From all over central Asia, 25 indigenous guardians of sacred sites were en route to the magnificent Karakol Valley in Russia’s Altai Mountains. Healers from Kyrgyzstan, activists from Lake Baikal and spiritual leaders from Mongolia all gathered in the land where the word shaman originated, and where throat singers still honor the earth with otherworldly intonations over a crackling fire. For two days in July, these caretakers strategized on how to save their ancient landscapes from modern threats. They shared traditional rituals and contemporary networking — in disparate languages, but with common values based on the cultural, spiritual and ecological necessity of respect for the sacred in nature.

The Sacred Land Film Project crew was privileged to record this historic meeting, and accompany the participants on a pilgrimage. Along the way they delved into how they care for land, the nature of their blessings, the conflicts they face and the strategies that have worked.

We enjoy the odd challenges of international travel and film production. Soundman Dave Wendlinger listened for hours as he set audio levels on dialogue in languages he couldn’t understand. Cameraman Andy Black hustled ahead with heavy gear trying to get in front of a group of shamans who don’t take direction easily, especially when they can’t understand the director.

After two days indoors we headed out into the exhilarating air of the wildflower-carpeted Karakol Valley. Standing beneath the sacred Uch Enmek Mountain, next to a 12-foot-high standing stone that marks an ancient burial, Danil Mamyev, founder of Uch Enmek Nature Park, thanked his visiting colleagues: “By networking sacred site guardians we also connect the places, and the guardians and the sacred places are all strengthened.”

Danil is racing the clock to survey and map the park to head off privatization of land. He is also active in the fight to prevent Russia’s natural gas company, Gazprom, from building a natural gas pipeline across the Altai to China. But it’s politics with a heart. “In our prayers and songs there is no request at all. We simply give thanks, knowing that the more blessings we give, the more we will receive.”

Danil describes Uch Enmek as an umbilical cord, a place of nourishment, receptivity and information. “A shaman comes to these places as a pilgrim and receives certain information. The shaman then distributes this information at a human level in human language. This land is important for that reason.” As Danil spoke, I recalled Native American scholar Vine Deloria explaining the revelations that comes from a sacred place: “What the revelation is telling you is how you and your community at this time in life can adjust to the rest of the world.” Do we know how to listen?

The following morning, 14 of the participants began a long journey to the Ukok Plateau, a World Heritage Site known to the ancient Greeks as a hollowed burial ground — “the pastures of heaven.” Before attempting to go over the high pass to the plateau (where a sudden blizzard turned us back in June 2007), Altaian shaman Maria Amanchina led a sunrise ceremony.

At a sacred spring below the pass to the Ukok Plateau, Altaian activist Maya Erlenbaeva offers milk at a sunrise ceremony before heading over the mountains. Maria Amanchina, with pipe, presides.
Ahamkara drummed over the bodies of his group lying in a bed of flowers, he told them he was invoking the Altaian wolf spirit. Two of the men in the group began moaning and growling and rolling around on the ground in convulsions. They later told us that they had become wolves. It was an intimate and revealing moment.

Once again we filmed a scene that raises the perennial question: how do we from fractured cultures rediscover appropriate ways to spiritually connect with the earth? From Machu Pichu in Peru to Uluru in Australia, I have seen tourists from the developed world cause offense to native people by disrespecting the traditions of the place — nearly always unintentionally, and often by imitating the rituals of the local community. The scene of young Americans at the spring on Mt. Shasta from In the Light of Reverence is one of the most talked-about scenes in any of my films. It makes us uncomfortable because we ask ourselves: am I like that?

Back in northern California, soft October light shimmered on the McCloud River as Winnemem Wintu leaders Mark and Caleen Sisk-Franco showed us signs of ancestral villages. The grinding rocks, home sites and burials will be submerged if Shasta Lake, the enormous reservoir held back by Shasta...
Our 8th and Final Story: Alberta Tar Sands

Flying over Canada’s expansive boreal forest, with poplars ablaze in fall colors, I was struck by water’s meandering path across the landscape. Snakelike rivers and shining pools gathered and flowed through the trees, enjoying a few last days of freedom before the big freeze-up. Suddenly, our plane crossed the Athabasca River and an industrial landscape of smokestacks, methane flare towers and tailings ponds defied the chill of autumn. With all the hip talk about creating a green economy and controlling global carbon emissions, the reality of Alberta’s tar sands oil boom is propelling us in precisely the opposite direction. With 1.8 million barrels of oil per day flowing south to the United States from Alberta’s refineries, Canada’s infrastructure is now a sensitive source of national security. No wonder it remains an untold story.

Unlike the Altai people of Central Asia, who struggle to preserve and renew cultural traditions and to be collaborating with Fort Chipewyan’s indigenous community to tell the story of their situation in animal populations. In an interview, the Métis elder said: “I understand the need to make a living. People have to work. What concerns me is the pollution of air and water. The frogs used to sound so good. Now it’s silent. They’re telling us something — they have been telling us for a long time. If we can put a man on the moon we can figure out a way to discharge clean water. The elders used to tell me everything has life on this earth. Water has a spirit. Once we pollute that water so much we’re going to kill that spirit, and there’ll be no life and spirit, that water will be totally poisoned. So while it’s alive, save it.”

Our managing producer Jennifer Huang and I left Alberta feeling energized by yet another challenge — a huge story that falls into place to take the eighth and final slot in Losing Sacred Ground. Jennifer flew off to Edmonton in an effort to secure an interview with Suncor, the oil sands company. I flew back to Berkeley yet again humbled to be meeting native people who hold their whole watershed to be sacred and to be collaborating with Fort Chipewyan’s indigenous community to tell the story of their struggle to preserve and renew cultural traditions in the face of rapid change.

≈ ≈ ≈ ≈

► Caleen Sisk-Franco blesses the Sucker Pool on the McCloud River.

► Refineries in Canada use three barrels of water to produce one barrel of oil from tar sands and generate mountains of toxic waste.