

# Nature–Culture Journeys: Exploring Shared Terrain

Nora J. Mitchell, Jessica Brown, and Brenda Barrett, guest editors

## Nature–Culture Journeys: Exploring Shared Terrain

*Nora J. Mitchell, Jessica Brown, and Brenda Barrett*

IN 2013, THE TRADITIONAL VOYAGING CANOE *Hōkūle‘a* set sail from Hawai‘i on a round-the-world journey using only traditional Polynesian way-finding techniques, including observations of the stars, the sun, the ocean swells, the winds, birds, and other signs of nature. After a journey of over 60,000 miles, visiting more than 23 countries and territories and 150 ports, the *Hōkūle‘a* returned to Hawai‘i on 17 June 2017.<sup>1</sup> The wayfarers carried a message of *Mālama Honua*—a Hawaiian expression meaning “to care for our island earth”—and gathered ideas to meet the challenges facing our world today.

In September 2016 another journey occurred with similar intentions to those of the *Hōkūle‘a*—this one at the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) World Conservation Congress in Hawai‘i.<sup>2</sup> In the Hawaiian spirit of *Mālama Honua*, people traveled from around the world to share ideas and learn from each other’s innovations in order to better address the earth’s many conservation challenges. As part of this Congress, a four-day “Nature–Culture Journey” explored the interconnections between nature and culture through over 50 related sessions. Drawing inspiration from the depth of knowledge and experience in Hawai‘i, participants in the Nature–Culture Journey delved into the growing understanding that natural and cultural heritage are inextricably linked in many landscapes and seascapes, and that lasting conservation of such places depends on better integration of these “entangled dimensions” in all aspects of planning and management.<sup>3</sup>

Convened every four years by IUCN, the World Conservation Congress focuses on addressing some of our greatest challenges today, such as tackling climate change, conserving biodiversity, and achieving food security. In 2017, the conference theme was “Planet at the Crossroads,” highlighting the urgency of ambitious, coordinated action on behalf of the planet.<sup>4</sup> This ten-day Congress, which featured over 1,000 events on diverse topics, was attended by some 10,000 people from all over the world, representing governments, civil society organizations, indigenous communities, faith and spiritual communities, the private sector, and academia.

---

*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 123–127 (2017).

© 2017 George Wright Society. All rights reserved.

(No copyright is claimed for previously published material reprinted herein.)

ISSN 0732-4715. Please direct all permissions requests to [info@georgewright.org](mailto:info@georgewright.org).

Hawai'i was a particularly appropriate venue for this gathering, as there is a long history of people adapting to their natural environment on these eight small islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean (Figure 1). As Melia Lane-Kamahele observes in her article, the congress provided an opportunity to showcase Hawai'i as a microcosm of culture, place, and conservation challenges, and to share with the world its experience with culturally rooted means of fostering stewardship. These are expressed in Native Hawaiian traditions such as *Aloha 'Aina* (mutual respect for one another and a commitment of service to the natural world) and *Kuleana* (care, responsibility and stewardship of the lands and seas).

The Nature–Culture Journey touched on a broad array of conservation issues, while examining how to better understand the interconnectedness of nature–culture and how to apply this understanding to more effective conservation. This thematic issue of *The George Wright Forum*, “Nature–Culture Journeys: Exploring Shared Terrain,” brings together a variety of perspectives on the connection between nature and culture from contributors who had participated in the gathering in Hawai'i. As co-editors we are pleased that the compilation brings out many voices from different fields and diverse geographies. While this compilation is not a comprehensive review of the many dimensions of this complex theme, the articles assembled here tease out key issues, reflect on areas of progress, and flag up new directions. They provide a rich overview of many of the challenges—and opportunities—of integrating nature and culture in conservation. It is our hope that this sampling of the deliberations from the Nature–Culture Journey conveys a sense of the collegiality and spirit of exploration that characterized this international gathering. We further hope that it will help to advance the dialogue.

### Learning from a range of perspectives

Given the myriad ways that the Nature–Culture Journey drew on Hawai'i's rich experience with nature–culture interlinkages, it is fitting that this compilation begins with an article offer-

**Figure 1.** Hawaiian fishpond on the eastern shore of the island of O'ahu. This advanced form of aquaculture is unique to the islands and many of the ponds are used to this day. (Brenda Barrett)



ing a Hawaiian perspective. Melia Lane-Kamahale presents the experience of several Native Hawaiian communities with community-based stewardship based on people's connections to land and to traditions, such that the *kuleana* grows out of engagement at the deepest level. She observes that in the traditional conservation systems of Hawai'i "there is no separation between *kama'aina* (people of the land) and the land, only their relationship."

Several of the collected articles reflect on and discuss the World Heritage Convention, which explicitly recognizes the value of both culture and nature. We begin these reflections with an essay providing a perspective from the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Centre by Susanna Kari and Mechtild Rössler. Their article examines the intent of the World Heritage Convention to provide a framework to consider both culture and nature and the interconnectedness of the two concepts. The paper analyzes how, through guidance and practice, the intrinsic relationship of culture and nature has been represented through a variety of developments in World Heritage, such as inclusion of the cultural landscape designation, the recognition of the role that people play in managing their environment, and the launch of the World Heritage Sustainable Development Policy. Co-authors Peter Bille Larsen and Gamini Wijesuriya argue that now is the time to re-examine and re-frame the interdependency of culture and nature. Noting that the dichotomy between sectors is an historical artifact of a more westernized worldview, they observe that dominant models of heritage are increasingly being questioned—in conservation practice generally, and in World Heritage in particular. As they write, "heritage thinking in both natural and cultural fields has moved from ideas of freezing heritage as 'static' values and attributes to one of recognizing heritage as dynamic, interrelated and complex." The challenge, they suggest, is to create new institutional practices and even a new language to deal with the broader linkages that are found in all World Heritage sites.

The next several articles examine how the fault line between nature and culture has had an impact on different segments of global heritage and explore how this can be addressed. Maya Ishizawa, Nobuko Inaba, and Masahito Yoshida report on a series of capacity-building international workshops for young heritage conservation professionals offered by the University of Tsukuba in Japan and partners, with a special focus on Asia and the Pacific region. The workshops are envisioned as a means of better understanding and developing new approaches to integrating conservation of cultural and natural heritage, and as a platform for international exchange among heritage practitioners. The first two workshops in the four-year series focus, respectively, on agricultural landscapes and sacred landscapes. Noting that nature has deep spiritual and cultural significance around the world, Edwin Bernbaum considers its potential to inspire and revitalize the connections between people and protected areas. His definition of the spiritual and cultural significance of nature encompasses "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." He suggests that a deeper understanding of this significance, and the related values it carries for people, is essential to effective management and protection of landscapes. Nora Mitchell and Brenda Barrett highlight the growing recognition of agricultural heritage landscapes through an array of designations, and

the serious challenges facing these landscapes. They describe several emerging initiatives to meet these challenges, including developing resilience indicators, adopting landscape-scale approaches, and drafting principles concerning rural landscapes as heritage. All of these essays highlight the inseparable role of nature and culture, as well as the important role of communities in stewardship.

Three more papers reflect on personal journeys inspired by the writers' work on the ground, and further informed by the literature and by deliberations during the Nature–Culture Journey. William Pencek of US ICOMOS (the United States Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites) reflects on personal experience that led him as a cultural heritage professional to broaden his horizons and adopt an expansive view of culture and nature. He observes that his role in supporting the Nature–Culture Journey confirmed the necessity for this perspective. Reflecting on their experience with World Heritage, Steve Brown and Letícia Leitão each explore the challenges and opportunities of advancing more integrated approaches to nature and culture within the convention. Both Brown and Leitão write about their participation in the Connecting Practice initiative, a joint project of IUCN and ICOMOS that brings together interdisciplinary practitioner teams to explore, learn about, and create new methods centered on recognizing and supporting the interconnected character of the natural, cultural, and social values of highly significant landscapes and seascapes.

In the final article in this collection, Andrew Potts offers a broad perspective on the Nature–Culture Journey, noting the potential value of holistic approaches to addressing global challenges. He argues that there is a growing sense of urgency for the nature and culture sectors to work together to address these challenges, specifically by advancing integrated nature–culture solutions to help achieve targets set by global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

### **Thoughts on lessons learned**

While it is beyond the scope of this issue to synthesize all of the findings of the Nature–Culture Journey, this collection of papers identifies some recurring themes. One is the central role of the World Heritage Convention as the international framework that continues to define the standards for heritage conservation. Although there is progress still to be made in addressing nature and culture interlinkages, it is promising that the World Heritage Convention has proven to be able to adapt as concepts have changed over time. Therefore, it is critical that our growing understanding of the dynamic nature of biocultural landscapes inform World Heritage processes and practice. Briefly, some other themes emerging from this compilation include the need to build capacity of practitioners, the sacred and spiritual dimensions of nature, the role of traditional ecological knowledge, and the contribution of agricultural heritage landscapes to ensuring resilient food systems.

As each of our contributing authors indicates, the real issue is not simply achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection of nature and culture. Ultimately, the aim is for conservation—informed by a more integrated perspective of heritage in all of

its manifestations—to contribute significantly to tackling the pressing challenges facing our planet, including climate change, human migration, and food security/sovereignty.

### Looking ahead

Participants in the Nature–Culture Journey in Hawai‘i not only forged new professional connections across disciplines, they also proposed a road map to improve conservation practice through better recognition of the interlinkages of nature and culture. This outcome can be found in the Journey’s closing communiqué: “*Mālama Honua—To Care for Our Island Earth*” (reprinted as the closing article in this issue). Inspired by the spirit of the *Hōkūle‘a* voyage, this statement of commitments recognizes the vital importance of the interlinkages of nature and culture, and calls upon actors from both sectors to work together and adopt integrated nature–culture solutions to address urgent global challenges.

The IUCN–ICOMOS Nature–Culture Journey now has a new destination. One of the commitments in the *Mālama Honua* communiqué requests ICOMOS to continue the Journey at its next General Assembly. Planning for a “Culture–Nature Journey” at the ICOMOS gathering in December 2017 (Delhi, India) is now underway and will provide a forum for continuing the dialogue so critical to advancing good conservation practice. At the upcoming Culture–Nature Journey in Delhi, practitioners from both sectors will have an opportunity to take their next steps together, exploring shared terrain.

### Acknowledgments

The Nature–Culture Journey was jointly coordinated by IUCN and ICOMOS, with the assistance of US/ICOMOS, and in collaboration with UNESCO and other partners. We also want to acknowledge the leadership of Tim Badman and Andrew Potts, focal points for IUCN and ICOMOS respectively, in creating the Nature–Culture Journey, as well as the many contributions from participants that actualized this vision. Highlighting examples of conservation from around the world, Journey sessions demonstrated that, through collaboration, more successful conservation can be imagined and implemented.

[Ed. note: All photos appearing in this special issue are the copyrighted material of their respective creators and are reprinted here with their permission.]

### Endnotes

1. See <http://www.hokulea.com/worldwide-voyage/>.
2. See <http://www.iucnworldconservationcongress.org/>.
3. For more on the Nature–Culture Journey, see <https://www.iucn.org/files/world-heritage-and-nature-culture-journeys-iucn-congress-2016>.
4. See <http://iucnworldconservationcongress.org/por-que-participar/planet-crossroads>.

**Nora J. Mitchell**, P. O. Box 787, Woodstock, VT 05091; [norajmitchell@gmail.com](mailto:norajmitchell@gmail.com)

**Jessica Brown**, 275 High Road, Newbury, MA 01951; [jbrown@oldtownhill.org](mailto:jbrown@oldtownhill.org)

**Brenda Barrett**, 2260 Rudy Road, Harrisburg PA 17104; [Brendabarrett88@gmail.com](mailto:Brendabarrett88@gmail.com)