

## **A STATEMENT OF CUSTODIANS OF SACRED NATURAL SITES AND TERRITORIES**

An outcome of a dialogue between Custodians of Sacred Natural Sites and Territories  
6 October 2008

At the IUCN World Conservation Congress, held in the Bibliotheca Catalunya,  
Barcelona, Spain

Recognising that the whole Earth is sacred, we the custodians and guardians of Sacred Natural Sites and Territories from four continents namely Asia, South America, Africa, Australia and the Pacific and from the countries of Mongolia, the Altai and Buryat Republics of Russia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Colombia, Ethiopia, Australia and Papua New Guinea gathered in advance of the IUCN World Conservation Congress, held in Barcelona, Spain.

We represent indigenous religious and spiritual traditions from those regions, and we shared together the Ancestral Visions of our communities and our profoundly deep relationship between them and our Sacred Natural Sites and Territories. We examined the threats that they face and we make recommendations to IUCN and the international community for their support.

There are many and unique ways we express our relationships with our land, country and sacred sites. The following statements do not necessarily apply to all of us but give a sense of how we as diverse groups relate to our sacred country.

- Our Sacred Natural Sites and Territories, and those of other religious and faith groups represent a great variety of natural features including mountains, rivers, springs, rocks, hills, deserts, forests, groves, individual trees coral reefs and coastal waters. They also include works of our ancestral communities such as petroglyphs and archaeological sites.
- We also note that for many of us our whole territories are sacred and this includes our homes, communities, farms, footpaths, markets and meeting places. That these territories include layers of sacredness often with different purposes, including those that are material and functional to humans.
- We noted that conditions of some of these lands include ‘pure’ or original conditions such as pure water, pure air and untouched nature. We also note that many of the species of animal and plant that share our lands and territories are also sacred.

- Sacred Natural Sites and Territories are important for the transmission of stories, and songs. They are the routes of pilgrimage, sites of prayer, offerings, and ritual and the keeping of our laws. These activities are important work for us as custodians of our lands and our communities. They are an important part of the interrelationship between the people and the Earth.
- For many of us, we see Sacred Natural Sites and Territories as living beings. Even the rocks are alive, animated by our beliefs, and should not be disturbed. The rocks and water themselves teach important lessons to our children.
- At the deepest level we belong to the land and the sea and they give us their secrets and wisdom. They give us the laws and the rules for preserving knowledge. The land gives us unity and brings healing.
- Therefore Sacred Natural Sites and Territories can be considered on the Earth, as a network of acupuncture points would be on the human body. They have a healing effect. We also consider that the relationship between them is critical and they cannot be seen in isolation from each other. The caretakers of these special places are maintaining these healing points but as our numbers become fewer our healing powers for the Earth diminish.

**In considering Sacred Natural Sites and Territories we therefore:**

Consider that a much higher priority has to be given to the sacred in all of human activity and all its manifestations both intangible and tangible, but especially in Sacred Natural Sites and Territories.

Reserve the right to define and describe our Sacred Natural Sites and Territories in our own ways as appropriate to our communities.

Recognise and appreciate the efforts of the international community and the IUCN in supporting the custodians of SNS, in for example producing guidance for protected area managers to improve their relationships with traditional custodians.

**We request that National Governments:**

Recognize the full rights of indigenous peoples to manage their territories in accordance with their traditional use and customs, to guarantee the permanence of culture and nature.

Give a high priority to Sacred Natural Sites and Territories that are now located within government or private protected areas to be recognised as Indigenous Peoples and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA).

**We also request that the IUCN:**

Incorporate in its concepts of nature the spiritual values and principles of traditional cultures.

Make efforts to overcome ignorance of many conservationists in relation to the Sacred Natural Sites and Territories of indigenous and local communities.

Seek new paradigms for the relationship between humans and the environment, based on the principles of indigenous peoples and traditional cultures.

Support the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Influence national governments to recognize or endorse sacred sites, but in a way that does not impose government management programmes upon custodians.

Increase the representation of indigenous peoples in the Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA).

Give specific and respectful advice on scientific approaches to the management of Sacred Natural Sites and Territories when requested.

**Considering all the above and particularly the overall degradation of the planet by modern society we therefore declare that the whole of the Earth is sacred and invite other indigenous peoples, traditional cultures, faith and religious traditions to endorse this statement.**

**We therefore request that communities across the Earth:**

- Respect nature and all the natural features;
- Re-awaken and restore knowledge and practices related to the care of nature;
- Give legal recognition to sacred sites, territories and landscapes and give recognition of traditional, spiritual institutions, which cannot be separated from them;
- Strengthen local advocacy groups that are guided by the guardians of Sacred Natural Sites and Territories;
- Re-empower the local communities to care for nature;
- Strengthen the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, for example by:
  - Recording oral traditions, which are as much in danger as geographic sacredness, as it is the time to pass on traditional ecological knowledge in written form;
  - Production of children books with traditional illustrations by the guardians.

**We recommend the following actions and strategies at different levels and request assistance from IUCN and other members of the conservation and development community to support these:**

**International level:**

- Develop networks of custodians and supporters of sacred natural sites reaching across cultures, technical and scientific disciplines.
- Translate international experience into national and local actions.
- Increase the awareness of sacred nature.

**National level:**

- Inform state agencies and citizens about Sacred Natural Sites and Territories.
- Develop appropriate legislation that recognises and endorses local ownership but does not force inappropriate regulation upon custodians.

**Local level:**

- Local communities develop codes of conduct to guide the wider community.

**Specifically it is requested that IUCN:**

- Make the IUCN Best Practice Guidelines 16, *Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers*, available in other languages of both IUCN and the United Nations.
- Keep the network, especially those people present at this dialogue, informed about outcomes.
- Create forums at which the guardians of sacred sites may speak.