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Asian Sacred Natural Sites: Philosophy and Practice in Protected Areas and Conservation

Edited by Bas Verschuuren and Naoya Furuta. Abingdon, United Kingdom and New York, USA: Routledge, 2016. xxii + 318 pp. Hardcover: US$ 150.00, ISBN 978-1-138-93629-4. Paperback: US$ 67.95, ISBN 978-1-138-93631-7. E-book: US$ 33.99, ISBN 978-1-315-67627-2.

Ever since the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) helped some two decades ago to bring the role of sacred natural sites for biodiversity conservation into the global arena, environmental conservationists have been showing growing interest in sacred natural sites. Can environmental conservation be practiced in a more sustainable way if it is aligned with spiritual values and cultural practices that are shared among, and are an integral part of, the traditional worldviews of a given community? Can spirituality and religion be powerful agents for protecting our physical environment and its living organisms? Is it possible to "link" conservation of biological diversity and cultural integrity?

Sacred natural sites appear to do just that. Traditional societies around the world, especially in Asia, have assigned a special status to natural sites considered as sacred—through the perception of residing deities and spirits, as shrines dedicated to ancestors, or as privileged places for meditation, revelation, and even purification of the inner self. Fear of retribution from (malevolent) spirits for harm done to nature within a sacred natural site is another powerful agent for conserving environmental integrity among many traditional communities. As sacred sites are places of seclusion from the nonsacred world, they are generally subject to restricted access and therefore suffer less direct human impact in terms of exploitation of natural resources for purely economic purposes.

As indicated by its title, this publication focuses on sacred natural sites in the Asian region. Asia is probably the most diverse continent regarding ethnic composition, cultures, traditional worldviews, and belief systems. More than 50 authors have contributed case studies, many from mountain areas, from Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Oman, and Thailand to this fascinating book. While many of the case studies focus on animist traditions (including Shintoism), Hinduism, Buddhism, shamanism, pre-Islamic religions, and any syncretic combinations thereof are also well reflected.

The publication is an outstanding attempt to shed light on how philosophies and practices related to sacred natural sites are relevant to conventional protected areas and conservation in Asia. To this end, following an introduction by Bas Verschuuren—one of the editors—the book is structured into 6 cross-fertilizing parts. Part 1, with 3 chapters, provides a general overview on "Themes and perspectives on the conservation of Asian sacred natural sites." This section explores some common perspectives that support our understanding of how sacred natural sites can contribute to existing and new conservation approaches in Asia; Ed Bernbaum's chapter focuses specifically on sacred mountains. Part 2 refers to "National perspectives and strategies for the conservation of sacred natural sites." These are illustrated by 3 chapters, which discuss how sacred natural sites could or should be recognized in government policies. The 4 chapters in part 3 are concerned with "Legal approaches and governance of sacred natural sites." This section shows the complexity behind the governance of sacred natural sites and emphasizes the role, often overlooked, of the spiritual in creating customary law and rule. Part 4, with 4 chapters, highlights how "The conservation of sacred lands meets the challenges of development," especially within the context of rapid economic development and modernization in many Asian countries. Part 5 discusses the "Role for custodians and religious leaders in the conservation of sacred natural sites," with 4 chapters that consider whether spiritual guides and religious leaders can help conservationists counter some of the threats imposed by societal and economic change and support the conservation of the environments that their sacred places depend on. Finally, part 6 focuses on "Dualing spirits and sciences: revisiting the foundations of conservation," with 4 case studies followed by an excellent concluding chapter by Bas Verschuuren on how the cultural, spiritual, and philosophical underpinnings of sacred natural sites can make conservation in Asia more effective and sustainable.

The editors did well by including the "Darvi declaration of sacred sites guardians and traditional cultural practitioners of the Pamir, Tien Shan and Altai Sayan biocultural mountain systems" (Mongolia 2014) as an appendix. In this, representatives of local and indigenous communities—shamans, traditional singers, storytellers, and traditional knowledge custodians—recognize the special role that sacred mountains and cultural landscapes play in maintaining Earth's biological and cultural diversity and, among other things, pledge to offer their experience in processes of nominating and managing World Heritage Sites.

The book is primarily written by, and mostly targeted at, environmental conservation experts. However, this statement should not be seen as a reductionist assessment:

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the publication is also a mine of information for anthropologists, philosophers, scholars on religions and traditional belief systems, environmental lawyers, social scientists, and political scientists interested in traditional and modern governance systems of sacred natural sites including or excluding government-designated legally protected areas.

The book is very well edited. For the fast reader it provides introductions and summaries for each of the 6 thematic parts. Cross-references among the different chapters and thematic parts inform on similar issues discussed elsewhere in the book. An index aids readers in finding information on a specific subject. It would have helped, however, if the black-and-white photos had been printed in color, as some details are not easily detectable. Surely, this decision was made with the aim of keeping costs low and the purchase price affordable for the largest possible audience (note that the publication is available in hardcover, paperback, and e-book editions).

This book is a must-read for anyone interested in the interrelationship of sacred natural sites and biocultural diversity. It can only be hoped that similarly well-researched and well-edited publications on sacred natural sites in Africa and the Americas will also be produced. These would complement the findings in this publication with worldviews and practices of managing sacred natural sites in other world regions.

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