



Sacred Sites Research Newsletter

JULY 2013



Note from the Editors

Dear friends and colleagues,

Welcome to a new issue of SSIREN. Firstly we would like to celebrate together what is a very important issue for us: we have come full circle, and SSIREN has now been coming to you for a full year! We hope that this newsletter has been enjoyable to read and of help to your work, and thank all of you for your contributions and ongoing support.

In sight of the International Congress of Conservation Biology (ICCB) taking place this month, this issue is thematically related to the work of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) and ICCB itself. Stephen Awoyemi introduces us to the aims and initiatives of the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group and Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative of SCB, while an overview of the ICCB symposium *Conserving sacred Sites and Species in the Anthropocene* is offered in the News section.

We hope that you will enjoy the issue, and will accompany SSIREN into another year of insight into sacred sites and conservation.

Fabrizio Frascaroli and Emma Shephard-Walwyn

FEATURE



Stephen Awoyemi serves as Chair of the Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative of the Society for Conservation Biology

Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative: Exploring the link between religion and conservation for policy action

by Stephen M. Awoyemi

The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) is an international professional society dedicated to promoting the scientific study of the phenomena that affect the maintenance, loss, and restoration of biological diversity. The Society's membership includes resource managers, educators, conservation workers, and students, with more than 6,000 members world-wide. Our mission is to advance the science and practice of conserving Earth's biological diversity. Our vision is "a world where people understand, value, and conserve the diversity of life on Earth. We envision SCB, a global community of conservation professionals, as a leading scientific voice for the study and conservation of Earth's biological diversity."

The Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group and Religion and Conservation Research Collective

The Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group (RCBWG) of the SCB was founded in 2007 by the then President Tom Baugh. The timing of the creation of the RCBWG coincided with a growing awareness of the role of religion in furthering the cause of conservation. The RCBWG is dedicated to building bridges of mutual understanding between religions and conservation, and helping form a meaningful synthesis between these two forces. In 2012, the Board of the RCBWG endorsed the creation of the Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative (RCRC), a committee of the RCBWG chaired by Stephen Mufutau Awoyemi. The RCRC is tasked with the goal of empirically investigating the role of religion in the quest for environmental conservation globally, and translating those results into policy action. The RCRC also identifies societal problems that need policy interventions, and through scientific research informs decision making and social change within the purview of religion and conservation. The RCRC's approach is unique in that it engages society through policy recommendations that are based on sound scientific evidence about the interface of religion and conservation.

The Animal Release Project

RCRC's first initiative involved the crafting of a policy statement on the religious practice of releasing captive wildlife for merit. Animal release – also known as *fang sheng*, the Chinese term for the religious act of releasing captive wildlife as an act of compassion – frequently causes several adverse effects on biodiversity including the spread of invasive species, genetic swamping of wild populations, extreme suffering in the captured and released animals, competition with native species, vulnerability to predation of the released animal, disease spread to natural populations, and human health concerns. Current studies show that the scale and intensity of animal release in several Asian countries is seriously harming many species. To date, efforts to curb or change this practice have had very limited effects. The policy statement was approved by the SCB Global Policy Committee in June 2012. Arising from this statement was an intensification of efforts from a diverse array of global professionals to address the problem. Over 40 scientists converged in an email forum in August 2012 to identify alternative approaches to animal release that are sustainable. The outcome of this forum was published as a 'Letter to the Editor' in the December 21st 2012 issue of *Science*. The *Animal Release Project* was established following the forum with help from an advisory board made of dedicated professionals such as Dr. Lucia Severinghaus, who has researched and published extensively on the issue of animal release, Jeff McNeely of IUCN who contributed to drafting the original version of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Dr. Andrew Gosler of Oxford University, Dr. Jame Schaefer of Marquette University, Tom Baugh, Founding President Emeritus of the RCBWG, and many others. The *Animal Release Project's* goal is to bring animal release practice in line with the principles of conservation biology, so that negative effects of animal release on biodiversity can be contained and eventually removed. The RCBWG is currently raising funds for the project.

Severing the demand for religious ivory

RCRC's second initiative was the crafting of a policy statement on the use of ivory for religious objects. The premise of this statement is presented in the following excerpt: "Elephant massacre in Africa has escalated to record levels today over the last 30 years. This alarming rate can be traced to the demand for ivory for religious artifacts, trinkets, and other purposes in Asia, which, if unchecked, could reduce the African elephant to small isolated populations, some of which will disappear altogether over the next two or three decades. In addition to the ethical concerns raised by the possible extinction of elephant populations or species, the ivory trade is associated with considerable bloodshed for humans as well as elephants. The RCRC of the RCBWG of the SCB has concluded that the requirements of religion and conservation should be and, indeed, can be complementary in reaching the best possible outcome whereby religious faith is respected and the future of elephants safeguarded, religious communities are advised of the problems pertaining to the use of ivory, and religious leaders are willing to prompt a change in attitudes and practices that ensure the survival of the African elephant". The statement received international attention from scientists and the media and efforts are currently being made to initiate a partnership amongst the RCBWG, Africa Section of the SCB, and other potential allies to address religious ivory in Asia.



"Faith traditions possess the power to make the ivory trade unpopular - what weapons and law cannot do", says Stephen

The road ahead

Future orientations for the RCRC on behalf of the RCBWG are targeted at compiling evidence/data through empirical research on the role of religion in environmental conservation, identifying/mapping those regions of the world where this synthesis has reached advanced stages and gauging their impact on policy. Also regions where little has been demonstrated about the role of religion in conservation will be researched into to establish their potential to inform policy.

Find out more:

- [Society for Conservation Biology](#)
- [Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group](#)
- [Position statement on the religious practice of releasing captive wildlife for merit](#)
- [Policy statement on the use of ivory for religious objects](#)

For additional info and inquiries, you are welcome to [contact Stephen Awoyemi](#).

NEWS

Translation of the *Green guide to Hajj* into Arabic

An Arabic translation of the document has just been published by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, in partnership with the Faith Regen Foundation, Global One and Eco Muslim. The document is a guide to an environmentally sustainable Hajj. It was launched at ARC's Assisi event in November 2011 to encourage Muslim pilgrims to reduce their impact on the Earth. Since its first publication, the Guide has also been translated into Bahasa Indonesian. The full document can be downloaded from [ARC's website](#).

Symposium on biocultural diversity and sacred landscapes at IALE Congress next September

A symposium on biocultural landscape diversity has been organized by Dr. Gloria Pungetti and Prof. Oliver Rackham (University of Cambridge) for the European Congress of the International Association for Landscape Ecology, scheduled for next September in Manchester. The symposium, titled *Biocultural landscape conservation in the framework of landscape ecology: a European perspective*, will consider sacred and biocultural landscapes, alongside traditional ecological knowledge, in the framework of European landscape ecology. The aims are to offer original interdisciplinary insights for future conservation and management, and to promote the integration of spiritual values of landscapes into policy and planning.

PUBLICATIONS

Adler, C.E., McEvoy, D., Chhetri, P., Kruk, E., 2013. The role of tourism in a changing climate for conservation and development. A problem-oriented study in the Kailash Sacred Landscape, Nepal. *Policy Sciences* 46(2): 161-178

Bossart, J.L., Antwi, J.B., 2013. Species-specific traits predict genetic structure but not genetic diversity of three fragmented Afrotropical forest butterfly species. *Conservation Genetics* 14(2): 511-528

Collins-Kreiner, N., Shmueli, D.F., Ben Gal, M., 2013. Spatial transgression of new religious sites in Israel. *Applied Geography* 40: 103-114

Deane-Drummond, C., Artinian-Kaiser, R., Clough D.L., (Eds.), 2013. *Animals as Religious Subjects: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*. Bloomsbury, New York.

Duncan, H.L., 2013. "Here at the fringe of the forest": staging sacred space in as you like it. *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43(1): 121-144

Kent, E.F., 2013. *Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

McKay J.E. (Ed.), 2013. *Integrating Religion within Conservation: Islamic Beliefs and Sumatran Forest Management*. DICE, University of Kent.

Narayanan, Y., 2013. Religion and Sustainable Development: analysing the connections. *Sustainable Development* 21(2): 131-139

Palmer, M., Finlay, V., 2013. *Faith in Conservation: New approaches to Religions and Conservation [Revised edition]*. Alliance of Religions and Conservation and World Bank, Bath and Washington

Symposium on sacred sites and species at ICCB this month

Dr. Shonil Bhagwat (University of Oxford), Dr. Alison Ormsby (Eckerd College), and Emma Shephard-Walwyn (University of Kent), have co-organised a symposium *Culture and Conservation: conserving sacred sites and species in the Anthropocene* for the upcoming International Congress of Conservation Biology (ICCB) in Baltimore later this month. The symposium aims to look at culturally-sensitive approaches from indigenous traditions and practices that have promoted conservation on a human-dominated planet and will feature work from Africa, Europe and on a global scale. With a strong focus on interdisciplinary work, work with local groups and traditional people, and the interconnectivity between belief systems and conservation, the symposium fits in perfectly with the theme at this year's ICCB: *Connecting Systems, Disciplines and Stakeholders*.

EVENTS

July 14-20, Amherst, MA, USA
Sustainability and the Sacred

Week-long program putting the discussion of sustainability into the context of the sacredness of the earth. Organized by the Hampshire College. More info [here](#).

July 15-18, Hoddesdon, UK
The Earth is the Lord's: Renewing the Covenant of Creation

Conference exploring what the Bible says about the creation and the idea of the eternal covenant, in the perspective of the current environmental crisis. More info [here](#).

July 21-25, Baltimore, MA, USA
26th International Congress for Conservation Biology

Recognized as the most important global meeting for conservation professionals and students. This year's meeting has the theme *Connecting Systems, Disciplines and Stakeholders*. More info at the [congress website](#).

July 25-29, Trondheim, Norway
2nd International Meeting of Green Pilgrimage Network

The Municipality of the City of Trondheim, the Diocese of Nidaros, The Church of Norway and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) will be holding the second official international meeting of the Green Pilgrimage Network. More info at [ARC's website](#).

July 27-August 3, Lake George, NY, USA
59th Annual Summer Conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS)

The conference has the topic *Scientific, Spiritual, and Moral Challenges in Solving the World Food Crisis*. Further details [here](#).

September 9-12, Manchester, UK
European Congress of the International Association for Landscape Ecology

The congress focuses on the theme *Changing European Landscapes: Landscape ecology, local to global*. Registration is open until August 1st. More info [here](#).

ISSUE 2(3) AT A GLANCE:

FEATURE

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NEWS

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UPCOMING EVENTS

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ON THE BOOKSHELF

List of relevant publications issued in the last three months

OPPORTUNITIES

August 15. Job application deadline
Head of Communications and other positions at *A Rocha*

October 1. Call for papers
Journal of the Sociology and Theory of Religion

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

For inquiries about the newsletter, to submit an article, or to contribute in any other way, please contact the editors:

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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



SNSI – The Sacred Natural Sites Initiative



Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas

CSVPA – IUCN-WCPA Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas

OPPORTUNITIES

August 15

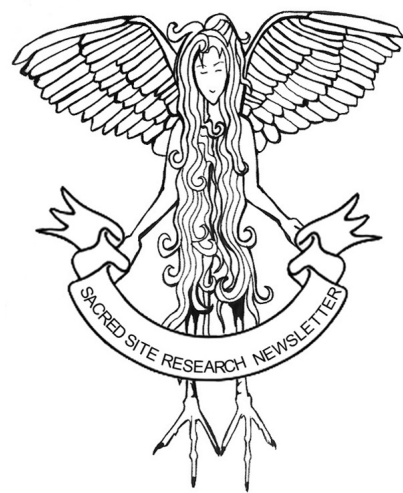
Job opportunity: Head of Communications at A Rocha

A Rocha is an international Christian and environmental NGO. The head of communications will report to the Executive director and is responsible for implementing A Rocha's communications strategy globally. Applications are due in by 15th August 2013. More info [here](#). For further opportunities with A Rocha, please visit [their website](#).

October 1

Special Issue of the Journal of the Sociology and Theory of Religion (JSTR) on Religion and the Environment: Call for papers.

More info and submission at the [JSTR website](#).



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.