries, such as sacred springs and trees, funeral places, fireplaces, grove saunas, dance places etc.

Owing to traditional customs, the ecosystems of sacred groves have had the possibility to develop quite freely during centuries or even millennia. Nowadays, being often situated in cultural landscapes, the groves have become stores of biodiversity.

Sacred stones have been brought to Estonia during the Weichsel glaciations by glaciers arriving from Scandinavia. Currently around 500 historical sacred stones are known, which can range from ten centimetres to ten or more metres. On rare occasions cup-marks made by humans can be found in them. Even though around 1700 cup-marked stones are known, less than 20 of them have been considered sacred.

Sacred trees are most often oaks (*Quercus robur*), lime trees (*Tilia cordata*), pines (*Pinus sylvestris*), birches (*Betula pendula*) and spruces (*Picea*

The eye-curing spring of Üügu, Saare county, Muhu isle. Healers and other visitors have trod a path leading to the spring. This is a place of habitation for many orchid species.



abies), but they can also be from other indigenous tree species. Choice of species shows considerable regional variation. For example, in Põlva parish, most of the known historical sacred trees have been junipers (*Juniperus communis*).

Cross-trees are considered an exceptional type of historical SNS. The tradition to cut a cross on a tree that grows on the way to cemetery used to be widespread in Estonia as well as other parts of Europe. Today, this tradition has only been maintained in four counties of Estonia: Põlva, Võru, Tartu and Valga. Even though the cross that is carved in the tree has the shape of a Latin cross, the church does not recognise this tradition as its own. A cross-tree becomes the soul-tree of the deceased one and also a kind of bulwark which protects the living from visits of the souls, except for the specific folk calendar events when spirits are welcome.

Sacred waters can be marine areas, lakes, rivers, creeks, yet most often they are springs. People go to the springs mainly for healing or for soul refreshing purposes, but also to pledge ones faithfulness, ask blessing for marriage, to tell fortunes and give name to babies. Nearby a sacred spring, a sacred tree or stone is often found. People use to take holy spring water home for drinking and healing purposes. In return for the water people throw coins into the spring or scratch silver dust from objects made of silver.

Other sacred natural sites. The above-mentioned types of SNSs are

the most common in Estonia, but other types are found as well. For example sacrificial sites, sliding stones to aid in fertility, and sometimes old trees that grow on stone graves.

Historical and religious background

In Estonia, unlike in many other technologically developed countries, the traditions connected to nature religion are still being followed today. People leave offerings to and gather health and power of mind from tens, even hundreds of sacred sites. The native SNSs of Estonia enrich Estonian society owing to the fact that they have not been demonised under the influence of Christianity as they were in other countries, such as Finland.

Estonians' religious beliefs that are connected to valuing SNSs stand out in the European context. Several proofs for it can be found from sociological studies named below.

According to an Eurobarometer survey 'Social Values, Science and Technology' conducted in 2005, Estonia has the lowest rate of people believing there is a single God (16%) and the highest rate of people believing that there are different spiritual forces (54%) in Europe (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf). A public opinion poll financed and ordered by the Parliament of Estonia in 2002 showed that 11% of Estonian population consider the Estonian native religion and Taara faith nearest to their heart (Lepane, 2002).

There are more studies affirming Estonians' deep conviction for nature religion. In 1994, the Estonian University of Life Science made a sociological survey which showed that 65% of people living in South-Estonia believe that trees have souls (Moor, 1998). In 2002, Tallinn University carried out an all-Estonian study 'Environment and us' according to which 82% of Estonian inhabitants find nature to be holy and animate (Raudsepp, 2005).

Another public opinion poll ordered in 2010 by the Estonian Council of Churches showed that 20% of Estoni-

ans consider 'maausk' (Estonian native religion) as the true religion of the Estonian people (A Conference of Sociology of Religion 'Elust, usust ja usuelust 2010', Lea Altnurme's presentation 'What should church know about the individual religiousness of Estonians').

Ensuring consistency of following the traditions of native people and freedom of religion has direct connection with Estonian SNSs. The followers of Estonian native religion can practice certain customs only in historical sacred sites where a perceptible bond with ancestors exists.

The sacred hill of Kunda Hiimägi, West-Viru county. Women are singing folksongs and cooking a holy porridge for the prayer held for the souls of the ancestors.



Sacred natural sites and customs

In Estonian native religion, nature's sanctity is tied to its animism. Just like human beings, also plants, animals and landscape objects have soul or spiritual dimension. In old Estonian creation songs, man and everything else in the world is born from the eggs of first bird (swallow). In addition, the Earth is perceived as a life-giving mother (*Maaema* – Mother Earth) who is thus source of both biological and, through human mediation, cultural diversity. Man is not the ruler of nature but a mere part of it. Likewise, fairies and gods form part of nature. Perception of the sanctity of nature is characterised by intimacy and cordiality. For instance when referring to the gods, diminutive form is often used to convey endearment (the suffix *-kene* being added to the name of a god: *Maaemakene*, *Veeemakene*, *Äikene*, *jumalukene*).

The traditions connected to sacred groves (*hiis*) and other sites of this kind have been quite similar over Estonia from the first written records up to modern times - one cannot break branches, mow lawn, dig earth or herd cattle there and has to keep spiritual and physical purity. There are many cases known where those who have damaged SNSs get punished with a severe illness or even death.

For historical reasons, Estonian native religion (*maausk*) has developed largely into a familial, personal and secret belief. People go to SNSs to pray, heal, get blessing for marriage, give name to a baby, hold meetings, cele-

brate folk calendar events, perform magical practices and make offerings. Sometimes the ash of the deceased is scattered there. Offerings and objects used for healing give evidence that sacred sites are in use.

Not all of the practices associated with the sacred sites are easily defined as religious. These include staying in a sacred site, being connected with ancestors, contemplation and gathering spiritual strength.

A significant practice that must be emphasised when talking about spiritual heritage is maintaining a spiritual connection with a SNS. As a result of urbanisation, most of Estonian native people have moved to towns. Staying spiritually connected with the SNS of one's birthplace over the distance offers important spiritual support and confidence.

During the past few decades, attempts have been made to restore the communal customs connected to SNSs. To celebrate certain folk calendar events, members of a community gather in their sacred grove to jointly pray to gods and ancestors, bring offerings and follow other traditional customs. From time to time, communal prayers are organised together with other Finno-Ugrian nature worshippers.

Sacred natural sites in change

The beliefs and customs of Estonian nature religion are an inseparable part of the Estonian contemporary culture, yet it has not significantly touched either Estonian higher culture or the

state institutions. Till recently the values and customs connected to SNSs where not taught in the official education system. Therefore, it is not surprising that appropriate terminology is missing from legal acts.

Established in 1918 and suffered for 50 years under the Soviet occupation, young Estonia is still recovering from mentalities that were forcibly brought in by the Christian and Communist regimes of the foreign occupants. We are relearning to recognise our SNSs and the rights of native people for them. Till recently the state has not seen SNSs as holy sites, but has only handled the natural or archaeological aspects of them. For example, in 2005 the National Heritage Board approved a project to build a wind mill park to the sacred hill of Kunda Hiimägi, which had been taken under protection as cultural monument many years earlier.

In Estonia, 450 SNSs have been designated as cultural monuments. The exact number of sacred sites under nature protection is not known, because they have not been mapped. During the last decades, a number of smaller regional fieldwork projects have been carried out, which have shown that most of SNSs placed under state protection are in a poor state. At the same time it has been proved that many protected species and other natural values can be found at those sacred sites, which have preserved at least in a satisfactory state.

Thus on one hand, the SNSs and the spiritual traditions preserved in Estonia

are of important natural, cultural and social value, on the other hand they are very scarcely researched and underprotected on national level. Estonia is lacking a thorough overview on the locations of most of our SNSs and their situation.

Native local communities have been weakened during the occupation times and have not yet gathered their powers enough to assemble. That is also a reason why sacred sites get damaged or destroyed by different agricultural, touristic and other development activities.

New era

In 1995 the followers of Estonian native religion officially formed their religious associations. A new period of legal acceptance began for Estonian native people and SNSs.

The Estonian House of Taara and Native Religions (Taarausuliste ja Maavalla koda; MK) started to bring together historians, natural scientists and folklorists who are interested in studying SNSs. The aim of Maavalla koda is to bring the research of SNSs to a new modern level, ensure complex and interdisciplinary scientific treatment of SNSs and, through this, direct the state to recognise the importance of SNSs. For the followers of *maausk* SNSs are important as intact and unfragmented cultural and natural areas.

In a few years the research and management situation of SNSs was mapped, a research methodology was compiled and several pilot projects

were carried out. It was concluded that a national conservation plan was needed in order to organise emergency rescue works as quickly as possible.

National conservation plan for sacred natural sites

As a result of thorough explanations from the followers of *maausk*, the Ministry of Culture formed in 2005 an interdisciplinary working group with the aim to prepare a national conservation plan for SNSs. The working group was put together by representatives of different ministries, universities, scientific research institutions and Maavalla koda. While taking part in the preparation of the conservation plan, Maavalla koda was collaborating with other scientific organisations to improve the study methodology of sacred sites, perform field works on the pilot areas and introduce this topic in the media. A first comprehensive overview of the Estonian SNSs was published in the form of a compilation of articles (Kaasik, 2007). Followers of *maausk* also organised protection of several SNSs which received quite a lot of media attention: Tammealuse grove, sacred grove hills of Kunda Hiimägi and Ebavere Hiimägi in Lääne-Viru County, Purtse Hiimägi in Ida-Viru county, sacred grove hill of Paluküla Hiimägi in Rapla County and Panga grove in Saare County.

On 1 April 2008, as a result of years of preparation, the Estonian Ministry of Culture approved the national conservation plan 'Sacred Natural Sites in Estonia: Study and Conservation 2008–2012'. It

consists of a historical overview of SNSs in Estonia, an analysis of the current situation, and also presents several concrete conservation measures and instructions on how to apply them.

Conservation measures

The conservation plan aims to retain all extant SNSs under national protection, as well as change the protection management in order to cover all the values of the sacred sites: intangible and tangible cultural heritage, natural values and freedom of religion. As the sacred sites help to maintain the traditions of local people (and some traditions can only be performed in the sacred sites), they are also important in enriching the living environment and supporting local development.

The coordinating steering committee of the Conservation Plan consists of representatives of the Ministries of the Environment, Agriculture, Internal Affairs, and Education and Research; the National Heritage Board and Maavalla koda. The University of Tartu is the implementing agency. Measures of the Conservation Plan are designed to handle all aspects of SNSs and the associated values.

As SNSs are one of the most endangered features among Estonian cultural heritage, it is essential to study and save them. SNSs as historical objects are endangered by perishing of the living lore, on one hand, and by lack of information on their existence, on the other. Often only a few old people remember the locations or existence of sacred

sites. Unless researchers interview these people in the forthcoming years, many significant and valuable sites will disappear from the heritage landscape and be forever lost for society.

The Conservation Plan foresees creating a database which supports researching and managing SNSs. The database would consist of folkloric, archaeological, natural, historical and other data on SNSs and provide information on the exact location, condition and form of ownership of each site.

In the first phase of fieldwork, the researchers will make interviews with local inhabitants to specify the locations and borders of SNSs. The second phase would ideally take place in the landscape where SNSs are situated. It focuses on details and the personal bond of the interviewees with SNSs. The following phases comprise taking the GPS coordinates, first demarcation, and its natural scientific, archaeological and ethnographic description.

The received audio and video recordings, and pictures (photos, drawings, schemes, maps) will be systematised, analysed and archived. Subsequently suggestions on demarcation, protection and management of the SNSs found will be made. In order to safeguard confidential information on sacred sites the information about endangered SNSs will not be disclosed.

The Conservation Plan foresees to perform a revision of the Estonian legal regulations and to formulate suggestions of amendments or prepare a new legal act about SNSs. Currently, the Es-

tonian legislation not only lacks direct regulation of SNSs, but does not even mention their existence. Consideration should be given to defining SNSs as a separate category of monuments.

Yet, effective legal regulation and protection measures are not sufficient when society in general does not value sacred sites. The plan foresees to launch media projects, disseminate information on the television and radio, books, exhibitions, lectures and other activities. It also proposes to supplement school curricula with relevant information about the SNSs.

Recent advances

The financial help from the state has so far been 197 000 euros, forming 11,6% from the general budget of the Conservation Plan. With this financing the coordinators of the Conservation Plan have been hired and they have so far led the following works. A research methodology has been compiled and the methodology for demarcation and conservation are being prepared. The database project is ready. An expert group has been put together to raise the necessary competence in the National Heritage Board.

The first fieldwork studies have been performed so far in Muhu parish on the West coast of Estonia and a partial inventory in Juuru and Kuusalu parishes of North Estonia. Altogether there are 102 parishes in Estonia.

A total of 21 researchers participated in Muhu fieldwork. The local community



The sacred grove (hiis) of Tammealuse, West-Viru county. A ribbon is tied as offering in a sacred natural site forming a bond between generations and this way keeping spiritual consistency with ancestors.

network helped to organise the work. During the research period more than 200 inhabitants were interviewed, 120 hours of interviews were recorded and more than 3000 photos were taken. Before starting the fieldwork, according to the collected historical and folkloristic data the researchers were aware of 28 SNSs in this area, and 11 of them placed under national protection. During the fieldwork, participants had collected information about 81 historical sacred sites and additionally about 30 potential sacred sites. They managed to find and perform an inventory of 67 sacred sites. Most of the previously unknown sacred sites were healing stones and springs.

The greatest surprise that came up as a result of the Muhu project was the understanding that researchers are still unaware of a considerable number of sacred sites. The reason for that is that bearers of the living traditions, the users of sacred sites, do not want to

share their knowledge with strangers whom they do not trust. Historical experience has taught local people that if strangers knew about your sacred place, it would be destroyed or interfered. People also believe that when strangers know about your sacred place, its powers weaken.

Values and knowledge

Since 2008, Maavalla koda has organised campaigns (*Hiie sõber*) to find people or organisations who are dedicated to protecting the SNSs. This also serves an educational purpose: the best practices of sacred natural site management and the good individual examples are shown to the public.

Annual photo contest, organised by Maavalla koda, aims to document the current situation of Estonian SNSs and draw public attention to this topic.

A photo exhibition on Estonian SNSs has been made with explanatory texts. This has been already shown in 16 towns and villages.

More than a 100 articles have been published in the media and many lectures have been delivered addressed to Estonian officials, school children and other interest groups.

For the first time in history, the Estonian University of Life Sciences and University of Tartu offer elective courses on SNS. Sets of lectures addressed to officials who are daily dealing with the questions connected to SNS management will be delivered in the next few years aiming to raise their competence and, through this, help to ameliorate the situation of SNS conservation.

Case study: The sacred hill of Hiimägi in Paluküla

The case discusses a SNS in a situation of conflicting interests. The local

government plans to build a recreational sports and tourist centre on the site. Despite the fact that the site is under nature protection, followers of *maausk* have done serious efforts during the past ten years to protect the spiritual and cultural values connected to the sacred hill of Hiimägi. This is one of the most long-lasting conflicts connected with conservation of SNSs in Estonia and has gained lots of media attention. Unfortunately no satisfactory solution has been found so far.

Natural and spiritual values

Hiimägi (sacred grove hill) is located in Paluküla, Kehtna parish, Rapla county, Estonia within a National Landscape Protection Area (IUCN category V), which protects landforms from the glaciations period and wild species. Its total surface encompasses 5713 ha, of which the sacred hill covers only 25 hectares. The area has been included in the Natura 2000 network, as a spe-

A signboard in front of sacred hill of Paluküla Hiimägi, Rapla county. Often natural and spiritual values suffer the pressures of economic interests. Ahto Kaasik



cial conservation area (IUCN Category V), (Dudley, 2008).

In the area of Hiimägi a Natura 2000 natural habitat type of Community interest has been inventoried. It is composed of 'Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (*Festuco-Brometalia*) *important orchid sites'. It is also registered as the location of a large population (around 50 nests) of a protected ant species *Formica polyctena*.

The spiritual and cultural values of Hiimägi form an inseparable part of its natural environment. During its long history this place has developed into what it is today due to having been used and regarded as a sacred site. Followers of *maausk* use Hiimägi even today as a natural sanctuary as much as the worsening conditions allow. Regular communal and individual prayers and rituals are being held there and people leave offerings on the hill.

According to the expert opinions of acknowledged Estonian folklorists, the sacred hill of Hiimägi in Paluküla is a SNS, which must be conserved and protected as a whole.

Pressures and impacts

The landowner, the local government, sees mostly the economic potential of Hiimägi, which should be used to develop forest, sports and tourist businesses. Approximately one third of the sacred hill of Hiimägi has already been turned into ski trails and grasslands that are maintained with different

machines. That is also the reason why the frequency of visitors to the sacred hill has gone up and the biodiversity of this place has significantly decreased.

Moreover, next to Hiimägi and on its hillside the local government plans to construct a sports and recreation centre with stadiums, ski lifts, motels etc.

Hand in hand with the impoverishing conditions of the environment, the possibilities to follow spiritual traditions on Hiimägi have substantially worsened. Followers of *maausk* feel that their sacred object has been attacked and their right of freedom of religion is violated.

The National Heritage and Environmental Boards, which are directly in charge of managing this protected area, have given permissions to the recreation centre projects, refusing to discuss the questions connected to spiritual aspects of Hiimägi.

Native people and followers of *maausk* and Maavalla koda find it essential to conserve the spiritual and cultural values of Hiimägi and keep it as a natural sanctuary. They have cleaned garbage from the hill, informed the public, carried out supervision and used all court and administrative means and even physical intervention to obstruct the construction activities on the sacred hill. The local groups have also participated in the implementation of the development plans of the sacred hill, carried out monitoring, negotiated with the landowner and developers, National Heritage and Environmental Boards, conducted research and hired

researchers, organised a public collection of signatures and media campaigns. Many folklorists, historians, conservationists and cultural celebrities have supported these activities.

One of the most dramatic events took place on 8 November 2004, when Maavalla koda called people to gather to Hiimägi for a protest meeting with a purpose to barricade the tractors moving up the hill. Probably it was the outcome of intensive media attention that prevented the conflict. As a result of negotiation, both the machines and police forces left the sacred hill.

After the incident, the protectors of the grove hill filed a court suit, went through all Estonian court instances and lost in the Supreme Court. Currently they are expecting an answer from the European Court of Human Rights about the case of the sacred hill of Paluküla Hiimägi as violation of freedom of religion.

Perspectives

The protectors of the Hiimägi sacred hill have repeatedly suggested several compromise solutions according to which the hill could be used both for recreational sports and ecotourism. The protectors cannot accept the construction of buildings, vehicular traffic and mass events taking place in this sacred site. The local government has offered, from their side, to leave a small reservation area for the followers of *maausk*.

It seems so far that no satisfactory compromise can be found through negotiation. A solution could lie in implementing the Conservation Plan. According to the Conservation Plan, the whole sacred hill of Hiimägi should be placed under heritage protection to ensure constitutional freedom of religion and possibility to perform historical customs. The IUCN-UNESCO Guidelines for Managing Sacred Natural Sites (Wild and McLeod, 2008) will hopefully be of help as well.

Websites

Estonian House of Taara and Native Religions, <http://www.maavald.ee/eng/>

Website of the sacred hill of Paluküla Hiimägi, <http://palukyla.maavald.ee/>

Conservation plan 'Sacred Natural Sites in Estonia: Study and Maintenance 2008 – 2012' (English version), http://hiis.ee/sacred-sites/sns_devplan

Glossary

Looduslik pühapaik - a SNS, a site associated with sacrifice, worship, healing, prayer or other religious or ritual activities according to folkloric, archaeological, historical, ethnological or other data which dates back before the 20th century.

Loodus – 'nature' in written Estonian. For the followers of *maausk* the word *loodus* has a shade of meaning referring that nature is a product or outcome, with a concrete creator, giving the word a monotheistic connotation

Loond – a term that was used in ancient Estonian to signify 'nature'. It harmonises better with Estonian myth of creation, according to which the world was born from bird's eggs and is a self-creating, constantly changing living being

Hiis – sacred grove, a SNS in communal use, comprising a larger and complex area. People intervene in its natural succession as little as possible

Maausk – Estonian native religion, based on nature worship

Maarahvas – historical ethnonym for the Estonians

Taarausk – Taara religion, a monotheistic belief, created in 1930s, banned and vanished during Soviet occupation

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