



FOCUS



Sacred grove in the Western Ghats of India. Photo by Claudia Rutte

Feature

SANASI: Designing a database for advancing research on Sacred Natural Sites

By Claudia Rutte and Katrin Daedlow

SANASI is an ongoing project to aggregate and provide sound data on sacred natural sites for research and policy making. The idea to collect and systematise in a single database the existent information on sacred natural sites was born in 2005, when Shonil Bhagwat and I first met in London. Shonil had recently finished his PhD thesis on biodiversity in sacred groves in the Indian district of Kodagu, whereas I was planning

to conduct a socio-economic study on the same groves. We both had read many scientific articles focused on different aspects of sacred natural sites and felt that time was ripe for trying to summarise some general conclusions about their global distribution, extent and importance to biodiversity as well as people. SANASI was thus designed to serve as a collector and research platform for scientists working on sacred sites from different angles.

An important inspiration came from the work of the late Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Prize winner in 2009, who challenged the conventional wisdom by demonstrating how local property can be successfully managed by local commons without any regulation by central authorities or privatization. She initiated an international database on forest resources (the IFRI database), built on the contributions of numerous scientists who follow a common data collection protocol. The strength of such an approach is that it enables the comparison of sites over space and time, and thus provides the basis for broad scope and sound science at the same time.

Pros and Cons of a public database

Collecting information on sacred sites and making it publicly available on an internet page can be a very sensitive issue. Although several advantages may ensue for the communities managing the sacred sites in question, some potential risks also need to be taken into account. Indeed, publicising the location of some vulnerable communities might expose them to unwanted and increased attention. Similarly, communities who manage economically valuable resources may prefer this to remain confidential information, rather than to be incorporated into a geo-referenced map. Therefore, it is crucial that researchers follow some basic principles when conducting and divulging research on sacred natural sites (see also www.sanasi.org). Most importantly, a prior consent from the respective communities to collect and publish data on a sacred site should be sought. If communities choose the extent to which their information is shared, sensitive information is safeguarded. On the positive side, a public database can raise awareness on local management and common property, and may also assist local communities with securing legal status and property rights over their traditional (but sometimes endangered) resources. Similarly, it increases opportunities for communities to learn about each other and share insights about their efforts. And, finally, it contributes to a growing body of knowledge that can inform conservation and other policies about the positive influence of community-based environmental management and governance.

Common effort

SANASI's dataset consists of seven domains:

- 1. Basic data;
2. Information source;
3. Ecology;
4. Management;
5. Protection;
6. Belief system;
7. Economy.

The data currently available in SANASI are sourced from publications in scientific journals, from reports of national or international agencies, from books, and from the internet. The fundamental idea, however, is that individual researchers themselves can also contribute their data, after identifying and registering on SANASI's website.



SANASI welcome page

At present, 217 sites are listed with SANASI, mostly from African and Asian countries. In 2011, a meta-analysis focusing on governance and management practises at a number of sacred sites was published with the aim to single out some general principles that coincide with successful site conservation (Rutte 2011). In the future, a comprehensive dataset on sacred natural sites could also enable the analysis of livelihoods as well as cultural values provided by these sites, such as provisioning of clean water and food, and preservation of useful species.

Katrin Daedlow, a political scientist and institutional economist at the Humboldt-University of Berlin, is currently re-working the database structure, which will result in some small changes. Namely, the database will be reviewed for biased and inconclusive wording from (Western dominated) scientific language, and the structure of the seven domains will be improved. For example, a clearer distinction between governance (decision-making) and management (day-to-day performance) in the dataset entries would be needed. Furthermore, work is underway for adding information relative to some social-ecological features of the sacred natural sites, such as a classification of disturbances, which would enable to combine institutional economic theories with concepts from the resilience school in the analysis of the sites.

Everybody is welcome to share ideas and comments to improve SANASI continuously. The main goal is to provide meaningful and high quality data for research and policy-making. Hopefully this effort will also lead to a network of scientists and common research protocols that will facilitate collaborations and exchange of data, as many questions around sacred natural sites can only be answered through an interdisciplinary approach.

SANASI is available at: www.sanasi.org.

Publications:

Rutte, C., 2011, The sacred commons: Conflicts and solutions of resource management in sacred natural sites. Biological Conservation 144. Pg 2387-2394.

OPPORTUNITIES

February 6
26th International Congress for Conservation Biology: Call for papers
Call for papers for the 26th SCB conference in Baltimore, Maryland, 21 - 25 July 2013, is still open. Conference website here.

February 15
26th International Congress for Conservation Biology: Call for papers on religion, culture, sacred sites and sacred species
Call for papers for the 50th ATBC meeting in San José, Costa Rica, 23 - 27 June 2013, is still open. Conference website here.

February 28
Protecting the Sacred: Recognition of Sacred Sites of Indigenous Peoples for Sustaining Nature and Culture in Northern and Arctic Regions: Call for abstracts
Call for abstract for the conference Protecting the Sacred, held in Rovaniemi and Pyhä, Finland, 11 - 13 September 2013, is currently open. Conference website here.

March 1
Annual meeting of the Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences (AESS): Call for abstracts
Call for abstract for the conference Protecting the Sacred, held in Pittsburgh, USA, 19 - 22 June 2013, is currently open.

PUBLICATIONS

Bhat, J. A., Kumar, M., Negi, A., K., Todaria, N. P., 2012, People's perceptions on conservation options and use value of a protected area in Garhwal Himalaya, India. Indian Forester 138. Pg 961-967

Fauna and Flora International (FFI), 2012, Current Status, Ownership and Management of Sacred Sites in the Rwenzori Mountains, Uganda

Henig, D., 2012, "This is our little hajj": Muslim holy sites and reappropriation of the sacred landscape in contemporary Bosnia. American Ethnologist 39. Pg 751-765

Hoggins-Zogib, L., Dudley, N., Aziz, T. (eds.), 2012, The High Ground: Bio-cultural Diversity and Conservation of Sacred Natural Sites in the Eastern Himalayas. WWF International

Jimoh, S. O., Ikyagba, E. T., Alarape, A. A., Obioha, E. E., Adeyemi, A. A., 2012, The role of traditional laws and taboos in wildlife conservation in the Oban Hill sector of Cross River National Park (CRNP), Nigeria. Journal of Human Ecology 39. Pg 209-219

Mallarach, J. M. (ed.), 2012, Spiritual Values of Protected Areas of Europe: Workshop Proceedings, Isle of Vilm, Germany, 2 - 6 November 2011. Germany, Federal Agency for Nature Conservation

Pala, N. A., Gokhale, Y., Negi, A. K., Razvi, S., Todaria, N. P., 2012, Local deities in conservation: a conservation practice in Banju Nami Tok sacred grove in Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand. Indian Forester 138. Pg: 710-713

Yi, C. H., 2012, Sylvanic trees institutionalized in the ancient Northeast Asia: Cultural and environmental significance of Dan-tree and Sa-tree. Forest Policy and Economics 22. Pg: 28-39

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ON THE BOOKSHELF

List of relevant publications issued in the last three months

OPPORTUNITIES

February 6. Call for papers
26th International Congress for Conservation Biology

February 15. Call for papers
50th Annual Meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation

February 28. Call for abstracts
Protecting the Sacred: Recognition of Sacred Sites of Indigenous Peoples for Sustaining Nature and Culture in Northern and Arctic Regions

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ABOUT SSIREN



The Sacred Site Research Newsletter (SSIREN) was conceived at the symposium "Conserving nature at sacred sites", held at the University of Zurich on the 25th October 2011, as a means to inform and aggregate the community of researchers working on sacred natural sites. It is aimed not merely at scholars but also practitioners and policy-makers coping with specific issues, as well as anyone with a general interest in the interaction between people and nature.

SSIREN is an acronym from the title Sacred Sites Research Newsletter, but as a creature a Siren is also a convincing symbol of the connection between beliefs, culture and nature, which is characteristic of sacred natural sites.

The Newsletter is issued quarterly and is literally "made" by its members: everyone is warmly encouraged to submit news, events, opportunities, and recent relevant publications, or to introduce their work in a feature article. Relevant contributions from all academic disciplines, as well as NGO practitioners and other institutions, are warmly welcome.

CONTACTS

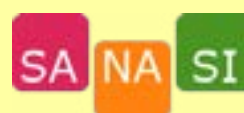
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Sacred Sites Research Newsletter
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FRIENDS



SANASI - World Database on Sacred Natural Sites



ARC - The Alliance of Religions and Conservation



ISSRNC - The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture



You receive this newsletter because you have previously participated in initiatives on sacred natural sites. Tired of it? Please contact the Editors. Think it's fantastic and would like to involve a colleague or a friend? Contact the Editors all the same.