

CGR4.MOT053

Recognition and conservation of sacred natural sites in protected areas

RECOGNIZING that one of the oldest forms of culture-based conservation has been the protection of the sacred natural sites of indigenous communities and mainstream faiths, and that these sacred natural sites often harbour rich biodiversity and safeguard valuable landscapes and ecosystems;

AWARE that Sacred Natural Site (SNS) is defined in the *Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines* as: “Areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities” (*Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers*, No. 16, IUCN, 2008, page xi);

UNDERSTANDING that sacred natural sites – springs of pure water, glaciated mountains, unusual geological formations, forest groves, rivers, lakes and caves – are today and have long been integral to human identity, survival and evolution;

AWARE that many sacred natural sites are at risk and subject to a wide range of pressures and threats, such as:

Impacts from extractive industries’ operations (mining, logging);

Encroachment by outsiders (poaching, illegal fishing, vandalism, looting of burial grounds and archaeological sites);

Poverty and population dynamics (new settlers, conversions to other faith groups);

Disrespectful tourism and recreational activities;

Degradation of neighbouring environments; and

Climate change (extreme weather events, sea level rise, drought, floods and erosion);

ACKNOWLEDGING that many sacred natural sites have been integrated into legally declared protected areas without adequate recognition of the local communities' cultural and spiritual values and the traditional beliefs, practices and knowledge that have sustained the associated locations, cultures and resources;

CONCERNED that legally recognized protected areas sometimes deny access to sacred natural sites to indigenous peoples or religious groups who have utilized and cared for them for many generations;

RECALLING that protection of sacred natural sites has been encouraged in the Man and the Biosphere Programme (1970), the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971), the World Heritage Convention (1972), the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), Vth World Parks Congress Recommendation V.13 (*Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas*) (Durban, 2003), Res 3.049 (*Community Conserved Areas*) adopted by the 3rd Session of the World Conservation Congress (Bangkok, 2004), and the *U.N.*

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007);

NOTING that IUCN and UNESCO in 2008 published the Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 16 on "Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers."

The World Conservation Congress at its 4th Session in Barcelona, Spain, 5–14 October 2008:

1. AFFIRMS that urgent action is needed for culturally appropriate sacred natural site conservation and management within (and near) official protected areas;

2. CALLS on:

Government Agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations to recognize the rights, the skills and the knowledge that local and indigenous custodians and mainstream faith communities have in managing the resources and ecosystems associated with sacred natural sites;

Government Agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations and Conservation Agencies to work with and support local traditional and indigenous communities and custodians to directly confront threats affecting sacred natural sites by improving the management of sacred natural sites, and by adopting laws and policies – with the full and effective participation and consent of communities or organizations concerned – that protect the biological and cultural integrity of sacred natural sites; and

Protected area agencies and managers to recognize the cultural and spiritual values of sacred natural sites included within their designated boundaries, and to recognize and facilitate the rights and interests of the communities or organizations concerned to continue managing and using those sacred natural sites as places for their cultural and spiritual realization and reverence;

3. CALLS for increased scientific research into the complex relationship between biological diversity, cultural diversity and sacred natural sites;

4. ENCOURAGES additional investment in public education and international networks dedicated to the conservation and protection of sacred natural sites; and

5. REQUESTS the conservation community to promote and participate fully in intercultural dialogue and conflict resolution with indigenous peoples, local communities and mainstream faiths to improve collaborative protection of sacred natural sites;

In addition, the World Conservation Congress, at its 4th Session in Barcelona, Spain, 5–14 October 2008, provides the following guidance in the implementation of the Programme 2009–2012:

6. REQUESTS the Director General to:

Implement and field test the new Sacred Natural Site guidelines in all categories of IUCN protected areas; and

Encourage their implementation and field testing in UNESCO Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites.

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