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Edwin Bernbaum

Sacred Mountains: Themes and Teachings

As the highest and most impressive features of the landscape, mountains have an unusual power to awaken a sense of the sacred. Their soaring summits, the clouds and thunder that swirl about their peaks, the life-giving waters that flow from their heights, these and other characteristics imbue them with an aura of mystery and sanctity. In that aura, people of diverse backgrounds, both traditional and modern, experience a deeper reality that gives meaning and vitality to their lives. Drawing on many of the themes associated with sacred mountains around the world, The Mountain Institute in Washington DC has developed with the US National Park Service innovative educational activities that highlight the spiritual and cultural meanings of natural features of mountain environments in different cultures. The purpose of the project is to connect a broad range of visitors with nature, enrich their experiences, and give them deep-seated, sustainable reasons for conserving the environment. Efforts to conserve the environmental integrity and cultural diversity associated with sacred mountains need to involve the many diverse peoples and traditions that revere and care for them.

The dimensions of sacredness

As sacred expressions of some deeper reality, mountains have become associated with the deepest and highest values and aspirations of cultures and traditions throughout the world. The remote Himalayan peak of Mount Kailas directs the minds of millions of Hindus and Buddhists toward the utmost attainments of their spiritual traditions. Mount Sinai (Figure 1) occupies a special place in the Bible as the imposing site where Moses received the Ten Commandments, the basis of law and ethics in Western civilization. The graceful cone of Mount Fuji has come to represent the quest for beauty and simplicity that lies at the heart of Japanese culture. Mount Everest stands out, even in the modern, secular world, as an inspiring symbol of the ultimate.

The sacredness of mountains is manifested in 3 general ways. Firstly, certain peaks are singled out by particular cultures and traditions as places of sanctity. These mountains—the ones traditionally known as "sacred mountains"—have well-established networks of myths, beliefs, and



FIGURE 1 Monastery of St Catherine at the foot of Jebel Musa (Mount Sinai), Egypt. (Photo by Edwin Bernbaum)

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religious practices such as pilgrimage, meditation, and sacrifice. Primary examples would be Tai Shan in China, Mount Sinai in Egypt, and the San Francisco Peaks in the United States.

Secondly, mountains that may or may not be revered frequently contain sacred sites and objects such as temples, monasteries, hermitages, stones, springs, and groves, or are associated with the activities of important holy persons, such as Mount Koya and Kobo Daishi in Japan. Great numbers of people, for example, visit pilgrimage shrines located in mountainous regions, such as the Hindu shrine of Badrinath in the Indian Himalaya.

Finally, mountains commonly awaken in individuals a sense of wonder and awe that sets them apart as places imbued with evocative beauty and meaning. Many tourists, hikers, and climbers today go to the Sierra Nevada in California, the Alps in Europe, and other ranges such as Huang Shan in China for esthetic and spiritual inspiration and renewal, often regarding them as expressions of important values enshrined in works of literature and art. As the writings of conservationists such as John Muir demonstrate, such views of mountains helped give rise to the environmental movement in the United States and have played a key role in galvanizing public support for the preservation of nature.

People of different cultures experience the 3 general expressions of sacredness in mountains through the views they have of them, such as the mountain as center of the universe or source of water and life. These views or themes differentiate the experience of the sacred and provide a starting point for developing a framework for identifying mountain sites and determining their potential for helping to conserve environmental and cultural diversity. In the course of studying sacred mountains around the world, I have found 10 themes to be particularly widespread. They are briefly described below.

Themes

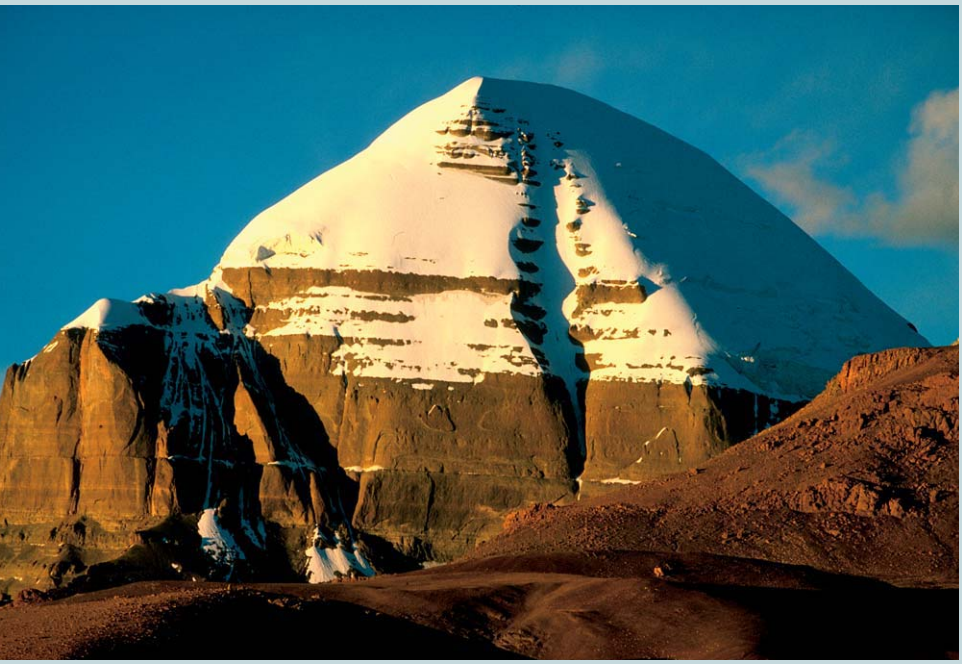
Height. Many people revere mountains as high places. Mount Everest, in particular, has assumed the status of a sacred mountain in the modern world. Its summit symbolizes for many the highest goal one can strive to attain, whether one's pursuit be material or spiritual. Because of its importance in the West as the ultimate high place, the Tibetan name of Mount Everest, Jomolangma, is almost always mistranslated in Western literature as "Goddess Mother of the World." In fact, Jomolangma is short for Jomomiyolangsangma, the name of the Tibetan goddess of Mount Everest, one of the Five Sisters of Long Life and a relatively minor deity, invoked for worldly benefits, such as longevity, food, and wealth.

Center. An extremely widespread theme is that of the mountain as center—of the cosmos, the world, or a local region. Although some scholars have gone so far as to assert that every sacred peak is an *axis mundi*, a careful analysis shows that this hypothesis does not hold true: the 4 sacred mountains of the Navajo, for example, determine the perimeter of the land within which the Navajo live, not its center. With this caveat, it is true that a large number of mountains in Asia, such as Kailas in Tibet and Gunung Agung in Bali, are patterned on the mythical Mount Meru or Sumeru, which stands as a cosmic axis around which the universe is organized in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. As a piece of Meru transported there by the gods, Gunung Agung provides the Balinese with their sense of geographical and psychological orientation—everything on the island exists and finds its place in relation to the volcano.

Power. Many sacred mountains are revered as places of power, both natural and supernatural. In the 19th century, Europeans in New Zealand were starting to buy up parcels of land on Tongariro, the sacred mountain of the Ngati Tuwharetoa. This threatened the *mana* or power of the chief and the tribe, which depended on maintaining the integrity of the volcano. In order to keep Tongariro whole, a European advisor counseled the Paramount Chief, Horonuku Te Heuheu Tukino IV, to give the mountain to the Crown as a park for the benefit of everyone. He did so in 1887, and Tongariro National Park became the first national park in New Zealand. It later became a World Heritage site.

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FIGURE 2 Mount Kailas, Tibet. (Photo by Edwin Bernbaum)



Deity or Abode of Deity. The power of many sacred mountains derives from the presence of deities—in, on, or as the mountain itself. Indians regard the graceful peak of Nanda Devi, a World Heritage site, as the abode of Nanda Devi, the Goddess of Bliss. A temple at the hill station of Almora has a well-known image of the deity. Native Hawaiians revere Kilauea itself as the body of the volcano goddess Pele.

Temple or Place of Worship. Many traditions revere sacred peaks as temples or places of worship. Tibetan Buddhists, for example, view Mount Kailas as the pagoda palace of Demchog, the One of Supreme Bliss, a tantric deity embodying the ultimate Buddhist goal of enlightenment (Figure 2). Mounts Zion and Sinai function as places of worship in Judeo-Christian traditions, the former providing the site of the ancient Jewish Temple.

Paradise or Garden. Shiva is said to reside in his heaven on the summit of Kailas. Numerous cultures, both traditional and modern, view mountains as gardens and paradises—heavens on earth. The Muslim Kirghiz of western China, for example, believe that the snows of Muztagh Ata, one of the highest peaks in the Pamir, hide an earthly paradise that goes back to the time of the Garden of Eden.

Ancestors and the Dead. Another major theme links mountains to the other world as ancestors and abodes of the dead, often involved in origin myths. Mount Koya, the meditation center of Shingon Buddhism, has one of the most impressive graveyards in Japan. The Maori believe themselves descended from peaks in New Zealand, who came as their ancestors in legendary canoes and were shipwrecked on the shores of the islands. Aoraki or Mount Cook represents one ancestor who waded ashore and froze into the mountain we see today. The peak is the highest in New Zealand because he was carrying his grandson on his shoulders.

Identity. Aoraki also illustrates the widespread theme of mountains as symbols of cultural and even personal identity. The standard formula for identifying oneself at an intratribal Maori meeting is to begin with one's tribal mountain, such as Aoraki or Tongariro, and then give one's lake or river and finally the name of one's chief. Mount Rainier in the United States functions as an icon of the Pacific Northwest, as Mount Fuji does of the entire country of Japan.

Source. Throughout the world people look up to mountains as sources of blessings, such as water, life, fertility, and healing. The Hopi of Arizona invite the Katsina deities to come from the San Francisco Peaks, bringing with them their rain clouds on which the people depend for growing corn. Andean *curanderos* or shamans invoke mountain gods, such as the Apus of Mounts Ausangate and Salcantay near Cuzco, for healing and water.

Inspiration, Renewal, and Transformation. In China mountains are regarded as such ideal places for meditation and spiritual transformation that the Chinese expression for embarking on the practice of religion means literally "to enter the mountains." North American Plains Indians, such as the Lakota and the Crow, seek out high places for vision quests that give them spiritual power and determine the course of their lives. Many in the modern world go to mountains such as the Alps and the Sierra Nevada for artistic inspiration and spiritual renewal.

Each of these 10 themes or views brings together different ideas, images,

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and associations to evoke the experience of a deeper reality. For the sake of simplicity, I have illustrated each theme with a particular mountain. But in actual practice these themes come in clusters linked to each other in complex ways. The more themes that gather like clouds around a peak, the more associations they bring to bear, making the mountain resonate with increasingly deeper significance.

Applications to parks and protected areas

Drawing on many of the themes associated with sacred mountains around the world, The Mountain Institute's (TMI) Sacred Mountains Program has been working with the US National Park Service (NPS) since 1998, developing innovative interpretive and educational materials and activities that highlight the evocative spiritual and cultural meanings of natural features of mountain environments—ranging from peaks and rivers to forests and wildlife—in American, Native American, Native Hawaiian, and other cultures around the world. The purpose of the project is to connect a broad range of visitors with nature, enrich their experiences, and give them deep-seated, sustainable reasons for conserving the environment. In addition to reaching the general public, the project helps diversify the National Park Service's limited visitor base by connecting with the heritages and backgrounds of cultural and ethnic groups who have not visited national parks in high numbers, such as African Americans and Latinos.

With more than 400 million visits a year from around the country and the world, US National Parks provide ideal high visibility, high impact platforms for reaching diverse sectors of the public with messages grounded in spiritual and cultural values that motivate enduring conservation, and for reaching other parks and protected areas with models that inspire them to create similar products suited to their particular needs and resources. TMI's project with National Parks has the potential to enrich the experiences of millions of people and give them a deeper understanding and appreciation of nature and of other cultures. Efforts to conserve biological and cultural diversity need such an understanding and appreciation to gain the local and public support required to be sustainable over the long term.

Interpretive and educational materials and activities

One of the first interpretive products TMI's Sacred Mountains Program developed with the NPS was an offsite traveling exhibit for Mount Rainier National Park entitled "Mountain Views" that focuses attention on the evocative spiritual and cultural dimensions of Mount Rainier, a prominent snow-clad volcano that is sacred for 6 local tribes and is also a powerful symbol of place and identity for 3 million residents of this region of the United States (Figure 3). Park rangers who specialize in interpretation take this traveling display to fairs, community centers, conventions, and other venues in the Seattle–Tacoma area in an effort to reach a wider audience and encourage greater visitation for the park.

The exhibit has 3 sections: "The Mountain," "Mount Rainier National Park," and "Mountains of the World." Each section employs images of people with



FIGURE 3 Mount Rainier traveling exhibit. (Photo by Edwin Bernbaum)

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evocative quotes by each of them. "The Mountain" section, for example, has a picture of the well-known American conservationist John Muir with his impressions on seeing Mount Rainier for the first time, and a photograph of tribal elders with a quote on what the mountain, Tacobet, means to the Nisqually Tribe. The quotes in the "Mount Rainier National Park" section show how "The Mountain," as Rainier is known in the Pacific Northwest, has inspired staff in different divisions of the Park, ranging from interpretation to maintenance, to work at Mount Rainier.

In an effort to provide multiple perspectives and connect with the heritages and traditions of African and Asian Americans in the Pacific Northwest, the left-hand section, "Mountains of the World," focuses on 3 mountains that stand out as cultural icons similar to Mount Rainier: Mount Kailas in Tibet, Kilimanjaro in Africa, and Mount Fuji in Japan. A picture of Kilimanjaro, for example, is accompanied by interpretive text on its importance to the Chagga people who live on its slopes and a quote by Julius Nyerere, the first president of the modern state of Tanganyika/Tanzania: "We will light a candle on top of Mount Kilimanjaro which will shine beyond our borders, giving hope where there is despair, love where there is hate, and dignity where before there was only humiliation."

A line at the bottom of the exhibit asks viewers to write down their comments on "What does the Mountain mean to you?" in order to engage the public and motivate support for the park and its environment.

In 1999 the Sacred Mountains Program initiated a collaboration among Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, and TMI to develop wayside exhibits that link Cherokee traditions and stories to features of the natural landscape—such as buzzards, trees, a mountain, and the river itself—along the 2 km Oconaluftee River Trail that runs from the Oconaluftee Visitor Center in the Park to the Qualla Boundary (the tribal lands of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee). The waysides are in English and Cherokee and are illustrated with artwork by local Cherokee artists selected by the Museum of the Cherokee Indian (Figure 4).

As much as possible, the stories related on the signs are in the voices of living Cherokee elders and storytellers in order to ensure authenticity and immediacy. One

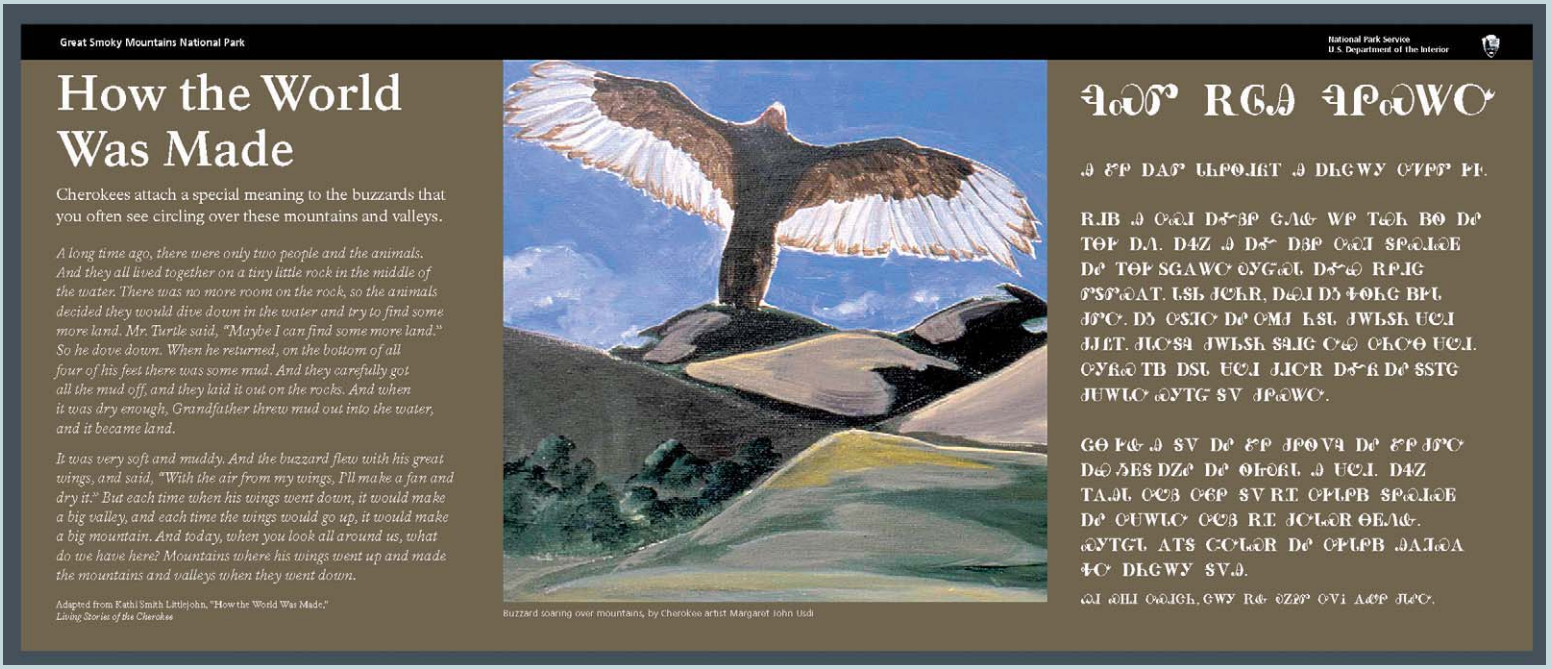


FIGURE 4 Design for Oconaluftee wayside exhibit on buzzard creating mountains and valleys. (Poster courtesy of National Park Service)

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FIGURE 5 Cherokee elder pointing out buzzards on the Oconaluftee River Trail. (Photo by Edwin Bernbaum)



wayside, for example, conveys Cherokee views on the sacredness of the mountains and their stewardship of the environment through the words of the Cherokee elder Jerry Wolfe: "The Great Smoky Mountains are a sanctuary for the Cherokee people. We have always believed the mountains and streams provide all that we need for survival. We hold these mountains sacred, believing that the Cherokees were chosen to take care of the mountains as the mountains take care of us." (Figure 5)

Since many Cherokees, both adults and school children, walk the trail for exercise, the signs provide an opportunity to pass on their traditions to the younger generation and reinforce the teaching of the Cherokee language in their schools. The project also enables the Eastern Band to reach the wider public through park interpretive materials. Two additional waysides on Clingman's Dome, the highest mountain in the Park, tell the Cherokee creation story of the creation of the mountains and valleys and relate Cherokee traditions of Clingman's Dome as a sacred place of healing and a sanctuary that enabled some of the Cherokees to escape the forced removal to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears in the first half of the 19th century. The Eastern Band and the Park organized a major event in 2006, with speeches and ceremonial dances to celebrate the installation of the waysides. The project provides an innovative model with exciting possibilities for inspiring similar collaborations and exhibits with other indigenous peoples and protected areas in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

Conclusion

As the examples above demonstrate, sacred mountains have great importance for a wide variety of people and groups, ranging from small to large. Many, such as the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona or Ausangate in Peru, are important primarily to local communities or indigenous peoples. Others, such as Kailas and Sinai, have regional, national, or even international importance. They may be revered by the people of an entire nation or by a major religious tradition with adherents around the world, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism. Similarly, caretakers and custodians of mountains and mountain sites may be local or they may come from far away or belong to a religious order responsible for many different shrines. Efforts to conserve the environmental integrity and cultural diversity associated with sacred mountains need to take into account and involve the many diverse peoples and traditions that revere and care for them.

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Edwin Bernbaum, PhD, is Director of the Sacred Mountains Program at The Mountain Institute (TMI), where he works with US National Parks developing interpretive materials based on the cultural and spiritual significance of different features of mountain environments. He also co-directs a project in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan focused on cultural values of nature as a basis for developing conservation activities and sustainable livelihoods, and consults on another TMI project on sacred sites in Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) National Park in Nepal. He is the author of the award-winning book Sacred Mountains of the World*—the basis for an exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution—and lectures widely to audiences at institutions such as the Smithsonian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the National Geographic Society.*

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