

Bas Verschuuren, Robert Wild, Jeffrey A. McNeely and Gonzalo Oviedo (eds): Sacred Natural Sites: Conserving Nature and Culture

**London, UK: Earthscan Publications 2010. ISBN 978-1-84971-167-8 (paperback). x+310
pages, index**

James P. Robson

Published online: 28 May 2011
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This is one of a number of recent books that Earthscan has published in association with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that look at alternative approaches to conservation based around the interconnections between biological and cultural diversity. Where this book differs is that it marks a first comprehensive attempt to understand the role played by ‘sacred natural sites,’ their prevalence across the globe, and their potential for meeting biodiversity conservation goals in the twenty-first century. It thus fills an important gap in the environmental and conservation literature; it is international in its scope, it brings together contributions from respected academics (from both the natural and social sciences) and practitioners (representing government, NGO and community organizations), and it is well organised into succinct and consistently formatted sections and chapters (something that cannot be said for all edited volumes). In introducing the reader to the diverse world of sacred natural sites—broadly defined as “areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities”—and exploring their potential for conservation planning and management, this is a publication that should be on the bookshelf of any scholar working on conservation-related issues, irrespective of their disciplinary grounding.

My only grievances relate to what is left unsaid in the 27 chapters and 300 pages of text. First, through the use of multiple and richly informative case studies from Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the

reader is exposed to the rich array of worldviews and cosmologies that underpin peoples’ relationships with plants, animals and ecosystems in different parts of the world. While a treasure-trove for the anthropologist, this reality throws up a conundrum for the conservation planner. We should remember that the book has been compiled by an organisation—the IUCN—that comprises a group of government and non-government conservation bodies whose interest in sacred natural sites will, to a lesser or greater degree, revolve around their potential incorporation (as small-scale biodiversity hotspots) into an expanding network of official protected areas, whether these be government-run or co-management arrangements involving local communities. History informs us that there is a danger that sacred natural sites could be co-opted by a dominant conservation paradigm that, while aware of the need to become more inclusive, still adheres to an ideology that can appear light years away from that of the people for whom the sacred in nature continues to form an integral part of local beliefs and cultural identity. With regard to the integration of sacred natural sites into mainstream conservation efforts (only ever touched upon in the book’s concluding chapter), such action may come a step too soon, a little bit like forcing the proverbial square block into a round hole. While Barrow (Chapter 4) understands this when suggesting: “[conservation] organisations [to] acknowledge and reaffirm the importance of the stewardship of nature as a core component of human spirituality [and belief systems],” the book in general allows for little discussion as to the appropriateness of melding such sites into national and international conservation planning models, or to what degree conservation policy can tolerate alternatives such as community self-determination. It would have been nice to see an

J. P. Robson (✉)
Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba,
303–70 Dysart Rd,
Winnipeg, MB, Canada R3T 2N2
e-mail: umrobsoj@cc.umanitoba.ca

additional chapter or two explain how environmental conservation planners could go about adopting and implementing the more qualitative view required to realign models with, and begin to understand, non-Western belief systems and spiritual values.

Second, as part of any discussion of alternative conservation models, one must understand that sacred natural sites form just one land use type within contemporary systems that have evolved to combine the traditional with the modern, both in terms of beliefs and values, as well as livelihood needs and opportunities. More than once, the book depicts sacred natural sites as some kind of “last refuge” for wild species, with surrounding areas seen as degraded and of little to no conservation value. This seems over-simplistic given how other work on bio-cultural diversity places such sites within the context of multifunctional landscapes, where other land uses (including productive ones) can and do offer functional habitat for wild biodiversity. In failing to make that point more explicit, the editors run the risk of actually reinforcing the notion that conservation can only take place in areas that are ‘protected’ or ‘off-limits,’ a message we should be moving away from. This is not to say that some areas are more important than others for biodiversity – they clearly are—but that a more holistic approach (where people and their sustainable activities are placed at the centre of conservation) will pay greatest dividends in many contexts. This is especially the case in tropical countries where so many sacred natural sites are found. While a sense of this is provided in a few of the chapters, much of the book is still couched in the language of ecological economics, dominated by talk of environmental goods and services. In an effort to reach a wide

audience, there are limits to the editors’ ability to translate and do justice to the worldviews that have given rise to this global diversity of sacred natural sites. As Byrne (Chapter 5) makes clear, most such sites are numinous in nature, possessing “agency” and the ability to affect change in the world. Again, the book never manages to address, in any serious way, just how these ‘non-scientific’ beliefs could be made to function alongside current conservation thinking.

Despite the above comments and concerns, which in my mind point to the need for a second volume, both Earthscan and the IUCN are to be applauded for their efforts, which do a great service in encouraging conservation research, planning and policy to incorporate multiple disciplinary perspectives and alternative views of the world. These efforts seek to shift the paradigm from one focused solely on government-run protected areas, as informed by systematic conservation planning, to a more inclusive set of models that better recognise peoples’ intrinsic links with the natural world and supports their active and leading role in initiatives to conserve bio-cultural diversity. According to the editors, this volume was put together to “encourage and inspire people to support the communities that are custodians of these sites to continue to defend them.” A worthy cause indeed. Time will tell whether the IUCN and its members are truly willing to “step outside the box” to ensure that this happens (Byrne, Chapter 5). What we can hope for is that the book, in highlighting the global diversity of sacred natural sites and the communities that sustain them, is taken as yet further proof that diverse local populations can and do conserve the lands and waters that they call home.