The Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature in the Management and Governance of Protected Areas

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Introduction

To gain the lasting support of the general public as well as local communities, protected areas need to ground their programs of interpretation, management, and conservation in not only solid scientific research and practice, but also deeply held spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic values and ideas that will engage and inspire people to care for nature over the long term and, when necessary, make sacrifices to protect the environment. Without this kind of enthusiastic and enduring support, no matter how good the science and how bold the law, protected areas, including national parks and even World Heritage sites, will lose the special place they hold in the public imagination and elected officials will reduce the funding needed for their adequate operation and for their very existence. This occurred recently when the state of California proposed closing a large number of state parks when faced with a major governmental budget deficit. It was only the outcry of the general public, and the actions of organizations representing their interests, that prevented many park closures, which would have had disastrous consequences for the environments as well as for the infrastructures of the affected parks (Dolesh 2012).

A key threat to continued public support of many protected areas is their limited visitor base. Most visitors to US national parks, for example, are middle-class white Americans and foreign tourists. Relatively few of the so-called minorities—African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans—visit US national parks (Floyd 2001; Finney 2014). With demographic change occurring in the United States, these ethnic groups are rapidly gaining political and economic influence. In California, minorities taken as a whole are now the majority of the population in most metropolitan areas (Armendariz 2011). If protected areas do not engage minorities, they will not develop an interest in supporting these areas and conserving nature, and the future of protected areas will not be ensured.

Many protected areas have sites that are sacred or have other special significance for indigenous peoples and indigenous traditions. Rather than interfere with traditional practices at these sites, protected area managers need to welcome and involve indigenous peoples in interpretation and management as key stakeholders. Having lived in and interacted with the

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environments of these natural areas for centuries or millennia, many indigenous peoples and local communities have knowledge and experience that can contribute greatly to conservation. Managers need to acknowledge and respect their values, traditions, ideas, and ancestral ties to the land and to work with indigenous cultures to develop their support, for example through programs of co-management (Leaman 2013). In parallel, there is growing recognition that many protected and conserved areas are governed and managed by indigenous and local communities, for example as indigenous and community conserved areas, or "ICCAs" (Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2013).

The task of engaging people in protected areas, faces, therefore, three major challenges, which can be framed in the form of three questions: (1) how to build deep-seated, long-lasting support for protected areas and conservation; (2) how to broaden the limited visitor base of many protected areas; and (3) how to respect and engage indigenous peoples for whom parks contain sacred and other cultural sites of special significance.

The spiritual and cultural significance of nature has a key role to play in helping address the first challenge by inspiring or revitalizing connections between people and protected areas. By "spiritual and cultural significance of nature," I mean the inspirational spiritual, cultural, aesthetic, historic, social, and other meanings, values, knowledge, and associations that nature in general and natural features in particular, ranging from mountains and rivers to forests and wildlife, evoke for people. I have chosen the word "significance" to emphasize the inclusion of knowledge and meaning as well as feelings and values. It's also important to note that the expression "spiritual and cultural significance of nature" refers to nature in its broadest sense, not just sacred natural sites, although it includes the latter.

Nature has deep spiritual and cultural significance in cultures around the world that can help address the second challenge of diversifying the limited visitor base of many protected areas. People throughout Latin America look to mountains as sacred sources of water and healing (Bernbaum 1997). The graceful cone of Mount Fuji has come to symbolize the country of Japan and the quest for beauty and perfection that lies at the heart of Japanese culture (Bernbaum 1997). The sacredness of trees in cultures as diverse as those of India and Ghana has inspired people to maintain the biodiversity of sacred groves around the world (Barrow 2010; Ortsin 2015). *Shanshui*, the term for landscapes and landscape painting in China, means "mountains and rivers," pointing to the importance of these two basic components of nature in Chinese art as well as life (Bernbaum 1997).

By highlighting the spiritual and cultural significance of nature in cultures around the world, programs of outreach and interpretation can establish links with the cultural backgrounds of diverse ethnic groups. As the case studies from North America below clearly indicate, the cultural and spiritual significance of nature also provides an important way of addressing the challenge of engaging and involving indigenous peoples and local communities in interpretation and management of parks that include places and natural features of sacred, cultural, and historical significance for them.

The spiritual and cultural significance of nature in interpretation

A program that I directed at The Mountain Institute (www.mountain.org) from 1998 to 2008

provides case studies of various ways of using the spiritual and cultural significance of nature to engage people with national parks. The program we initiated in 1998 worked with a number of US national parks, including Yosemite and Hawai'i Volcanoes, both World Heritage sites. We developed interpretive and educational materials and activities based on the evocative spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic meanings and associations of natural features in mainstream American, Native American, Native Hawaiian, and other cultures around the world.

Yosemite National Park exhibit on major national parks. At Yosemite National Park we collaborated with interpretive staff on an exhibit on 58 major national parks organized around the theme of the inspirational value of nature and wilderness (Figure 1). Each park had a panoramic picture and a plaque with a brief paragraph describing the park and the dates it was first established as a protected area and then designated as a national park, if there was a difference. The Mountain Institute provided an inspirational quote appropriate to the park, ranging from the voices of conservationists, such as John Muir, to Cherokee storytellers and Native Hawaiian elders. The quotes were highlighted just below the descriptions of each of the parks.

To set the tone for the exhibit, I wrote an introductory panel with the following text:

> The unspoiled sanctuaries of wilderness and nature preserved in our national parks have an extraordinary power to awaken a profound sense of wonder and awe. The ethereal rise of a peak in mist, the smooth glide of an eagle in flight, the bright

Figure 1. Exhibit on 58 major national parks at Yosemite National Park. (Chris Stein / National Park Service, Yosemite National Park)

> slant of sunbeams piercing the depths of a primeval forest—such glimpses of natural beauty can move us in inexplicable ways that open us to a reality far greater than ourselves. There, outside the artificial routines of routine existence, lies an awe-inspiring realm of wild mystery, governed by forces beyond our control. In coming to national parks, many seek to transcend the superficial distractions that clutter their lives and experience something of deeper, more enduring value (Bernbaum 2006).

As this introduction to the exhibit demonstrates, the spiritual experience of nature does not need to imply a belief in a deity or divine creator. It is open to everyone, be they religious, agnostic, or atheist. All that is necessary is a sense of wonder and awe, of being in the presence of something greater than oneself, such as the vastness of the star-filled sky or the beauty of a flower.

As an example of the brief descriptions of each park with dates of establishment and designation, the plaque for Yosemite National Park reads at the top:

Yosemite Grant, California 1864

Glacier-carved granite peaks and domes rise high above broad meadows, while groves of giant sequoias dwarf other trees and wildflowers in the heart of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. Lofty mountains, alpine wilderness, lakes, and waterfalls, including the nation's highest, are found here in this vast tract of scenic wildland. 761,266 acres

Later Designations

Yosemite National Park — 1890
World Heritage Site — 1984
Wilderness (93%) — 1984

To bring out the inspirational nature of Yosemite National Park, The Mountain Institute provided the following evocative quote from John Muir, the conservationist and naturalist most closely associated with its creation:

> I invite you to join me in a month's workshop with Nature in the high temples of the great Sierra Crown beyond our holy Yosemite. It will cost you nothing save the time and very little of that, for you will be mostly in Eternity.

This quote, from a letter Muir wrote to the Transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1871, evokes the sense of timelessness experienced by many in the quiet contemplation of nature that can fill one with spiritual feelings of wonder and awe.

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park painting competition and radio program. As the seat of two of the world's most active volcanoes, Kilauea and Mauna Loa, Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park is connected in Native Hawaiian tradition and the public imagination with the fire goddess Pele. For Native Hawaiians, she is associated with many natural features, ranging from the fiery lava to various species of flora and fauna native to the area (Spoon 2005). A

group of Native Hawaiian elders known as the Kupuna Committee was working with the park superintendent advising on cultural matters. They expressed concern that the painting of Pele in the main visitor center did not portray the fire goddess in a culturally appropriate manner. A Haole (non-Native Hawaiian) had painted it in the 1920s and had depicted her without reference to Hawaiian culture. Pele had a Western-looking face and her hair was blazing yellow, so that she looked like a blonde surfer from California (Figure 2). The elders wanted to replace her with a painting of Pele more in accord with their traditions. The Mountain Institute had funds from a grant from the Ford Foundation to make it possible. We worked with the Kupuna Committee and interpretive staff to put out a call for people to submit paintings of Pele for the elders to judge and to choose a winning entry.

Figure 2. Painting of Pele by D. Howard Hitchcock (1927) that had been on display at the Kilauea Visitor Center, Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, until 2003. (National Park Service, Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park)

The park sent the call out in a news release, and the two main newspapers in Hawai'i published front-page articles on the contest (Wilson 2003; Thompson 2003). Soon after the park staff learned to their surprise that all the art stores on the Big Island of Hawai'i were sold out of supplies. The park was inundated with what they called a "tsunami of art"—more than 140 paintings. The Kupuna Committee chose the winning entry for its depiction of Pele with a serene, compassionate expression on her face and two objects in her hands representing important stories connected with her activities (Figure 3). For Native Hawaiians, rather than being a wrathful deity associated with volcanic eruptions, she is a benevolent, life-giving goddess who creates new land with her lava.

The park had originally planned to display the remaining entries in the Volcano Art Center, but that venue had space for only about 14 paintings. The various partners in the

Figure 3. Painting of Pele by Arthur Johnsen (2003) selected by Native Hawaiian elders to replace the painting by Hitchcock. (Courtesy of the estate of Arthur Johnsen)

project chose 67 paintings from among the more than 140 submitted, and spread them throughout the park in the Jagger (geology) Museum, Volcano House (the hotel on the rim of Kilauea crater), and the Volcano Art Center in an exhibit titled "Visions of Pele." The exhibit remained up for five weeks, and the artists had a chance to expose their work to the general public and sell their art.

In another issue of concern, the Kupuna Committee wanted to let visitors know before they even entered the park that they were entering a special place sacred to Native Hawaiians, so they would not treat it disrespectfully as a mere recreation area or outdoor amusement park. I attended a meeting with Native Hawaiians on the park's interpretive staff in which they were talking about conveying this message by installing large signs and striking Polynesian sculptures outside the entrance to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. I had driven that morning past a sign well before the park that said something like "Tune into 640 AM on your radio for park information." I suggested they add an introduction about the special importance of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park to the existing radio program that almost everyone entering the park listened to for information on where to see lava flowing and what else to do and see. Since the cars had to wait in line at the entry station and most people spent a lot of time driving around the park, the staff had a captive audience. The interpreter in charge of the radio program was Native Hawaiian, and he composed the following introduction that blended together in a particularly sensitive way the spiritual and physical characteristics of the park and linked the concept of *wahi kapu,* or sacred area, to the more familiar idea of a World Heritage site:

> Aloha and welcome to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. You may notice a change in the plant and animal life, climate, or maybe the way you feel as you enter the park. Don't be surprised; this is a common occurrence. For centuries people have felt the power and uniqueness of this place. Hawaiians call it a *wahi kapu* or sacred area. You are in the domain of Pele, the volcano goddess. She is embodied in everything volcanic that you see here. This is also home to a forest full of species that are found nowhere else on earth and two of the world's most active volcanoes. Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park is now a World Heritage Site, a modern term for a *wahi kapu,* recognizing its importance to all of us.

The introduction to the radio program provides a useful model of an inexpensive way parks and protected areas can use the spiritual and cultural significance of nature for native peoples to engage a large number of visitors and promote support for treating the environment with respect.

Among the lessons learned from these and other projects at various US national parks are the following. It's important for interpretation to focus on inspiring and enriching experience rather than simply conveying information, and to promote mutual respect and appreciation for different points of view. Interpretive materials and activities need to generate multiple messages for different audiences rather than a single message. To avoid imposing views on visitors, it's critical to leave the final interpretation up to them: "What meaning does it have for you?" Interpretation of indigenous views and traditions should be made contemporary

by using the living voices of traditional elders and storytellers. Appealing to the cultural and historical backgrounds of diverse ethnic groups can be an effective means of interesting them in coming to parks and protected areas.

The cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the management and governance of protected areas

In 2014, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) that I co-chair initiated a project to extend the spiritual and cultural significance of nature from interpretation to the conservation, management, and governance of protected areas (http://csvpa.org/cultural-spiritual-nature-programme/). Toward this end, the CSVPA conducted a series of workshops at the IUCN World Parks Congress in Sydney, Australia, in November of that year. The purposes were to: (1) bring protected area managers together with representatives of indigenous traditions and local communities, mainstream religions, and organizations representing the general public; (2) gather ideas and start to develop a training module to promote the role of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the conservation, management, and governance of protected areas; and (3) establish a network of people interested in lending support and sharing experiences and ideas for working together on projects and activities that integrate the cultural and spiritual significance of nature into protected area management and governance.

This project builds on work the CSVPA and its affiliates, the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative (www.sacrednaturalsites.org) and the Delos Initiative (www.med-ina.org/delos/), have done with sacred natural sites, but broadens the scope to include the spiritual and cultural significance that nature in general has for people in both traditional and modern societies. By being as inclusive as possible, including the general public and mainstream religions as well as indigenous traditions and local communities, the project has the potential for reaching a wide audience and a large number and variety of protected area. Mainstream religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism) have millions of followers who can be and have been inspired by their religious leaders to support measures that protect the environment. As the history of environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club in the United States demonstrates, the general public can be galvanized by inspirational messages to influence government policies and the activities of private companies affecting parks and other protected areas (Cohen 1988).

Subsequent workshops with the International Academy for Nature Conservation on the Island of Vilm, Germany, in 2016 and 2017 (Figure 4), and as part of the Nature–Culture Journey at the World Conservation Congress (WCC) in Hawai‘i in September 2016, have focused on developing IUCN best practice guidelines in tandem with training modules and workshops on integrating the cultural and spiritual significance of nature into the management and governance of protected and conserved areas. The strength of this approach lies in the synergies between developing and testing the guidelines and modules and encouraging the actual implementation of the guidelines, which will probably require some adaptation at regional or national scales to be applicable on the site level.

Figure 4. Participants at Vilm workshop, 2016. (Courtesy of Edwin Bernbaum)

The workshop at the WCC in Hawai'i was a key part of the Nature–Culture Journey that IUCN and ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites) jointly sponsored to encourage ways to bring nature and culture together to improve the effectiveness of the nomination, designation, and management of World Heritage sites. This effort, epitomized in the mission of the CSVPA, builds on the growing recognition that considering the interconnections of nature and culture is important as most natural sites have cultural components and significance, while many cultural sites have natural features and meanings. Up until recently there has been a sharp division between natural and cultural World Heritage sites. This is paralleled in the work of IUCN and ICOMOS, as advisory bodies to the World Heritage Committee in evaluating World Heritage nominations. The Connecting Practice initiative is working on bridging the divide between IUCN and ICOMOS over nature and culture (see, for example, articles in this issue by Steve Brown and Letícia Leitão).

The following general principles for promoting the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the management and governance of protected areas are based on review of case studies and emerged from the workshops held on the island of Vilm in 2016 and 2017:

1. Include, recognize, respect, and acknowledge the diversity of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in protected areas.
2. Promote transparency and build relationships by engaging and involving all those who hold, transmit, or are responsible for cultural or spiritual knowledge.
3. Create a secure and safe environment in which culturally appropriate and inclusive processes can be found that allow the best management of the protected area.

4. Be mindful that culture, religion, and spirituality change with time and place, that the cultural and spiritual significance of a place may only become apparent at unexpected scales, and that any particular protected area is embedded in much wider networks and histories.
5. Adopt a holistic approach that recognizes and encourages reciprocity, multiple responsibilities, and rights.
6. Cultivate and foster networks of support that promote the cultural and spiritual significance of nature and protected areas through education, practice, craft, art, and so on (Figure 5).
7. Recognize the key role that the cultural and spiritual significance of nature can play in promoting environmental conservation and enabling biophysical, social and spiritual regeneration, resilience and adaptation.

Figure 5. Hula dancers in ritual dedicated to Pele in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. (Edwin Bernbaum)

Guidelines for specific situations and diverse stakeholders are being developed to implement these general principles.

Conclusion

Despite its critical importance to conservation, relatively little guidance exists on how to work with the cultural and spiritual significance of nature. The outputs of training modules and IUCN best practice guidelines will be among the first of their kind at the global level, contributing to further opportunities to advance the Nature–Culture Journey of IUCN and ICOMOS. The modules and guidelines have the potential to reach a very broad and diverse range of people and a large number of different kinds of protected and conserved areas. Looking to the future, a deeper understanding of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature could also enrich the understanding of World Heritage sites inscribed for their outstanding universal natural values, as well as sites inscribed for their cultural values. This can have significant impacts by making management and governance of protected and conserved areas more sustainable, inclusive, and equitable, especially for the next generation.

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