

# 🌿 The Heart of the Matter

*New essential reading on parks, protected areas, and cultural sites*

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*Sacred Natural Sites: Conserving Nature and Culture*, edited by Bas Verschuuren, Robert Wild, Jeffrey A. McNeely, and Gonzalo Oviedo. Earthscan, \$150.00 (hardcover), \$49.95 (paper), 310 pp., index. 2010.

*Reviewed by David Harmon*

FOR THOSE OF US WHO LIVE IN SOCIETIES where doctrinal religious practice—or reaction to it—has appropriated the majority of our thoughts and actions with respect to sacredness, it can be hard to grasp that for most of human history the sacred was firmly tied to nature. The mysteries of the natural world were certainly the initial impetus for humans to create (or, if you prefer, discover) the concept of sacredness. And, precisely because these mysteries were so abundant in the absence of any scientific explanation, people imputed sacredness to natural sites throughout the landscapes they called “home.”

It is this conjunction of sacredness, nature, and home that is brought to the fore in the welcome recent book *Sacred Natural Sites: Conserving Nature and Culture*. It is edited by four prominent figures within IUCN: Verschuuren and Wild lead the Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas, McNeely recently retired as chief scientist, and Oviedo is senior advisor for social policy. Because of IUCN’s global reach, the editors were able to draw together contributions from every corner of the world, resulting in the most comprehensive analysis yet of the scope and importance of sacred natural sites—sites which persist despite the larger trend toward “denaturing” the sacred.

Framed by introductory and concluding chapters by the editors, the book is divided into four sections. The first looks at the scientific basis of these sites—“science” in this case including both conservation biology and the social sciences. The second offers case studies of places as disparate as the holy island of Lindisfarne in the UK, Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) in Nepal, and the sacred forests of western Cameroon, among others. The third considers how sacred natural sites—most of which exist outside of civil law regimes, having no official recognition—might fit into larger protected area systems, such as UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere Program, the World Heritage Convention, and the Ramsar network of internationally significant wetlands. The fourth section recounts case studies where communities themselves have taken the lead to restore or protect sacred natural sites in the face of threats emerging from changed social and environmental conditions.

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Considering all this, conservationists of a skeptical bent are likely to have two main questions: How important are these places, really, in ecological terms? And, how well protected can they possibly be when restrictions are enforced by custom and not by law?

In fact, these questions, as I have just phrased them, are not nearly sophisticated enough. As most remaining sacred natural sites are part of rural landscapes that people consider to be their home, they cannot appropriately be evaluated simply on whether they protect biodiversity or deliver ecosystem services (though they do, as a review of the scientific literature by Nigel Dudley and co-authors shows). Rather, we need to ask how they fit into the environmental *and* social fabric of people's lives. The answer is that these sites, beset though many are by eroding traditions and encroaching modern development, are still highly meaningful to hundreds of millions of people around the globe. And, because the meaning people find in them is deep and multilayered, the second question posed above needs to be restructured to account for the fact that people's relationships to sacred natural sites is far more complex than simply refraining from prohibited activities.

Limitations of space allow me to give just a couple of examples. In a chapter on the sacred lakes of the delta of the Niger River, E.D. Anwana and co-authors explain how, in traditional African society, the notion of an ecosystem includes not just the plant and animal communities we see before us, but also the spirits of animals and human ancestors that have gone before. Nature conservation, therefore, does not take place exclusively in the present; it is conditioned by the past and, indeed, continuously relinked to it. This adds a temporal dimension to conservation that does not have an exact parallel in Western society (although it is akin to the epistemological field against which historians, preservationists, and archaeologists work). To make sense of the delta's sacred lakes from an African perspective requires both an environmental and social accounting.

A second example, this one speaking to the complexity of people's relations to nature in the context of the sacred, comes from Thailand as told by Denis Byrne. Thais, the majority of whom are Buddhists, have traditionally had an ambiguous attitude toward the nation's expansive and ecologically important forests. On the one hand, Thais "conceive of forests as representing darkness and disorder in distinction to the light and civilization of cleared agricultural and urban areas." On the other, forests have a venerable historical importance to Buddhist monks as sites of retreat, contemplation, and spiritual testing. This schism is reflected in the ranks of monks themselves, some of whom have been tabbed "development" monks while others are "ecology" monks. As Thailand has aggressively modernized and more forestland is cleared, some ecology monks have modified old rituals in order to carry out the "ordination" of individual trees. A saffron monk's robe is tied around the tree, which, to believers, has the effect of altering the tree's state so that it becomes spiritually hazardous to harm them. The point of the ritual is not to save a single tree, but to connect a whole community to the protection of the local forest. "In one tree ordination ceremony," Byrne explains, "a monk sanctified a bowl of water from which each of the village headmen drank, ritually binding them to protect the forest which was also ritually sanctified during the same ceremony."

Ordaining trees—seriously? Seriously. The book is full of similar examples that could very well induce eye-rolling in thoroughgoing secularists like me. But my view is that it is a

huge mistake for us cold-blooded rationalists to simply dismiss the cultural and spiritual values of protected areas, even if we cannot share in the vast majority of beliefs that underlie those values. Why? Because as foundational as conservation science and scientific values are, there is no doubt in my mind that cultural, spiritual, and other nonmaterial values are every bit as important in terms of motivating people to protect nature. And so it behooves conservationists of every stripe to at least make an attempt to understand them. Chapter after chapter of *Sacred Natural Sites* provides evidence to back me up.

In November 2011, the journal *Conservation Biology* published the results of a survey of nearly 600 conservation scientists. They were asked about their expectations for biodiversity in the decades to come, and about the values that motivate their work, among other things. The key empirical finding was that the respondents were virtually unanimous—99.5% being in agreement—in thinking that major biodiversity losses are likely. They were also largely agreed that “understanding interactions between people and nature” is “a priority for maintaining ecosystems.” “However,” the study’s author reported, “they largely rejected cultural or spiritual reasons as motivations for protecting biodiversity. They also rejected ‘human usefulness,’ suggesting many do not hold utilitarian views of ecosystem services.”

What does this tell you? What it tells me is several things. First is that, for biodiversity—unlike, for example, climate change—there is not merely a very strong scientific consensus about likely future impacts, but essentially complete agreement. That’s nothing short of remarkable. Second, biodiversity scientists understand that they cannot abstract people out of the picture when considering what to do about maintaining ecosystems (presumably meaning “ecosystem function”). Thus, the problem, as well as the context for its solution, are already settled. But—moving on to a third inference—it appears that, by virtue of their training, most scientists are quite unlikely to credit any overtly nonscientific reasons as being part of what motivates them to protect biodiversity. Yet they do *not* thereby default—as they easily and logically could—to an anthropocentric view of other species as mere commodities.

That fourth conclusion gives, if I am correct in my inferences, a very interesting twist to my little back-of-the-napkin exercise in figuring out what makes conservation biologists tick. It’s apparent to me that at some deep level they don’t just admire the complexity of the natural world: they *love* it. And they will go to their graves doing everything in their power to avoid admitting it.

Now, admittedly, I am exaggerating here. Still, the hard-to-disentangle attitudes of conservation biologists are a big challenge to those who want to gain respect for cultural and spiritual values for protecting nature. As I’ve said above, that is part of what the editors of *Sacred Natural Sites* are up to. But it’s only a very small part. The book is largely conceived as an opportunity for the stewards of these sites to explain them in their own words and on their own terms. My hope is that the rest of us will make time to listen.