



FOCUS

Editorial: Sacred Sites Research Newsletter (SSIREN) By Emma Shephard-Walwyn

Dear friends and colleagues,

Welcome to the first issue of the Sacred Sites Research Newsletter (SSIREN). My name is Emma Shephard-Walwyn and I am one of the editors. I would first like to take this opportunity to welcome you all to the Newsletter on behalf of myself and all those who have helped to bring it together, and especially Claudia Rutte, Marc Hall and SSIREN's co-editor Fabrizio Frascaroli.

This newsletter was conceived following the symposium Conserving nature at sacred sites, held at the University of Zurich on the 25th October 2011. One of the key issues which repeatedly emerged during the meeting was the need for a better communication channel between researchers, practitioners and others working on different facets of Sacred Natural Sites (SNS). This newsletter is our attempt at providing a first answer to that call and intends to act as an information platform for ongoing work and developments in the field. This first issue will serve as a general introduction, offering some background on the newsletter's focus and an example of its planned structure. In the future, it is meant to provide insight into specific projects, as well as timely updates on achievements, publications, opportunities and other useful resources concerning SNS around the world.

But first... why sacred natural sites?

SNS, as defined by IUCN are an "area of land or water having special spiritual significance to people and communities", are "almost certainly the world's oldest form of habitat protection" (Dudley et al. 2009) and "often harbour rich biodiversity and safeguard valuable landscapes and ecosystems" (IUCN motion on sacred natural sites CGR4.MOT053, at the The World Conservation Congress, Spain 2008). Sacred natural sites are linked both with the survival of biodiversity and to human "identity, survival and evolution" (ibid). As such SNS are of interest to many individuals, groups and academic disciplines. They are investigated for their environmental, social, theological, cultural, anthropological and spiritual significance. Not only are they important to the survival of thousands of species and habitats across the globe: in virtue of the physical and intangible resources which they provide, they are also key to the survival of cultural heritage, traditional practices and many peoples and communities (Byers et al., 2001; Dudley et al., 2005; MEA, 2005; Papayannis et al. 2008). As such, we and many like us believe that the conservation of sacred natural sites, is of vital importance, and that dedicated research into SNS providing greater understanding is key to sustainable conservation of these sites.

Some background on SNS research

Associations of sanctity with diverse natural features such as trees, forests, plant and animal species, water bodies, rocky outcrops and caves, have been recorded all around the world, not only in regards to most traditional faiths, but also "mainstream" religions and their scriptures. Also the relevance of an earth protection ethic within different religious traditions has been widely acknowledged and received scholarly attention for many years (Gottlieb 1996; Palmer and Finlay, 2003). The recognition and investigation of the prominent role played by sacred places for the conservation of cultures and biodiversity, instead, has not been as thoroughly



Kenyan sacred natural site. Photo by Emma Shephard-Walwyn

researched, although this seems to be rapidly changing.

In the pioneering article 'Sacred Groves of India: A plea for continued conservation', published in 1975, Gadgil and Vartak noted that certain sites had been protected through traditional belief systems and that the demise of local religious faiths threatened their environment. They thus plead for 'enlightened conservation' which incorporates traditional practices and preserves the legacies of SNS. Shortly before Gadgil and Vartak's publication, the Man and the Biosphere programme was started by UNESCO, which explicitly stressed the virtuous link between spiritual beliefs, cultural practices and nature in a perspective of social and environmental sustainability. In our knowledge, these were the first scientific article and policy action openly targeting sacred places and religious beliefs as effective drivers of conservation. However, despite the potential of those ground-breaking contributions, research in the field did not gain more momentum until relatively recent years.

In 2005, the report Beyond Belief, commissioned by WWF, Equilibrium and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, focused specifically on the links between the world's faith groups and protected areas. The authors listed no less than 100 sites of spiritual importance located in parks or nature reserves, identified possible threats and criticalities, and offered some advices to managers and policy-makers. Similarly, in 2006, through a systematic search in scientific journals, Bhagwat and Rutte found reference to SNS on every continent except for Antarctica and over a very wide variety of habitats (e.g., mountainous, woodland, savannah, marine, freshwater, etc.).

Building on the wealth of research produced over recent years with regards to ecology, conservation, cultural issues and possible conflicts at SNS, IUCN published Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers (Wild & McLeod, 2008) in 2008. The guidelines offered key insight on how to deal with SNS located within existing protected areas and the people, cultures and traditions associated with such sites.

As of today, the link between sacred places and conservation is an expanding field of scientific inquiry and a key concept in the activities of many environmental organizations. Yet, despite such rapid developments, many questions remain unanswered and further research is needed. A number of individuals and organisations are attempting to heed this call. We hope that this newsletter will contribute to their work, by soliciting discussions, promoting ideas for research and encouraging cooperation across disciplines and institutions.

About the newsletter

The Acronym SSIREN is taken from the title Sacred Sites Research Newsletter. It is not only a play on the words, however: as a creature, the Siren represents the connection between beliefs, cultures and nature which are aspects often found at SNS.

Sirens from Greek mythology are a mix of a woman and a bird. Sirens are associated with fields and meadows (In early Greek mythology) and with the water (in later Greek and Roman mythology). Not only are Sirens a symbol of different habitats and mythologies from two different cultures; they are a literal combination of man and nature. As such, they perfectly embody the interdependence between habitats, cultures, humanity and nature, found at SNS. In addition, Sirens also convey ideas of both lethal peril and great beauty: like the taboos surrounding many SNS, they carry a warning of the incredible forces concealed behind a surface of beauty and awe, and a caution of the danger that will befall those who are not wary or respectful of them. All these facets therefore combine to make the Siren a great figurative representation of some of the key aspects of SNS.

SSIREN will be issued quarterly. Each issue will consist of a feature article, several short updates, recent publications, and information on upcoming events and opportunities. The intention is for the newsletter to be 'built' by its readers, so we warmly encourage everyone to submit information pertaining to any section of the newsletter. We are counting on your cooperation and hope that you will find the final outcome interesting and useful.

Highlighted organizations

Numerous organisations across the world work on the interconnectedness of belief systems and the conservation of nature. Here we highlight a number of them and provide a brief description of their work. Again, this is by no means a complete list, but can give an idea of the diversity of actors involved.

**Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority:** Responsible for the protection of aboriginal sacred sites in the northern territories in Australia.

**Alliance of Religion and Conservation:** Works with the world's major faith groups to develop environmental conservation programmes based on their own core beliefs, practices and teachings, and helps to link faith groups with environmental conservation organizations.

**KRAPAVIS:** Working on reviving the Orans (sacred village forests) of Rajasthan.

**IUCN Specialist group on Cultural and Spiritual Values:** Aims to identify, define and provide guidelines for managing both the cultural and spiritual aspects of protected areas.

**Sacred Land Film Project:** Produce educational and media materials to help broaden the public's awareness and understanding of sacred sites, indigenous cultures and environmental justice.

**Sacred Natural Sites:** Supports the conservation and revitalisation of sacred natural sites by building alliances between custodians, traditional knowledge holders, conservationists and academics.

**Sacred Sites:** Focuses on the protection of sacred sites and traditional cultures.

**SANASI:** World database on sacred natural sites with 3 main aims.

**Terralingua:** Conservation of biocultural diversity.

PUBLICATIONS

Featured

**Bhagwat, SA., and Rutte, C.,** 2006, Sacred groves: potential for biodiversity management. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* (4:10), Pg 519-524

**Byers, BA., Cunliffe, RN., Hudak, AT.,** 2001, Linking the conservation of culture and nature: A case study of sacred forests in Zimbabwe. *Human Ecology* (29:2), Pg187-218

**Dudley, N., Higgins-Zogib, L., Mansourian, S.,** 2009, Beyond Belief: Linking faiths and protected areas for biodiversity conservation. WWF/ARC, Gland Switzerland

**Gottlieb, R.,** 1996. This Sacred Earth. Routledge, New York

**IUCN motion on sacred natural sites CGR4.MOT053,** at the The World Conservation, Spain 2008

**Gadgil, M., and Vartak, VD.,** 1975 Sacred groves of India – a plea for the continuous conservation. *Journal of Bombay Natural History Society* (72:2), Pg 313 - 320

**Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA),** 2005. *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Synthesis.* Island Press, Washington

**Palmer, M., and Finlay, V.,** 2003, Faith in Conservation: New Approaches to Religions and the Environment. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, Washington D.C., USA

**Wild, R., and McLeod, C.,** 2008, Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.

Recent

**Berber, M.,** 2012, Sacred natural sites: conserving nature and culture. *Australian Journal of Environmental Management* (19:1), Pg 72-73

**Taylor, K.,** 2012, Sacred natural sites. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (18:1), Pg 103-104

**Carter, Lee Ellen and Sarmiento, Fausto O.,** 2011, Otavalenos and Cotacachenos: Local Perceptions of Sacred Sites for Farmscape Conservation in Highland Ecuador. *Journal of Human Ecology* (35:1), Pg 61-70

**Luo Y., Wang S., Yang Y.,** 2011, Application of biodiversity surrogates in rapid biodiversity assessment. *Shengtaixue Zazhi* (30:6), Pg: 1270-1278

**Murray, JK.,** 2011, The Divine Nature of Power: Chinese Ritual Architecture at the Sacred Site of Jinci. *Journal of Asian Studies* (70:2), Pg 535-536

**Robson, JP.,** 2011, Sacred Natural Sites: Conserving Nature and Culture. *Human Ecology* (39:3), Pg 389-390

**Rutte, C.,** 2011, The sacred commons: Conflicts and solutions of resource management in sacred natural sites. *Biological Conservation* (144:10), Pg 2387-2394



ISSUE 1(1) AT A GLANCE:

EDITORIAL

Emma Shephard-Walwyn

UPCOMING EVENTS

August 8-11. Malibu, California, USA  
5th International Conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture

August 28-September 1. Glasgow, Scotland  
3rd European Congress of Conservation Biology

September 6-15. Jeju, Korea  
IUCN World Conservation Congress

ON THE BOOKSHELF

Publications referenced in the feature article

Relevant publications on Sacred Sites published in the last 6 months.

OPPORTUNITIES

Marie Curie International and Intra-European fellowship calls  
August 16. All Europe

Swiss National Science Foundation fellowship applications  
September 1. Switzerland

ABOUT SSIREN



The Sacred Site Research Newsletter (SSIREN) was conceived at the symposium "Conserving nature at sacred sites", held at the University of Zurich on the 25th October 2011, as a means to inform and aggregate the community of researchers working on sacred natural sites. It is aimed not merely at scholars but also practitioners and policy-makers coping with specific issues, as well as anyone with a general interest in the interaction between people and nature.

The Newsletter is issued quarterly and is literally "made" by its members: everyone is warmly encouraged to submit news, events, opportunities, and recent relevant publications, or to introduce their work in a feature article. Relevant contributions from all academic disciplines, as well as NGO practitioners and other institutions, are warmly welcome.

CONTACTS

For inquiries about the newsletter, to submit an article, or to contribute in any other way, please contact the editors:

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FRIENDS



SANASI - World Database on Sacred Natural Sites



ARC - The Alliance of Religions and Conservation



ISSRNC - The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture

EVENTS

5th International Conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture (ISSRNC)

August 8-11. Malibu, California, USA

The conference will be hosted at Pepperdine University, and this year's theme will be 'Nature & the Popular Imagination'. Info and details at the [ISSRNC website](#).

3rd European Congress of Conservation Biology August 28-September 1. Glasgow, Scotland

The Congress is organized by the European Section of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB-Europe) and will have 'Conservation on the Edge' as main theme. Further info [here](#).

IUCN World Conservation Congress September 6-15. Jeju, Korea

The IUCN World Conservation Congress is the world's largest conservation event. Held every four years, it aims to improve how we manage our natural environment for human, social and economic development. Info and program [here](#).

OPPORTUNITIES

Marie Curie International and Intra-European fellowship calls

August 16. All Europe

Calls for European Union's Marie Curie fellowships aimed at intra-European and overseas mobility for advanced researchers are now open. Info and details [here](#).

Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) fellowship applications

September 1, Switzerland

A new call for applications for both individuals and projects is now open at the Science National Foundation. Info and details available [here](#).

You receive this newsletter because you have previously participated in initiatives on sacred natural sites. Tired of it? Please [contact the Editors](#). Think it's fantastic and would like to involve a colleague or a friend? [Contact the Editors](#) all the same.