

# An Urgent Journey: Realizing the Potential of Integrated Nature–Culture Approaches to Create a Sustainable World

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All culture remains tethered to the biosystem, and the options within built environments, though they free us by shifting our dependencies around, provide no final release from nature.... Humans live in a technosphere but remain residents in a biosphere.<sup>1</sup>

Koi i nā pōʻai pili ao ola a pili moʻomeheu e hana pū ma nā pilikia nui o ka honua a kākou e ʻalo nei ma o ka hooholomua ʻana i mau hanana pili ao ola a pili moʻomeheu I mea e kō ai nā UN Sustainable Development Goals, ka Paris Agreement, ka Sendai Framework, a me ka New Urban Agenda o Habitat III.<sup>2</sup>

EMBEDDED IN THE NEW UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS is an urgent message for the conservation community: addressing the planet’s looming crises requires better integrated nature–culture approaches and on a global scale. Collaboration among professionals working across the spectrum of natural, cultural, and social values carried on the planet’s land- and seascapes has, of course, long been accepted as an element of good conservation practice. After all, these values, together with their affiliated biocultural practices, are interlinked. Yet few would deny that a divide has persisted between so-called “nature” and “culture” practitioners and their policies<sup>3</sup>—and this divide has come at a cost to conservation outcomes. The adoption of the UN (United Nations) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; Figure 1) is a powerful indicator that this cost is one that the world is increasingly unable to bear.

The SDGs (as well as related global charters such as the UN New Urban Agenda) recognize that our planet is at the crossroads and set out urgent sustainability objectives to guide humanity’s path. Importantly, they also recognize that integrated nature–culture approaches can advance these objectives by improving conservation outcomes, fostering biological and

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**Figure 1.** The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out a series of objectives to guide the world to a sustainable future. An integrated nature–culture approach can advance these goals by improving conservation outcomes, fostering biological and cultural diversity, and supporting the well-being of contemporary society.



cultural diversity, and supporting the well-being of contemporary societies in both urban and rural areas. Such recognition, at the highest policy levels, creates both a profound opportunity and a formidable responsibility for all those working in the nature conservation, heritage safeguarding, and culture fields. Integrated approaches are needed at all stages—identification, documentation, conservation, protection, management, and presentation. But how can practitioners from these diverse backgrounds, along with the stakeholders they serve, come together to achieve better nature–culture integration in the stewardship of the places we value?

This question was at the center of the Nature–Culture Journey, an unprecedented gathering of hundreds of experts and practitioners that occurred as part of the 2016 World Conservation Congress held by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).<sup>4</sup> The Journey, a linked series of over 50 sessions, was designed to help improve the state of conservation practice through better recognition of the interlinkages of nature and culture and to strengthen interdisciplinary professional networks. Over the course of a week, Journey participants discussed strategies, such as using protected areas as laboratories of innovation; the need to scale-up and -out landscape approaches; how to valorize traditional knowledge and indigenous science in decision-making; and how to overcome professional silos.

The Journey went beyond tactics to focus on the potential of integrated nature–culture approaches to make substantive contributions to solving a host of problems. When are the natural values of a protected area key to the resilience of a far-away city? What types of environmental evidence are locked in a site’s tree rings, skeletons, glaciers, and lake sediments that could help scientists extend their analyses backward in time to enhance our understanding of climate? How can traditional knowledge, for example the heritage of water, be harnessed as a source of contemporary resilience in the face of sea level rise? How are culture and spirituality vectors for promoting sustainable living in harmony with nature? What is the contribution of biocultural diversity to food sovereignty?

The Journey’s outcome document, entitled *Mālama Honua—To Care for Our Island Earth*, provides a road map for how the promise of nature–culture approaches can be realized for the sustainability of our planet in general and the achievement of the SDGs in particular. With the trust of the world reposed in such global frameworks as the SDGs and in the

collective professional practice of nature and culture constituencies, some of the Journey's work is shared here in hopes that it will hasten the attainment of that prize.

### **Background: Nature–culture approaches, the SDGs, and a planet at the crossroads**

Rapid urbanization, wealth inequality, globalization, and the attendant loss of human identity present grave threats to the well-being of human communities and all life on earth. Excessive and insensitive development reflects the abandonment of sustainable patterns of land use, consumption, and production, developed over centuries if not millennia of slow co-evolution of human communities and their environment. At the same time, the ecosystems that underpin our well-being are collapsing. Species are becoming extinct at unprecedented rates and our climate is in crisis. Together, these trends are increasing the risks of disasters, conflict, and displacement. “We live in a time of tremendous change, the nature and extent of which is the subject of intense debate. At the heart of this debate is the clash of immediate human needs with their long-term impacts on the planet’s capacity to support life.”<sup>5</sup>

Against this backdrop and after years of dialogue, in late 2015 the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With its 17 SDGs and attendant 169 targets, these Global Goals (as the SDGs are sometimes known) are arguably the most ambitious and holistic development framework ever conceived. While the SDGs’ adoption by the countries of the world was itself historic, not to be overlooked is the unprecedented, explicit recognition given in the SDGs to the fundamental role that nature, culture, and heritage play in human development. From goals on climate change (Goal 13) and oceans (Goal 14), to those focusing on inclusive education (Goal 4) and productive employment (Goal 8), nature and culture suffuse the Global Goals.

More surprising, perhaps, is the recognition given to the interlinkages between natural and cultural values. “We acknowledge the *natural and cultural diversity* of the world”<sup>6</sup> reads the preamble, and this emphasis is borne out across the document. An example is Goal 15, which addresses terrestrial ecosystems, land use, and biodiversity loss. In targeting the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems and their services, as well as the integration of ecosystem and biodiversity values into government processes, Goal 15 invites us to focus on the interrelation of people and nature. Equally so does Goal 12, which addresses sustainable consumption and production, as in Target 12.8 that focuses on “lifestyles in harmony with nature.”<sup>7</sup> Arguably, though, nowhere is the nature–culture interlinkage made more express than in SDG Target 11.4.

One of the seven targets making up the groundbreaking new “Urban Goal” (Goal 11), Target 11.4 calls for “making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable by strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s *cultural and natural heritage*.”<sup>8</sup> This phrasing recalls the 1972 UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Convention, whose full title is the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and whose policies have long recognized that sites often include and integrate elements of both natural and cultural significance. Indeed, the World Heritage Committee has itself sought to stimulate the development of new methods and strategies to better integrate nature and culture within the

implementation of the convention, although challenges remain. One promising effort in this regard has been the “Connecting Practice” initiative, a joint project of IUCN and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS; see articles in this issue by Leitão and Brown). Target 11.4 extends these considerations far beyond the rarified precincts of World Heritage to all cities and human settlements.

The SDGs coordinate with several other global charters adopted as part of the UN’s Agenda 2030 process, including the Paris Agreement adopted by the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Habitat III New Urban Agenda. These charters not only reflect an emerging development paradigm that views sustainability in more humanistic and ecological terms but also speak, to varying degrees, directly to the role of nature, culture, and heritage in this shift. This vision embraces the reality that we live in a world of complex, interdependent systems and acknowledges that changes to these systems can either enhance or degrade resilience. They point to the need for profound transformations in our patterns of living, production, and consumption, while recognizing that cultural heritage can guide choices that promote development in ways that support and even enhance our planet’s natural systems.

### **The IUCN World Conservation Congress and planning the Nature–Culture Journey**

The adoption of these global charters helped focus the world’s attention on resiliency and sustainability in the face of urgent challenges. This emphasis in turn helped to inspire the theme for the 2016 quadrennial IUCN World Conservation Congress: Planet at the Crossroads. In explaining its choice of themes, IUCN stated: “[w]ith a timeframe of 15 years, the world has committed to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals—an ambitious agenda for improving human living conditions for all. There is a real sense of urgency in this call to action, as many believe there is a closing window of opportunity to effect meaningful change in Humanity’s trajectory.”<sup>9</sup>

The SDGs’ promise, IUCN said, could only be achieved through an enhanced understanding of the planet’s complex life-support systems and the predominant global trends currently acting upon them—urbanization, economic growth, burgeoning consumption, disappearing biodiversity, wealth inequality, climate change, and population growth among them.

This same sense of urgency helped create an impetus for using the 2016 Congress to address the need for more integrated nature–culture approaches. The congress’s location in the heart of the Pacific Ocean and the generous *Aloha* spirit of the people of Hawai‘i provided an optimal setting. Native Hawaiian traditions like *Aloha ‘Āina* (mutual respect for one another and a commitment of service to the natural world) and *Kuleana* (care for, responsibility for, and stewardship of the lands and seas) helped shift the focus from a perceived division between nature and culture to one that highlighted the nexus between biological and cultural diversity, and how their conservation and sustainability require an understanding of “modern” knowledge that includes traditional wisdom.

And thus, the Nature–Culture Journey was born.<sup>10</sup> From the beginning, the Journey organizers had two key objectives. The first was that the planning and execution of the Journey would itself be a model of connecting practices. Biologist and architects, anthropologists and

oceanographers, indigenous and “western” scientists were encouraged to form new partnerships and plan sessions in cross-functional ways. Each session also brought relevant IUCN commissions, themes, and expert groups together with related ICOMOS scientific and national committees, some collaborating for the first time.

The Journey planners also sought to highlight and emphasize the broad range of contexts, settings, and themes in which the better integration of nature and culture held particular promise. Ultimately, a joint IUCN–ICOMOS curatorial committee selected a variety of emphases, including:

- Rights-based approaches, equity, and equitable and effective governance.
- Cultural landscapes and biocultural landscapes.
- Climate change adaptation and resilience, including learning from ecology, culture, history, and ancestral voices.
- Indigenous science, and local and traditional cultural and ecological knowledge (inter-generational transfer of traditional knowledge; using, linking, and reconciling traditional knowledge with western scientific approaches).
- The role of local natural resource management systems and local dynamic cultural systems/heritage in the conservation of nature.
- Nature–culture linkages in the urban and peri-urban contexts.
- Ecosystem goods and services; inclusion of dynamic cultural processes—valuing broader socio/economic/health benefits for local and traditional communities.
- World Heritage and protected area processes—recognition of interlinkages of natural and cultural values; partnerships and management.
- Integrating social and cultural dimensions into large-scale ocean conservation.

### **Mālama Honua: The Nature–Culture Journey Outcome**

Journey participants issued “*Mālama Honua*,” a statement of personal commitments and observations rooted in their Journey experience (Figure 2).<sup>11</sup> *Mālama Honua* includes a sobering recognition that cultural and natural diversity and heritage are seriously threatened around the world by a number of challenges, including climate change. It goes further in arriving at the conclusion that the very culture/nature divide the Journey had assembled to address was itself a symptom of larger processes that have put the earth on an unsustainable path. At the same time, participants acknowledged the wealth of inspiring examples of harmonious approaches to nature and culture shared at the Congress that demonstrate place-based approaches, governance, and equity; show respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities; and strengthen traditional institutions.

A recurring theme across the Journey was the potential for the adoption of landscape-, biocultural landscape-, and ecosystem-based approaches to drive better integration of natural and cultural values and practitioners. Both cultural and biological diversity are already accepted as central components of these approaches. Journey participants reviewed case studies where landscape approaches had this effect and others where either cultural or natural values and/or professionals had not been meaningfully engaged despite a “landscape” label.



**Figure 2.** Participants in the Nature–Culture Journey at the World Conservation Congress put their signatures on the Mālama Honua statement to declare their commitment to care for the diverse resources on the planet earth. (Andrew Potts)

Even with their promise, landscape approaches are not in use in a variety of places, from protected areas to historic urban centers. *Mālama Honua* calls for new working methods and practices that bring together nature and culture to achieve conservation outcomes on a landscape scale, while promoting the leadership, participation, resilience, and well-being of associated communities.

Journey participants also examined the potential of integrated nature–culture approaches, including landscape approaches, not just by category of protected area or type of cultural resource but more thematically across a variety of global trends and challenges. A few examples highlight the exciting potential.

**Ending hunger, achieving food security, and promoting sustainable agriculture.** The need to provide food for people has resulted in the intensification and industrialization of agriculture, including aquaculture, while traditionally farmed areas, practices, biocultural diversity, and natural ecosystems have been lost, and water resources have been depleted and degraded. Participants in the Journey felt strongly that food sovereignty and cultural survival depended on the emergence of unified landscape models for managing food production areas, including integrated urban and territorial planning. Linkages between agrobiodiversity, wild biodiversity, and cultural diversity were also emphasized. They also discussed people-centered conservation strategies that connected food production and consumption patterns. This will require bringing together currently fragmented organizations and initiatives

and strengthening governance systems, including integrating nature and culture regulatory systems.

**Climate change.** The Paris Agreement confirms that the world community now accepts the reality of climate change, the current and projected impacts, and the difficult fact that greenhouse gas emissions from all sources must be reduced. It also acknowledges notions of climate justice and recognizes the value of ecosystem services and the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems (including oceans) and the protection of biodiversity, carbon sinks, and reservoirs. Nature and culture have much to offer and are generally closely aligned. Both present models of conservation and both are components of a comprehensive approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Ecosystem-based adaptation, often drawing on traditional place-based knowledge, helps reduce people's vulnerability to climate change impacts.

Journey participants shared a concern for the ethical, economic, and cultural implications of natural capital approaches; for just and effective governance of conservation; and for support of diverse knowledge systems, which represent critical tools for climate response. They discussed the role iconic spiritual, cultural, and nature values can play as a source of social cohesion and as a guide to climate adaptation. Journey sessions emphasized that heritage sites possess paleoclimatology data that extend the archive of weather and climate information back by hundreds of years. Participants spoke to the parallel insights that nature and culture bring to addressing the unavoidable impacts of climate change, from refugia and wildlife corridors to climate mobility, migration, and human displacement. The need for better models of valuing both ecosystem services and cultural heritage was discussed, as was the challenge of measuring impacts on them in terms of non-economic loss and damage.

**Urbanization and resilient cities.** It is noteworthy that arguably the most explicit inter-linkage of natural and cultural values found in the SDGs occurs in Goal 11, which focuses on making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. This emphasis is carried forward in the UN's New Urban Agenda, which sets new global standards for how we plan, manage, and live in cities and provides guidance for achieving the SDGs. Section 38 of the New Urban Agenda says:

We commit ourselves to the sustainable leveraging of natural and cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, in cities and human settlements, as appropriate, through integrated urban and territorial policies and adequate investments at the national, subnational and local levels....<sup>12</sup>

The agenda also lays out commitments for addressing the ecological and social functions of land, adopting ecosystem-based solutions, addressing sustainable consumption and production patterns as well as healthy lifestyles in harmony with nature, building urban resilience, reducing disaster risks, and mitigating and adapting to climate change in cities and human settlements.

Participants felt that the potential for nature-based solutions may be less well developed in the urban context while cultural landscape approaches can be less robust in monument-intensive urban cores. The Journey examined how to leverage nature-cultural coalitions in

such circumstances. Participants felt that a town's natural attributes and processes (i.e., its setting) is the *genius loci* from which a city emerges. If this relationship were better understood, it could unlock benefits for resilience planning. "If we recognized the entanglement of nature and culture and their inseparability," participants said, "we would manage cities differently." "Historic urban landscape" (HUL) and protected area approaches to cities were compared. There was agreement that we needed to value the people that can work "across the divide" and that issues such as climate change and disaster risk reduction can be a catalyzing force to accelerate and structure nature-culture collaboration in the urban context.

## Conclusion

A growing body of evidence establishes that integrated nature-culture approaches can advance sustainability by improving conservation outcomes, fostering bio- and cultural diversity, and supporting the well-being of contemporary societies. The promise of these approaches is such that policy-makers have now incorporated them into the SDGs and other global charters. The Nature-Culture Journey gave cross-functional teams of practitioners, experts, and stakeholders an intensive opportunity to examine not only paths towards achieving such integrated practice but also insights into how to calibrate that work to the ambitions of the Global Goals.

While Journey participants were generally aware of the SDGs and the expectations they hold for conservation professionals, *Mālama Honua* calls for a renewed appreciation of the direct connection between conservation work and addressing the urgent challenges we face. It calls on the nature and culture sectors to work together to address these challenges specifically by advancing integrated nature-culture solutions correlated to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the ambitions of the Paris Agreement, and the objectives of the Sendai Framework and the New Urban Agenda.

And finally, *Mālama Honua* signatories each committed themselves to advancing the transformation of conservation in their own work by reaching across professional disciplines and continuing these conversations with colleagues and communities, and engaging future generations. This is perhaps the least that any of us could do, but it also may prove to be the most important.

## Endnotes

1. Holmes Rolston III, "Human Values and Natural Systems," *Society and Natural Resources* 1 (1988): 271–283.
2. *Mālama Honua—To Care for Our Island Earth: A Statement of Commitments from the Nature-Culture Journey Participants at the IUCN World Conservation Congress, Hawai'i 2016*. Online at <https://www.iucn.org/files/m%C4%81lama-honua-%E2%80%93-statement-commitments-nature-culture-journey>. ("Call on the nature and culture sectors to work together to address the urgent global challenges we face, by advancing integrated nature-culture solutions to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework, and Habitat III's New Urban Agenda.")
3. See, e.g. *Connecting Practice Project Final Report* (2015). Online at <https://www.iucn.org>.

org/downloads/connecting\_practice\_report\_iucn\_icomos\_.pdf. (“The World Heritage Convention is the leading international instrument for conservation that brings together nature and culture. Yet a divide between the two fields is still often observed.”)

4. The Nature–Culture Journey was organized by IUCN, ICOMOS, and the United States National Committee of ICOMOS (US/ICOMOS). It was supported by the US National Park Service, the state of Hawai‘i including its Department of Land and Natural Resources, and the Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment. The assistance of other supporting organizations, including the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, as well as dozens of ICOMOS national and scientific committees and IUCN commissions, themes, and expert groups, is gratefully acknowledged.
5. IUCN, “World Conservation Congress: Planet at the Crossroads” (n.d.). Online at <http://iucnworldconservationcongress.org/why-attend/planet-crossroads/theme-iucn-congress-2016-planet-crossroads>.
6. UN General Assembly Resolution 70/1, “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” A/RES/70/1 (21 October 2015). Online at [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E) (emphasis added).
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid. (emphasis added).
9. IUCN, “World Conservation Congress: Planet at the Crossroads.”
10. The Nature–Culture Journey benefitted from the richness of over two dozen other Congress journeys, including ones focusing on the SDGs more generally and on World Heritage. Of special note is the Spirituality and Conservation Journey. This journey was grounded in a recognition that the world’s rich diversity of cultures and faith traditions, including the wisdom embodied in indigenous worldviews and traditions, are a major source of ethical values and provide insights into ways of valuing nature.
11. *Mālama Honua*.
12. UN General Assembly Resolution 71/256, “New Urban Agenda,” A/RES/71/256 (25 January 2017). Online at <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/New-Urban-Agenda-GA-Adopted-68th-Plenary-N1646655-E.pdf>.

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