



FORWARD TOGETHER

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Forward Together: A Culture-Nature Journey Towards More Effective Conservation in a Changing World

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The Presidio

San Francisco, California

This symposium was convened to share insights on how understanding culture-nature interlinkages on many landscapes and waterscapes can shape more effective and sustainable conservation.

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Forward Together: A Culture-Nature Journey Towards More Effective Conservation in a Changing World
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The Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature in the Management and Governance of Protected Areas and World Heritage Sites

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Abstract

This paper chronicles the evolution of the IUCN Specialist Group on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) with a focus on the development of its current Cultural and Spiritual Nature Program, which includes IUCN Best Practices Guidelines, a peer-reviewed book, training modules, case studies, and a network -- all dedicated to promoting and integrating the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the management and governance of protected and conserved areas. The program is being developed in conjunction with the IUCN ICOMOS Nature Culture and Culture Nature Journeys and seeks to create a comprehensive approach to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage. Six principles distilled from the input of 200 international experts and reviewers through editorial work and workshops at the World Parks Congress in Australia, the World Conservation Congress in Hawai'i, and the Isle of Vilm in Germany provide key insights and lessons learned. The paper concludes with next steps for implementing the Best Practice Guidelines through the development of training modules and workshops and a network for providing support and sharing experiences.

Keywords

cultural heritage, natural heritage, spiritual values, nature conservation, protected areas, world heritage sites

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The Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature in the Management and Governance of Protected Areas and World Heritage Sites

Background

From its origins the IUCN Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA), which is currently co-chaired by the two authors, has focused on linkages between nature and culture that lie at the heart of efforts by the IUCN and ICOMOS to connect practices in their nature-culture and culture-nature journeys (Brown & Verschuuren, 2018). The CSVPA ([CSVPA](#), 2018a) began life in 1998 as a temporary task force on Non-Material Values of Protected Areas, reflecting an emphasis on the intangible values of nature for people of both modern and traditional cultures. *The Full Value of Parks: From Economics to the Intangible*, a book coming out of the work of the task force and published in conjunction with the World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa, in 2003, highlighted the wide range and importance of these intangible values of nature for protected areas: recreational, therapeutic, spiritual, cultural, identity, existence, artistic, educational, scientific, and peace (Harmon and Putney, 2003). World Parks Congress Recommendation V.13 was largely drafted by CSVPA members and called for a wide range of actions by protected area agencies to “recognise and incorporate spiritual values of protected areas and culture-based approaches to conservation” (IUCN 2003, 168).

At the same World Parks Congress, recognizing the conceptual limitations of the term “non-material,” the membership decided to change the name of the task force to the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas. This name change reflects the understanding that in many cultures and traditions there is not a dichotomy between the non-material and the material, the intangible and the tangible, the sacred and the profane. It also reflects the recognition that culture doesn’t cover all the ways in which nature inspires or is meaningful to people. It’s necessary to consider spiritual as well as cultural values of protected areas. The name change posits that there are spiritual dimensions of personal experience that may be mediated by but are not reducible to culture. As the IUCN webpage on the CSVPA explains:

Spiritual values attributed to protected areas refer to the transcendent or immanent significance that features of nature have that put people in touch with a deeper reality greater than themselves that gives meaning and vitality to their lives and motivates them to revere and care for the environment (IUCN, 2018a).

CSVPA and UNESCO collaborated closely on the topic of sacred natural sites, which received considerable attention and importance at the World Parks Congress and were eventually defined by IUCN as “natural features or areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities” (Wild and McLeod 2008). The definition is drawn from an important publication developed by CSVPA - the IUCN-UNESCO Best Practice Guidelines no.16, *Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers* (Wild and McLeod 2008). In 2010, the work of CSVPA on the biodiversity and cultural values of sacred natural sites culminated in the first peer-reviewed book on the topic: *Sacred Natural Sites: Conserving Nature and Culture* (Verschuuren et al. 2010). Two other important initiatives emerged out of this focus on sacred natural sites, founded by members of the CSVPA and affiliated with the Specialist Group (in 2009 the CSVPA became a permanent Specialist Group of the World Commission on Protected Areas of the IUCN). Established in 2005, the Delos Initiative deals with sacred natural sites, but focused on their role in technologically developed countries and their importance in mainstream religions (Delos Initiative 2018). The Delos Initiative conducted four workshops, mostly in Europe, and produced a number of reports (Papayannis and 2007, Mallarach et al., 2012), as well as assembling numerous documents on intangible spiritual and cultural heritage in the Silene Documentation Centre as a resource of the CSVPA (Silene 2018). Members of the CSVPA connected with the Delos Initiative have represented IUCN in the development of the UNESCO initiative on World Heritage Sites of Religious Interest -- most of them sacred sites, both natural and human-made. The Sacred Natural Sites Initiative (SNSI) emerged in 2008 and concentrated on supporting the custodians of sacred natural sites of Indigenous people and overseeing the translation of the IUCN UNESCO Sacred Natural Sites Guidelines (Wild & McLeod 2008) into 8 different languages, see fig. 1. The Initiative has run field projects offering practical conservation support to custodians of sacred natural sites in Zanzibar, Ghana, Guatemala and

Nepal. It also supported groups of Indigenous custodians of sacred natural sites in making their voices heard at the IUCN World Conservation Congresses in Barcelona (2008), South Korea (2012) and Hawaii (2016), (SNSI 2018).

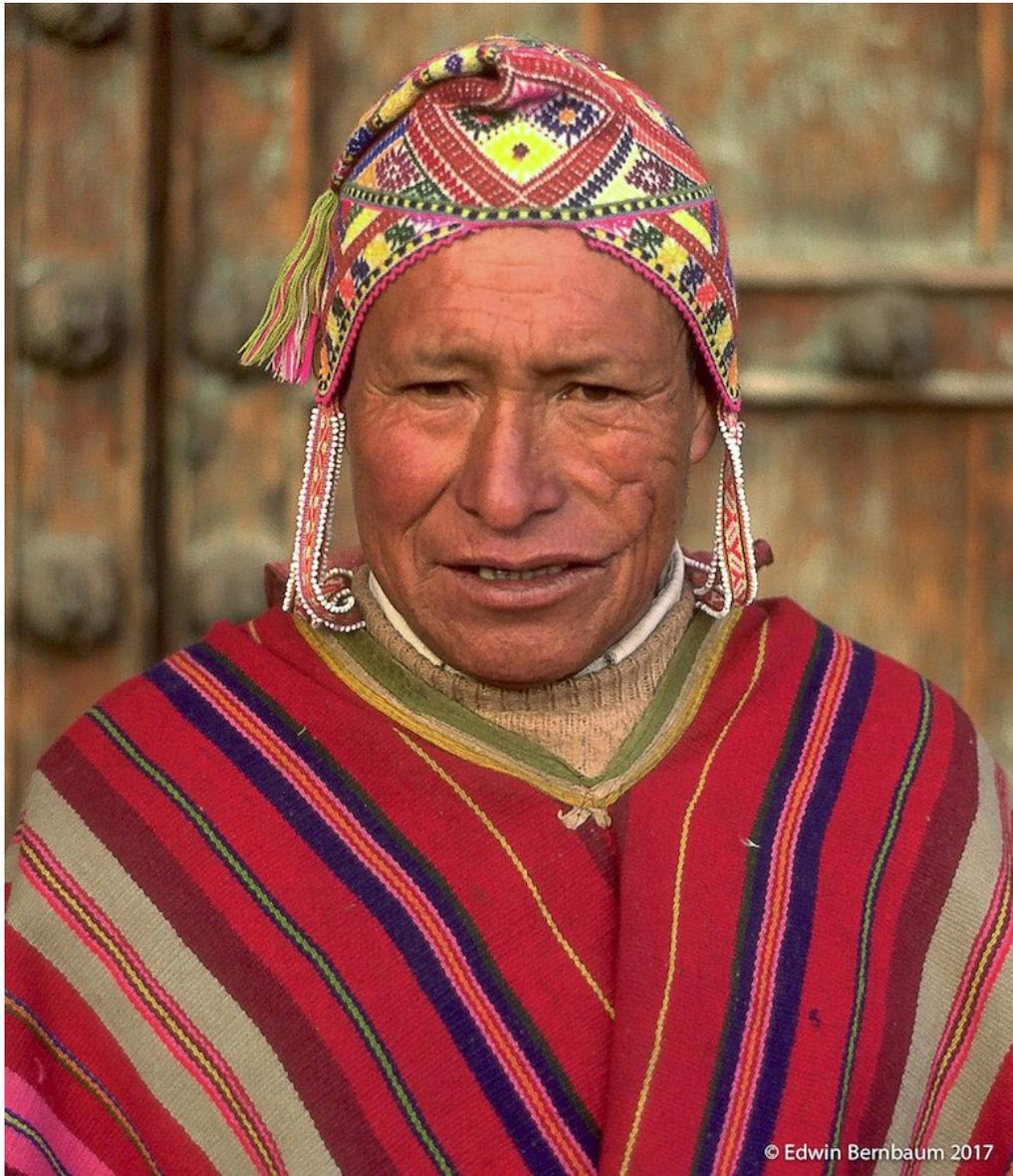


Figure 1. An Andean *curandero* or traditional healer who derives his power to diagnose and cure from his relationship to the *apu* or spirit of his sacred mountain near Cuzco, Peru.
Photo by Edwin Bernbaum.

CSVPA Cultural & Spiritual Nature Program

Following its successes recognizing and integrating the relevance of sacred natural sites in the conservation movement, the CSVPA turned the focus of its work to its broader mission -- the more general cultural and spiritual significance of nature -- in order to reach a wider range of protected and conserved areas. Not all protected and conserved areas have sacred natural sites, but most of them have natural features of spiritual and cultural importance that need to be taken into consideration in management and governance. Nature in general -- including but not limited to sacred natural sites -- has the power to inspire secular as well as religious and Indigenous people, thereby providing a solid foundation for making programs of environmental and cultural conservation in protected areas more sustainable, equitable, and inclusive (Bernbaum, 2017 and 2018).

With funding from the Christensen Fund and in partnership with The Mountain Institute, the CSVPA conducted workshops at the 2014 World Parks Congress in Sydney, Australia, to solicit interest in and ideas for initiating a project on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature. The main workshop brought protected area managers together with representatives of Indigenous traditions and communities, mainstream religions, and environmental organizations representing the general public. About 100 participants broke out into working groups to brainstorm ideas and make suggestions for developing various activities, such as training modules emphasizing experiential learning and a network for providing mutual support and sharing experiences. The workshops at Sydney led to the creation of the CSVPA Program on the Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature in the Management and Governance of Protected and Conserved Areas (Cultural & Spiritual Nature Program for short) with five core components: 1) the development of IUCN Best Practice Guidelines, 2) the collection and dissemination of case studies, 3) a peer reviewed book, 4) the development of training modules, and 5) the creation of a network of practitioners, see figure 2 ([CSVPA 2018b](#)).



Figure 2. Diagram of the five core components of the CSVPA's program on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature.

CSVPA Best Practice Guidelines on the Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature

The German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) funded two week-long workshops conducted by the CSVPA at the International Academy for Nature Conservation on the Isle of Vilm in Germany in 2016 and 2017 to develop a new volume of IUCN Best Practice Guidelines on promoting and integrating the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the management and governance of protected and conserved areas. Experts from around the world gathered on the island to work in small groups organizing, writing, and editing general principles and specific guidelines, drawing on preliminary ideas and drafts prepared by CSVPA's editorial team, see figure 3. Along with systematizing the overall structure and making substantial additions, revisions, and refinements, the participants identified and selected examples for each guideline

and longer case studies to be used in the printed volume and disseminated through the CSVPA website. Work continued between and after the workshops with the additional inputs, comments, and edits of as many as 200 colleagues as well as several expert reviewers. The CSVPA is now finalizing the Best Practice Guidelines in preparation for publication in 2019 (Verschuuren et al., n.d.).

The CSVPA organized an additional workshop with a partial focus on World Heritage Sites as part of the Nature Culture Journey at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Hawai'i in 2016. As a test of the Best Practice Guidelines, the participants came up with guidelines for five principles adapted from early drafts developed at Vilm and made suggestions on exercises to implement them in training modules – an important next step of the Cultural & Spiritual Nature Program. CSVPA participation at the Congress led to the adoption of IUCN resolution 033: *Recognising cultural and spiritual significance of nature in protected and conserved areas* (IUCN 2016). The resolution specifically calls on IUCN institutions and members to develop and disseminate best practice guidelines and implement training for protected and conserved area managers to build capacity and improve recognition of the role of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in management and governance. Adoption of the resolution at the World Conservation Congress lends strong institutional and individual support to the CSVPA program and its Best Practice Guidelines on the spiritual and cultural significance of nature.



Figure 3. Participants at the second Vilm workshop, 2017.
Photo courtesy of Edwin Bernbaum.

Building on the earlier work of the CSVPA and its affiliates, the Best Practice Guidelines broadens the reach and scope of protected and conserved area management and governance to include the cultural and spiritual significance that nature in general has for Indigenous traditions and communities, mainstream religions, and environmental organizations representing the general public. The first part of the volume explains the meaning of the key phrase “cultural and spiritual significance of nature” and the shift from “values” to “significance” as follows:

We define the cultural and spiritual significance of nature as the inspirational, spiritual, cultural, aesthetic, historic and social meanings, knowledge, values, feelings, ideas and associations that natural features and nature in general reveal to and inspire in people - both individuals and groups. The use of the word significance - rather than values - has been chosen to include knowledge and meaning as well as feelings and values in order to

make the concept more widely applicable. This also makes the concept acceptable and essential to managing and governing protected and conserved areas (Verschuuren et al n.d., 40).

The inclusion of knowledge and meaning is particularly important in convincing scientifically minded and secular managers to take the cultural and spiritual significance of nature seriously and not dismiss it as a mere matter of feelings that can be relegated to secondary status as icing on the cake of the real work of management and governance. This recognizes the fact that different worldviews and epistemologies have their own concepts and values of nature that are equally valid and need to be taken into consideration in programs of natural and cultural heritage conservation (Mallarach et al. 2018). See, for example, IUCN resolution 4.099: *Recognition of the diversity of concepts and values of nature*, which was developed by the CSVPA (IUCN, 2008).

The heart of the Best Practice Guidelines is “Part 4: Principles, Guidelines, & Examples.” The first subsection of Part 4 lays out six general principles that can be applied by all stakeholders, groups, and interested parties for whom the cultural and spiritual significance of nature has a role to play. These six principles provide key insights and lessons learned from the Cultural and Spiritual Nature program, which can be seen later in this paper. The following twelve subsections present about 50 guidelines for application to more specific situations and needs. These subsections range from the first on identifying all groups concerned with the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in protected and conserved areas to the twelfth on adapting and scaling consideration of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature. Each guideline within these subsections comes with an example illustrating its application. A representative sample of a guideline with an illustrative example is:

10.2 Use the cultural and spiritual significance of nature to motivate members of the public to contribute to organizations that support protected and conserved areas and promote conservation generally.

Example: Through programs of outreach, education, and interpretation, protected area managers can use the cultural and spiritual significance of nature to draw on the general public for volunteer and financial, as well as political support. By exciting and engaging people through cultural and spiritual values that connect them emotionally to a protected area, these organizations can generate funds for implementing management plans and also inspire volunteers to work on projects such as trail maintenance, wildlife census, and litter removal. The Yosemite Conservancy, for example, has raised millions of dollars for Yosemite National Park from the general public, in particular, residents of San Francisco, a city with strong cultural and historical connections to the park, for a number of projects,



including preserving a grove of giant sequoias and improving access to Yosemite Falls. For example, in 2011 the Conservancy announced completion of the Campaign for Yosemite Trails, a \$13.5 million effort to restore popular hiking trails throughout the park - including to iconic sites such as Half Dome, see fig. 4 - where many people go for inspiration and renewal (Bernbaum, 2018; Yosemite Conservancy, 2011; and Verschuuren et al., n.d. 78).

Figure 4. Half Dome, inspirational icon of Yosemite National Park, a World Heritage Site.
Photo by Edwin Bernbaum.

The volume also includes ten longer case studies from various parts of the world ranging from Rwenzori National Park in Uganda to the Kii Mountain Range in Japan, both World Heritage Sites. These case studies show in more detail how the guidelines can be applied to protected and conserved areas worldwide. They are also intended for educational purposes and for inclusion in training modules and workshops implementing the Best Practice Guidelines. These and additional case studies will continuously be posted on the CSVPA website (CSVPA 2018c).

Book on the Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature

As another core component of the Cultural & Spiritual Nature Program, members of the CSVPA prepared a book to supplement the Best Practice Guidelines. *Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature in Protected Areas: Governance, Management and Policy*, was developed in the spirit of the nature-culture journey. Edited by the CSVPA Co-Chair Bas Verschuuren and Steve Brown, ICOMOS President of the Scientific Committee for Cultural Landscapes - at the time of publishing by Routledge in 2018, see figure 5 (Brown and Verschuuren 2018). With contributions by experts in a wide range of fields, the book expands on topics in the Best Practice Guidelines and consists of 20 illustrated chapters divided into three parts: Concepts, Policy and Practice, and Case Studies. The chapters cover explorations of conceptual and philosophical underpinnings, cutting edge conservation programs such as the IUCN ICOMOS Connecting Practice project and specific conservation policies, as well as additional case studies on the role of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature. In addition to protected area managers and stakeholders – the primary audience of the Best Practice Guidelines – the book presents material of interest and practical use for policy makers, conservationists, heritage practitioners, and academics, thereby expanding the reach and influence of the CSVPA Culture & Spiritual Nature Program.

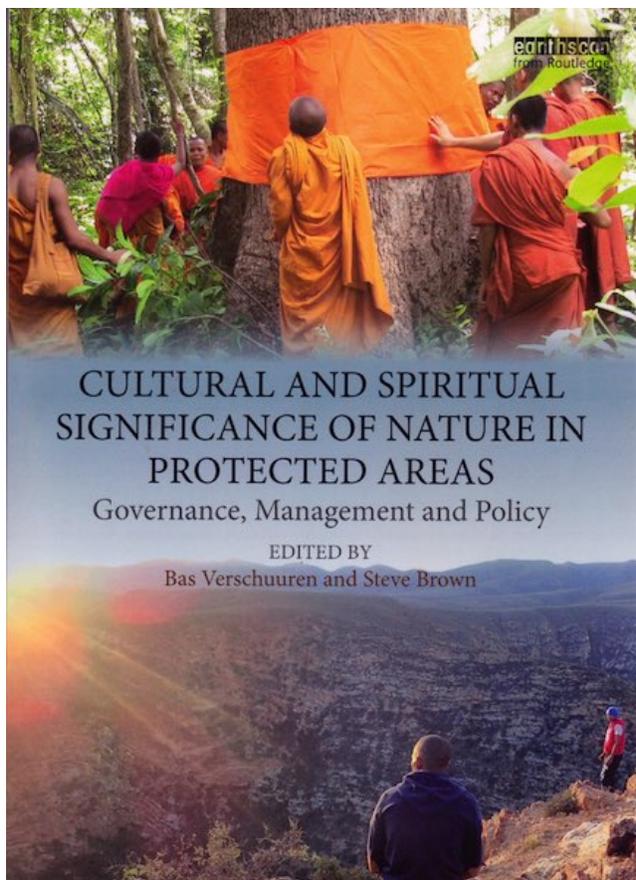


Figure 5. Cover of the book *Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature in Protected Areas*. Upper photo courtesy of Chantal Elkin, lower photo courtesy of Matthew J. Zylstra.

Key Insights and Lessons Learned

The six general principles from the beginning of Part 4 embody the key insights and lessons learned from the development of the CSVPA program and Best Practice Guidelines on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature. They are:

1. Recognize, respect, acknowledge and include the diversity of expressions of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature, as expressed in people's relationships, connections and associations with the landscapes, waterscapes and natural features inside and around protected and conserved areas;
2. Recognize the full potential that the cultural and spiritual significance of nature can play in creating and cultivating networks of support among diverse groups of people, enabling revitalization, resilience, and strengthening the management and governance of protected and conserved areas;
3. Create an informed and safe environment for all stakeholders in which culturally

appropriate and inclusive processes enable the best possible governance, design and management arrangements and outcomes based conserving and restoring cultural or spiritual relationships with protected and conserved areas;

4. Be mindful that culture, religion, spirituality, and aesthetics may change with time and place and may only become apparent when protected and conserved areas are seen as embedded within wider cultural and social networks and histories;
5. Adopt a holistic approach that recognizes the multiple responsibilities and rights of stake- and rights holders and encourages reciprocity amongst all parties for the mutual recognition of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature;
6. Contribute to recognition of nature-culture linkages through education, practice, arts, humanities and literature as well as by providing a role for the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, wherever this may be useful to improve just and equitable conservation approaches.

Next Steps

Once the Best Practice Guidelines have been published, the next step will be to implement them through training modules and workshops that are currently being prepared by the CSVPA. The training modules and workshops developed so far consist of a three-hour module as part of a larger conference or training course and a two-day stand-alone workshop (CSVPA 2018d). They will need to be added to, further fleshed out, adapted for different audiences and purposes, and field-tested in a variety of settings, including various kinds of protected areas and university courses. The CSVPA is gathering additional case studies on its website for use in the trainings and has compiled a registry of extant modules and workshops developed by other organizations for reference.

Another important next step is developing an online network that enables practitioners to keep in touch and share ideas and experiences. In addition to sustaining interest, such a network plays an important role in supporting the training modules and workshops. People come away from these training modules and workshops excited about what they plan to do, but when they go back to

their places of work, they often find that it is not easy to put new ideas into action and gradually lose their enthusiasm and determination to make changes. The network the CSVPA is now developing as part of the larger program provides crucial support and sharing of experiences that helps practitioners maintain their excitement and implement new ways of doing things in their protected areas that will advance the nature-culture, culture-nature journeys of the IUCN and ICOMOS.

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Biographical Notes

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Bas Verschuuren, Ph.D., is Co-Chair of the IUCN Specialist Group on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA). He combines experience in conservation with research. His academic work is ethnographic and focuses on interlinkages in practices, management and governance of natural and cultural heritage. Bas has participated in the IUCN ICOMOS Connecting Practices Project, several Nature Culture Journeys, and leads the development of the

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