

## SACRED SITES IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURES

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Sacred places are found everywhere in the world and in every culture. The historic preservation movement has only recently begun to appreciate the unique importance and universal characteristics of sacred sites and to recognize the contribution they make to cultural diversity and to resource conservation. The value of sacred places can not be measured by politics, history or even religion; they transcend many of our preconceived notions about nature and the human relationship to place.

Sacred sites contribute a special dimension to contemporary society, one that goes beyond their value to those who use them. In the United States, many Native American sacred sites are large natural areas that encompass the "non-built environment". They do not necessarily include structures, unlike the churches, synagogues, mosques and temples associated with sacred sites in western cultural heritage. Natural sacred sites have not been given the recognition they deserve, and their potential for our cultural enrichment has not been appreciated. Native sacred sites are particularly misunderstood. They are often seen as cultural artifacts or even as commercial commodities to be developed for tourism. They are rarely regarded as legitimate places of worship. Moreover, these places have not been valued as sources of inspiration for contemporary cultures, with special values to contribute to our lives.

This discussion will focus on issues and problems surrounding the preservation of sacred sites, particularly natural sites, and on the unique contribution they make to the conservation movement. The terms we are using, such as "sacred sites" and "holy places" are defined very broadly. Sacred sites include little known places, secret sites used by select groups, places that were valued in the past but whose meaning is no longer fully understood as well as the famous sites of pilgrimage and healing known to many. Some sacred places are personal, others are revered by millions.

Sacred sites become imbued with special meaning through formal teaching, history, myth, oral tradition, folklore or legend. They are often associated with magic and miracles and may have real or imagined powers. These places are often distinct in appearance, being particularly beautiful or unique. They may be extraordinary, or mundane, accessible or remote. Both the built and the non-built environment are included. Sites as small as a stone or as immense as a mountain range are held sacred.

People visit holy places for a variety of reasons. Usually they go to feel connected to something beyond themselves and their everyday life, to get in touch with another realm. There they seek a sense of something "other", something holy. Often holy places are revered as sources of spiritual or physical healing or to renew a personal or collective memory. To visit a sacred site is a special journey, a pilgrimage, a matter of the heart and soul. One leaves renewed, rewarded with religious merit or insight or with the body or spirits restored.

However we choose to define sacred sites, there are subjective aspects to them that are intangible and undefinable. These elements can not be quantified or synthesized. But it is precisely this dimension to sacred sites that makes them so valuable to us today. We need them because they challenge us to broaden our vision of space and time and to expand our world view.

The historic preservation movement, which has come into its own over the last twenty years, has been saving sites and has been focusing on obtaining the political will and the necessary financial and technical assistance to do so. While this has been essential, it has to some extent fostered a limited "site specific" and narrow technical view of cultural conservation. As preservation philosophy matures, however, we can afford to reevaluate our thinking. We can include the larger landscape into our vision and consider the importance of intangible values in the preservation process. If we are to fend off the rampant destruction of our diverse cultural and natural resources, we must expand the preservation imperative.

The preservation of sacred sites provides us with lessons in establishing and protecting values which are beyond the usual cultural, historic, economic or even religious. It can lead the way toward developing new terminology to express and evaluate subjective values and to incorporate them into the preservation process. Sacred sites demonstrate the meaning of special places and show us how we are attracted to them, and why they are worth saving. Sacred sites are special because their subjective qualities surpass their objective attributes.

These intangible values may not be immediately obvious, nor are they easily measurable or even familiar. But they are almost always profoundly human and thus very important. An example of such a value is the quality of natural silence. Environmentalists consider silence an important part of the wilderness experience. But the value of silence in sacred sites can be absolutely essential. It is an

integral part of the experience of that place, not a by product or side benefit. Thus the absence of artificial noise, or the value of silence, is raised to a new level of importance when viewed in the context of sacred sites.

When sacred sites come into their own as a legitimate land use category, these values will take on new meaning for conservationists. Perhaps then they will begin to play a larger role in the thinking of planners and architects. Sacred sites add another dimension to the experience of place that includes an internal reference by the visitor, one that is spiritual. The evaluation of the site must include that subjective value and the site can not be measured merely by its external characteristics.

There is a Native American sacred site that illustrates these points. Located in a Northern California mountain range called the Siskiyou, the area is the spiritual center of the universe to the Karok, Tolowa and Yurok people. They call it the High Country. The area is currently managed by the United States government as part of the Six Rivers National Forest. The Forest Service's own studies have confirmed its extraordinary value. The region, which encompasses about 40,000 acres, was recognized as a historic district and placed on the National Register. The religious value of the Siskiyou High Country to the traditional indigenous Native Americans is the same as the value of the Western Wall to the Jews, Mecca to Muslims or perhaps Lourdes to Catholics.

The story of the Siskiyou High Country also involves a remarkable lawsuit. A few years ago the United States Forest Service tried to complete a logging road through the heart of the High Country. The road would destroy the area as a sacred site because it was used by the Natives as a place for prayer, meditation and ceremonies that required unobstructed views, isolation and natural silence. Road building and logging would destroy that essential peace. Native Americans sued the United States to stop the road.

The result was an extraordinary finding by the federal courts. The Native American's right to practice their religion on public land was upheld and the government was precluded from further development of the area. The United States Supreme Court is reviewing the case, so the final result is still uncertain. However, the findings of the lower courts are still important to preservationists because the intangible values and native religious practices which were inherent in the site were key considerations in the court's decision to protect the area as a place of worship.

In this, as in other similar cases, there are important legal and moral issues raised. Native Americans were joined in their effort by environmentalists, fishing interests and historic preservationists. On the other side was the logging industry, the politicians, the Forest Service, and even some Indians without traditional values who wanted the local jobs development would create. The legal system is challenged by such questions as: How should the courts weigh these competing interests? Who should be the expert witnesses: the anthropologists or the Indians themselves? How can courts compare the religious practice of a few against the economic interests of many? And should the courts make these decisions at all?

Litigation is a questionable method of resolving preservation disputes. In cases involving sacred sites, the courts have to evaluate religious practices that are unfamiliar. There are no adequate means of translating some Native American practices into terms analogous to western religions, for instance. While natural resource values are somewhat more measurable, sacred land values involve qualities that are hard to express let alone quantify. It is difficult to prove the value of certain places or practices within a system of law which demands concrete evidence and requires that the court quantify competing values. Native Americans are often reluctant to seek legal protections for their sacred places because the legal system is essentially a foreign tribunal which is dedicated to preserving the separation of church and state.

The usual outcome for an unresolved dispute, especially when it involves land, is for the conflict to end up in the courts or develop into open warfare. Either way there is a loss. The loss of sites, cultures, even lives is not inevitable. A concerted effort by the preservation community must be made to develop alternative dispute resolution mechanisms which are especially designed for preservation problems. Special attention must be given to strategies for bridging the cultural gap and developing trustworthy communications.

Equally important is the notion that not all disputes can be solved, and compromise may not be possible. Some way to accommodate the conflict, perhaps to live peacefully and productively with differences should be explored. Certainly, the adversarial conditions of the courts are not conducive to resolving fundamental cultural conflicts regarding land rights and religious beliefs. The tension surrounding the survival of sacred places all over the world demonstrates the profound cultural differences between traditional land based peoples and modern societies.

Traditional peoples understand themselves to be part of their landscape. Their world view and spirituality are embedded in their natural habitat. As a result, dispossession from their land and their sacred places is equivalent to the destruction of the meaning of their lives. Given the objective powerlessness of many native peoples in the face of a dominant culture, which regards land as inanimate and natural resource exploitation as justified, resistance is often regarded as futile.

A recent report by the World Bank acknowledged that lands sacred to indigenous peoples in developing countries are being threatened by resource development. The report listed sites affected by World Bank projects in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and South America as examples.

World wide, the array of sacred sites is remarkable. They play an important role in the everyday lives of people throughout the world, from the much visited wayside shrines in industrialized Japan, to the crowded churches and mosques in the holy city of Jerusalem. There are, of course, all of the major centers of faith and worship for the world's major religions. Also included are Hawaiian heiaus and volcanoes, tree circles in the English countryside, monolithic rocks and special stones in Australia, springs in Europe, caves in the rainforests, many great rivers such as the Ganges in India, many lakes such as Manasarovar in Tibet are holy places, and the most of the worlds major mountains are sacred.

We are faced with the relentless destruction of invaluable sacred places all over the world, partly because their importance has not been emphasized and partly because native peoples lack the means to protect them. An international and integrated multi-disciplinary approach to the preservation of sacred sites is crucial. There must be legal and enforceable international protections for sites. Clearly, "sacred" is not just another "land use category." It is an irreplaceable, intangible quality which we may call holiness that makes sacred places as precious today as ever before in human history.

Whatever method is found to protect those places now endangered, the key to preservation is an appreciation for the critical contribution sacred places make toward the preservation of cultural diversity and integrity in contemporary society. Sacred places are a unique human phenomenon, even though their value or meaning has often been misunderstood. Eventually, our common need to preserve sacred places must be addressed.

## SUMMARY

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Sacred places are found everywhere in the world and in every culture. The historic preservation movement has only recently begun to appreciate the unique importance and universal characteristics of sacred sites and to recognize the contribution they make to cultural diversity and resource conservation.

A cross-cultural review of sacred places illustrates the important issues involved. The holy places of Jerusalem have been the focus of bitter international conflicts for centuries. The political struggles often overshadow both the religious interests and the resolution efforts. In Australia and South America the push for development threatens sites long revered by indigenous tribes. In China and Japan, sacred mountains are becoming tourist sites rather than places of worship, distorting their original use for commercial purposes. Native American sacred sites are often large natural areas located on public land. Their sacredness is derived from a view that encompasses the natural and human worlds in the same spiritual community. When government land use threatens those values, native cultures clash with the more prevalent contemporary lifestyle and Anglo-american legal system.

The preservation of sacred sites raises fundamental questions about the interplay between traditional cultures and modern society, between competing interests in land use and resource management and offers lessons in establishing and protecting values which are beyond the usual cultural, historic, commercial or religious. Sacred sites require that we develop new terminology to express and evaluate intangible values, to incorporate them into the preservation process and they challenge us to find new ways to resolve conflicts and accommodate cultural diversity.

## Résumé

### LES SITES SACRÉS DES CULTURES CONTEMPORAINES

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Des endroits sacrés sont trouvés partout dans le monde, et dans chaque culture. Ce n'est que récemment que le mouvement de conservation historique a commencé d'apprécier l'importance. Unique et les traits caractéristiques universels de ces sites sacrés, et de reconnaître la contribution qu'ils font à la variété culturelle et la conservation des ressources.

Un compte rendu des échançes de cultures de ces endroits sacrés illustre l'importance des questions impliquées. Les endroits saints de Jérusalem ont été le centre des conflits amers et internationaux depuis des siècles. Les luttes politiques éclipsent souvent les intérêts religieux et les efforts de conservation. En Australie et l'Amérique de sud les sites reverés depuis longuetemps par des tribus indigeneuses sont menacés par la nouvelle crise de developement. En Chine et au Japon, les montagnes sacrées sont en train de devenir des sites touristiques plutôt que des endroits d'adoration, d'éformant par le commerce leur utilization originale. Les sites sacrés de l'amérique propre sont souvent des endroits naturels situés sur du terrain publiques. Le fait qu'ils sont sacrés émane d'un point de vue qui entoure les mondes humaines et naturels. Vivant dans des mêmes communautés spirituelles. Quand ces valeurs sont menaces par l'utilisation des terrains par le gouvernement, les cultures indigenes se heurtent contre contres des modes de vie plus contemporaines et le système juridiques anglo-américains.

La preservation des sites sacrés soulève des questions fondamentales concernant des jeux croisés entre des cultures traditionnelles et la société modern, et entre des intérêts concurrenant d'utilisation du terrain et de la gestion de ressources. Ceci nous offres des leçons concernant l'établissement et protection des valeurs qui sont bien plus profondes que des valeurs cultureles, historiques, commerciales, ou religieuses habituelles. Ces sites sacrés exigent que nous developons un langage nouvel pour pouvoir exprimer et evaluer ces valeurs impalpable, et pour pouvoir les incorporer dans un program de préservation. Ils nous provoquent de trouver des méthodes nouvelles pour pouvoir résoudre ces conflits et d'accomoder des cultures diverses.