

Sacred Land Film Project

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Sanctuaries for Spirit and Nature

by Christopher McLeod

CUTTING TREES along the misty pilgrimage routes in the Kii Mountains of Japan has been prohibited since the 15th century. In the Jaagbo sacred grove of Ghana — an abode of ancestral spirits — hunting, farming, plant collecting and wood gathering have been taboo for at least that long. In each of these places, birds thrive, medicinal plants flourish and water runs clear.

Many people understand that sacred places are sanctuaries for human spirituality. What's not commonly understood is that sacred places are also sanctuaries for rare, threatened and endangered species.

In May, two hundred people gathered in Tokyo for a four-day symposium entitled: "Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes." I flew across the Pacific Ocean to screen *In the Light of Reverence* and meet with the growing international activist community dedicated to protecting sacred lands. The film was shown on opening night and it struck a passionate chord, reminding me again how deep and universal is the love people everywhere feel for "home."

This was a high-level meeting, sponsored by the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Convention on Biodiversity, the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN). The conference attracted scientists and indigenous people from around the world who came to share compelling data collected in forests, mountains and deserts that prove that sacred places are sanctuaries for both spirit and matter. With development devouring land



All photos by Christopher McLeod

on every continent — from the Andes in Peru to the Kaya Forests of Kenya — native communities' deeply held cultural values of respect and responsibility still protect many ancestral sites.

As a new World Wildlife Fund report, *Beyond Belief*, states: "Sacred sites are probably the oldest method of habitat protection on the planet."

On the final afternoon of the Tokyo symposium, Makko Digisso Dosh, an elder from Ethiopia, rose to speak.

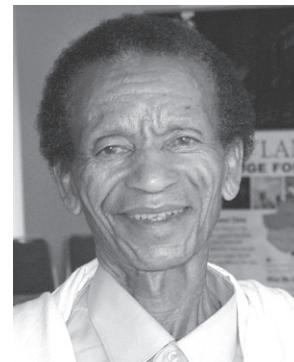
In southwest Ethiopia, Makko explained, sacred landscapes comprise a web of agricultural fields, trails, homesteads, water sources, mountains and sacred groves. It is impossible to separate

discreet elements from the whole, but at the center of the territory of each traditional village leader, a pillar is erected as a central shrine. Prayers and offerings over many years add spiritual power to the shrine. Last January, Makko's sacred pole was torn down by a mob of evangelical Christians who commenced immediately to build a church on the same site. Makko was shaking as he spoke.

"Why am I here?" he asked. "It doesn't help to sit in my place weeping and feeling angry. I thought if I came here I might find a solution to our problem and save our heritage. I have been

given a tradition that has been passed down to me unbroken for many generations. I am the one responsible for these things. It

(RIGHT) ETHIOPIAN ELDER MAKKO DIGISSO DOSHA; (ABOVE) OUR NEW SHORT FILM *Winnemem War Dance at Shasta Dam* PORTRAYS THE WINTU PEOPLES' STRUGGLE TO STOP THE HEIGHTENING OF SHASTA DAM IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, WHICH WOULD FLOOD DOZENS OF SACRED SITES ALONG WHAT REMAINS OF THE FREE-FLOWING MCCLLOUD RIVER.



seems the tradition may end while it is in my charge. We have been humiliated and our sacred area has been abused. I feel as if I am about to go insane."

He paused to calm himself, and continued: "At our shrine, in our sacred area, we have prayed and given offerings for many years. We have prayed that the infertile give birth. When they took our children to war, we prayed and they came back. Now this shrine of ours has been desecrated. When they pulled down the central pillar I felt all the ancestors had been thrown into chaos, as has my very being. How can you help me, please?"

The room was silent.

As the session moderator at the head of the room, I took a deep breath and pushed the button to activate my microphone: "Makko, every one of us would like to return with you to Ethiopia to help restore your shrine and protect it — but we can't. Thank you for making us all more aware of the urgent need for both education and effective action, because strength will surely come from spreading knowledge and building an alliance of guardians. We all hope you can take some of that strength home with you."

It was an insufficient response. What can we really do, any of us, to confront the global injustices we hear about every



IN TOKYO, THOMAS SCHAAF (CENTER) OF UNESCO DISCUSSES EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SIERRA NEVADA DE SANTA MARTA BIOSPHERE RESERVE IN COLUMBIA, WITH CONSERVATIONIST GUILLERMO RODRIGUEZ (LEFT) AND ROGELIO MEJIA (RIGHT), WHO TRAVELED TO TOKYO TO REPRESENT HIS ARHUACO ELDERS.

day? We can take small, steady steps and trust that, as the *I Ching* says, perseverance furthers.

Personally, I do know what I can do. I can make a film, linking Makko's and other similar stories together, weaving a powerful tapestry to educate and inspire action to help protect both biological and cultural diversity.

In many ways, this represents a return to the original vision of the Sacred Land

Film Project from the early 1990s. Our intention then was to profile indigenous cultures around the world struggling to protect their special places, to show the universality of the problem, and the fact that sacred sites are common to people all around the world.

It proved to be an ambitious idea whose time had not quite arrived. We first needed to develop new relationships, articulate our arguments, distill the message, develop a funding base, and prove that we can make effective films that successfully tell these delicate, complex stories. We needed to start at home. Though it took ten years, we now have *In the Light of Reverence* — and its Web site and extensive educational materials — as a preview of what we can do globally for sacred places.

The reports that flowed into Tokyo from around the world contained powerful new information and illustrated how extensive this movement has become. Participants learned, for example, that there are 3,000 sacred groves in the African nation of Ghana, and more than 100,000 in India. In the Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve in Yunnan Province, China, there are 122 villages containing 22,000 people — and there is a sacred forest in every village. Scientists at Xishuangbanna are documenting extremely high biodiversity within the sacred areas. Ethnobotanist Pei Shengji reported that these sacred forests comprise just .02% of China's total land area, yet they are safe haven to 18%



IN MARCH, FIVE BAY AREA SCREENINGS OF *In the Light of Reverence* AND *Winnemem War Dance at Shasta Dam* HELPED BUILD SUPPORT FOR THE WINNEMEM CAMPAIGN TO REGAIN FEDERAL RECOGNITION AND PROTECT THEIR ANCESTRAL LANDS. THE WINNEMEM CONTINGENT GATHERED AROUND LEADER CALEEN SISK-FRANCO (CENTER) AT THE CREST THEATRE IN SACRAMENTO.

of China's flora (4669 species), 20% of the nation's fauna (3317 species), and 26% of the country's birds (427 species).

We heard inspiring stories about preventing the privatization of water, resisting threats from mining and logging, and exposing fraudulent ecotourism schemes. We also heard about the promise of indigenous communities mapping their homelands, preserving traditional knowledge, and comanaging national parks at places like Uluru in Australia and Tongariro in New Zealand.

IUCN social policy analyst Gonzalo Oveido, from Ecuador, summed up the goals of the conference participants: to launch a major international effort to increase awareness and knowledge about sacred natural sites and associated cultures, and to strengthen laws and policies that protect cultural landscapes worldwide.

We made many fruitful contacts with colleagues who want to collaborate to achieve these goals, and we took important steps to envision a film project that will provide an educational framework for this significant new movement.

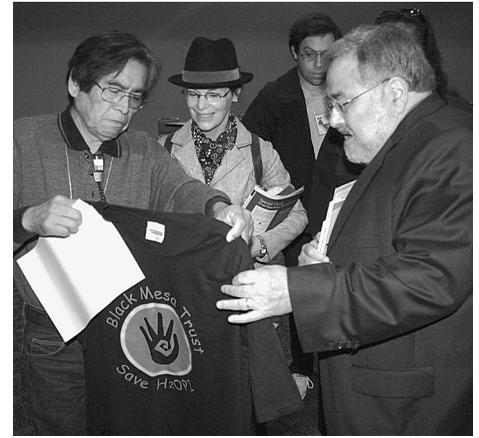
Erjen Khamaganova, from the Buryat community in Russia, gave a passionate report on Lake Baikal, in which she defined a sacred site as: "pure, a place of power, a place of worship, with spirits present who will protect you if you

follow the rules." She defined a sacred landscape as: "a zone of peace and non-violence, a place of traditional education and knowledge transmission, and a place of deep spiritual work." If people behave properly at a sacred place, she said, "know the plants, use right words, and show respect for life and diversity, there is an excellent effect on mind and spirit."

What do we learn from our journeys away from home?

Back in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California, a Hopi friend, Leonard Selestewa, and his wife and daughter visited my family during the summer. We took them to see the towering redwoods near our home. Standing by a clear stream in the green forest, the desert-dwelling corn farmers experienced the tall trees' magic. The place brought back a memory for Leonard: "My grandfather told me: 'To be Hopi, your prayers have to encompass the entire world.'"

Preserving what we love at home and beyond has never been a greater challenge. Listening to native people and learning from them has never been more crucial. They have preserved the ancient wisdom that we are part of nature, not separate, and that what happens to nature happens to us. Indigenous communities nurture the values that can



HOPÍ ACTIVIST VERNON MASAYESVA (LEFT) OF BLACK MESA TRUST, AND LINGUIST GEORGE LAKOFF (RIGHT) — MEET AT THE SIERRA CLUB SUMMIT IN SAN FRANCISCO. MASAYESVA'S DISTILLED HOPÍ VALUES: *Brotherhood, Respect and Responsibility.* LAKOFF'S AMERICAN VALUES: *Empathy, Responsibility, Fairness and Community.*

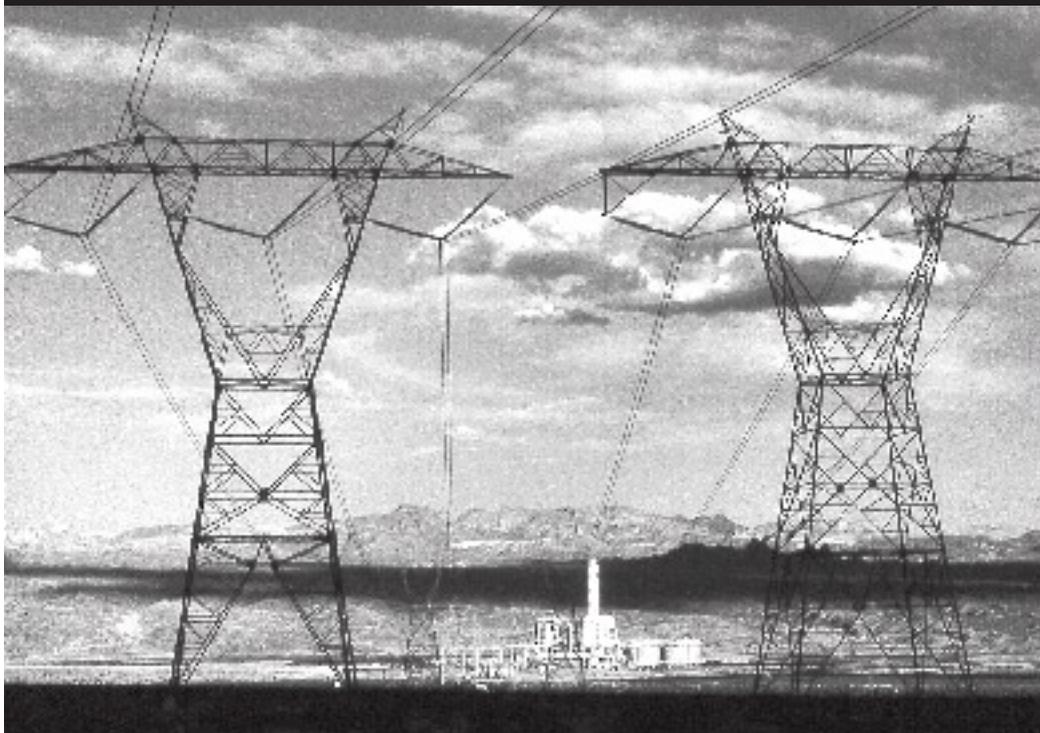
sustain us in the future and help keep the earth alive.

The sacred natural sites that grace every continent are culturally and biologically important in and of themselves. But let us also appreciate them as doorways opening to a priceless opportunity — the paradigm shift that just might save our teetering society.

Let's walk through the door together.

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VICTORY! Mohave Power Plant to Close on December 31



Following Vernon Masayesva's maxim, "If you see something wrong you have a responsibility to do something," 35 years of hard work and collaboration will bear fruit on December 31, 2005, with the shutdown of the Mohave Power Plant, near Laughlin, Nevada. Since 1970, this power plant has burned coal from Black Mesa, polluted the air over the Grand Canyon and other national parks (the main reason for its closure) and consumed 50 billion gallons of pristine groundwater from the aquifer beneath Hopi and Navajo land. The closure of the power plant and shutdown of the slurry line will hopefully allow Hopi village and ceremonial springs to recover. Congratulations to Black Mesa Trust and the Hopi and Navajo activists who collaborated over decades with many allies to stop this environmental injustice and protect the air and water we all share. Happy New Year!