



## **Draft Report (as of 25 March 2003)**

### **International Workshop on**

### ***“The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation”***

### **Kunming and Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve (People’s Republic of China) 17 – 20 February 2003**

#### **Introduction**

1. An international workshop on the topic “The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation” was held in Kunming (17 – 18 February 2002) and Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve (19 – 20 February 2003) in the People’s Republic of China. The workshop was organized by UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme in collaboration with the Kunming Institute of Botany of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, and the Chinese National Committee for the Man and the Biosphere Programme. Support for the workshop was provided by UNESCO-MAB, the cross-cutting project “Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS)”, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature - Mexico Programme (WWF-Mexico). The UNESCO Offices in Beijing, Jakarta and New Delhi also provided funding to enable the participation of selected workshop participants.

#### **Workshop Objectives**

2. The workshop’s objectives were to address, at the interface of biological and cultural diversity, the basis and methodology for comparative, inter-regional collaboration on biodiversity and environmental conservation based on culturally important areas, and in particular, sacred natural sites. Work on ongoing case studies was presented addressing in particular the traditional mechanisms of environmental conservation in the differing regional contexts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It was expected that similarities on the traditional management of sacred natural sites would help formulate guidelines for policy-makers in the conservation of these sites for future generations. Emphasis was placed on the interrelationship between biological and cultural diversity in the light of promoting sustainable development. The workshop was considered to be a preparatory session for the forthcoming IUCN “World Parks Congress” (Durban, South Africa, September 2003), during which a session on sacred natural sites will be organized by IUCN’s World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) Task Force on Non-Material Values and UNESCO.

3. The background and rationale of the workshop stems from the concern that in many developing countries, national parks or other protected areas have not always achieved the

primary objective for which they were established (i.e. environmental protection), as the concept of a national park is essentially a western-based one and is often unfamiliar to non-western societies. However, many community-based protected areas exist throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America as *sacred natural sites*. Due to restricted access, these sacred natural sites (mountains, groves, rivers etc.) are often pristine ecosystems in otherwise degraded environments. They have survived environmental degradation precisely because they are well rooted in local cultures and traditional belief systems. Moreover, sacred natural sites play an important role in the conservation of species and the rehabilitation of degraded environments, thus promoting sustainable development and alleviating poverty in rural areas.

4. The workshop also served to address the “secrecy” of sacred places, their potential to foster peace and understanding among different cultures, and the role of traditional ecological knowledge in the light of community-based management of sacred natural sites. Custodians of sacred natural sites have a wealth of knowledge on the plant and animal species found in them due to their medicinal properties and their role in all aspects of every day life. In addition, they often know about the importance of these sites in ecosystem functioning and their role in supplying freshwater, as many natural sacred sites contain water sources. At the same time, the custodians are increasingly aware of mounting pressures on these sites due to, amongst other things, land degradation in adjacent areas as a consequence of poverty and demographic growth. Custodians are therefore indispensable partners in helping to conserve the natural environment, as the protection of sacred natural sites is of mutual benefit.

### **Workshop Papers, Discussions and SWOT**

5. A total of twenty-six participants from Africa, Asia, Australia and Latin America took part in the workshop (List of Participants attached as Annex 1 to this report). Specific case studies on sacred natural sites were presented from Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Madagascar, Mexico, Mongolia and Nepal (see Workshop Agenda appended as Annex 2). Several of the sacred natural sites mentioned had a legally protected area status (including biosphere reserve status) while others were solely protected because of their “sacred site” status. While a number of differences are apparent throughout the world’s regions, a large number of similarities appear with regard to the origins, status, conservation and management of sacred natural sites clearly demonstrating that sacred natural sites play a pivotal role in biodiversity conservation.

6. The workshop participants used the SWOT analysis technique (SWOT = strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) to identify a number of key issues with regard to the role of sacred natural sites for biodiversity conservation i.e. their lack of recognition and their changing value systems, which may jeopardize their traditional protected area status. However, as the protection of natural sacred sites is often more sustainable than the classic legally protected areas, and as they often contain a higher degree of biodiversity (as was reported by several case studies), their recognition and study was considered vital by workshop participants. Moreover, workshop participants considered the importance of community-based development, local participation in decision-making processes, eco-tourism as well as their potential as indicator sites for the rehabilitation of degraded environments. In particular, workshop participants considered the importance of formulating guidelines for their sustained protection and its management and recognition by public authorities.

7. The results of the SWOT analysis are attached as Annex 3 to this report.

## **Creation of an International Network**

8. The workshop participants decided to create an "International Network on Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation" spanning Africa, Asia/Pacific and Latin America, which would increase collaboration among workshop participants and other interested parties. The workshop website (<http://biowest.ac.cn/sns/>), set up by Prof. Hu Huabin, could well serve as a reference for and information on the new network. The main purpose of the new network will be to test and validate policy guidelines on the conservation and management of sacred natural sites using on-going studies and conservation schemes in place at the sacred natural sites discussed during the workshop. The network will thus have (a) a scientific objective (to improve understanding of the mechanisms of culture-based environmental conservation) as well as (b) an application-oriented and policy-relevant objective (to foster national and international recognition for such sites, and with the full cooperation of local custodians and communities, to consider management guidelines for the protection of sacred natural sites). The network could also serve to form attitudes that place people as part of nature thus promoting the sustainability principle in environmental management.

## **Future steps**

9. The workshop papers will be published by UNESCO. Mr Thomas Schaaf (UNESCO-MAB) and Mr Allen Putney (IUCN-WCPA) will prepare a zero draft version of the guidelines on sacred natural sites based on workshop papers and the workshop's SWOT analysis, which will be sent to workshop participants for their review and comments. The final draft version will then be available for subsequent consideration at the World Parks Congress in Durban, September 2003 (within the stream "Creating Public Support for Protected Areas").

10. A future workshop on the new network should ideally be held in 2004 or 2005 (possibly in connection with an international symposium to be organized at the World Expo in Aichi, Japan, 2005).

## **Field Trip**

11. During the field trip to Jinhong and the **Error! Not a valid link.**Biosphere Reserve, workshop participants had the opportunity to see a holy hill above the Dai village of Chengzi. Most Dai villages in the area have a "sacred forest" higher up the settlement. Many of them were seriously logged and damaged during the Cultural Revolution, though now they enjoy a vigorous regeneration into secondary forests, largely due to community-based conservation. The designation of the Xishuangbanna site as a biosphere reserve has greatly helped to increase the nature reserve's visibility and tourism is developing rapidly (120,000 visitors in 2002). Problems persist with the elephant population, despite the fact that they are a main tourist attraction, causing about 2-3 casualties a year. Poaching was a problem up until about 5 years ago when the government authorized the confiscation of weapons from local people. The "butterfly farm" has been a great success, both for tourists and the local people. Indeed, the latter are now setting up their own butterfly farms with the assistance of the biosphere reserve staff, to generate alternative income opportunities. Other tourist facilities in the biosphere reserve include a cable car (35 minutes ride above the tropical tree canopies), large-scale aviaries and vivaria for snakes and reptiles, as well as traditional Dai dance and music performances.

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## Workshop Agenda

### Sunday, 16 February 2002:

Arrival of workshop participants in Kunming (China).

### Monday, 17 February 2002:

#### **Morning session:**

Chairperson: Prof. Pei Shengji, Kunming Institute of Botany

9:00 – 10:00 hrs.: *Opening Session*

- Opening of the workshop by Prof. Pei Shengji
- Opening address by Mr Liu Jiang, Chinese National Commission for UNESCO
- Environmental research and management in Eastern Asia by Dr Axel Hebel, UNESCO-Beijing Office
- IUCN's perspective for the World Parks Congress by Mr Allen Putney
- Introduction into workshop objectives by Dr. Thomas Schaaf, UNESCO-MAB

10:00 – 10:20 hrs.: *Coffee/tea break*

Chairperson: Mr Allen Putney, IUCN

10:20 – 12:30 hrs.: *Thematic Session 1: Presentation of case studies from Africa and Latin America*

- Mr Anthony Githito (Kenya): Kaya coastal forests in Kenya
- Ms Hanta Rabetaliana (Madagascar): Sacred sites in Madagascar
- Ms Mercedes Otegui Acha (Mexico): Huichol and Seris sacred landscapes
- Mr Alfonso Alem Rojo (Mexico): Experiences of indigenous peoples in Mexico, Guatemala and other Latin American countries on the conservation of their sacred natural sites
- Dr Derek Elias (Australia): LINKS Project and sacred sites in Australia

13:00 – 14:30 hrs.: *Lunch break*

#### **Afternoon Session**

Chairperson: Ms Mercedes Otegui, WWF-Mexico Programme

14:30 – 16:00 hrs.: *Thematic Session 2: Presentation of case studies from Asia (other than China)*

- Prof. P.S. Ramakrishnan (India): Sacred landscapes in Sikkim, India
- Prof. Kunio Iwatsuki (Japan): Sacred mountains in Japan
- Dr Norov Urtnasan (Mongolia): Sacred sites in Mongolia
- Dr Lhakpa N. Sherpa (Nepal): Sacred beyuls and biological diversity conservation in the Himalaya

16:00 – 16:15 hrs.: *Coffee/tea break*

Chairperson: Prof. Kunio Iwatsuki, University of the Air, Japan

*16:15 – 17:45 hrs.: Thematic Session 3: Presentation of case studies from China*

- Prof. Pei Shengji (China): The role of ethnobotany for biodiversity conservation
- Prof. Hu Huabin (China): Sacred sites in Xishuangbanna, China
- Dr Liu Hongmao and Mr Xu Youkai (China): Rehabilitation of holy hill site in Xishuangbanna.
- Prof. Liu Wenjian (China): Local knowledge and dryland management in Xingjian, north-western China
- Dr. Luo Peng (China): Sacred sites in north-western Yunnan, China

*18:30 – 20:00 hrs.: Welcome banquet*

### **Tuesday, 18 February 2002:**

#### **Morning session:**

Moderator: Dr Thomas Schaaf

*8:30 – 10:30 hrs.: Thematic Session 4: Cultural and biological diversity: opportunities and threats of sacred natural sites for biodiversity conservation (using SWOT Analysis)*

*10:30 – 10:45 hrs.: Coffee/tea break*

Moderators: Mr Allen Putney/Ms Mercedes Otegui

*10:45 – 11:45 hrs.: Thematic Session 5: Discussion on interregional collaboration and preparations for the World Parks Congress*

*11:45 – 12:30 hrs.: Lunch break*

*13:45 hrs.: Travel to Jinhong, Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve by plane.*

Guided 2-hours' tour through Jinhong and its park in the afternoon.

*18:30 – 19:30 hrs.: Dinner Banquet*

### **Wednesday, 19 February 2002:**

*8:00 – 12:00 hrs.: Field visit to Mengyang tropical forest area.*

*12:00 – 13:00 hrs.: Lunch*

*13:00 – 18:30 hrs.: Field visit to Baka village and visit to Ji'nuo Village Museum. Visit to Menglun township and holy hill site of Chengzi (Dai) village. Tour through and overnight stay at the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden.*

*19:30 hrs.: Evening party*

**Thursday, 20 February 2002:**

**Morning session**

8:30 – 10:00 hrs.: *Concluding session of the workshop.*

10:30 – 12:00 hrs.: *Travel back to Jinghong.*

12:00 - 13:00 hrs.: *Lunch*

14:10 hrs.: *Departure by plane from Xishuangbanna Airport to Kunming International Airport*

15:00 hrs.; *Arrival at Kunming International Airport and departure of participants.*

## Results of SWOT Analysis

Note: While the SWOT analysis addresses both internal factors (strengths – weaknesses) as well as external factors (opportunities – threats) of a given issue, time constraints limited its analysis in more thorough detail. The positive factors (strengths & opportunities) and the negative factors (weaknesses & threats) were therefore treated jointly.

### **I. Strengths/Opportunities of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation**

#### (A) Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) have high conservation value

Many SNS have a high biodiversity and are often important for freshwater conservation. Due to low human impact and restricted access, they are often found in a pristine state in virtually all representative ecosystems and landscapes thus serving as sanctuaries for rare, endangered and endemic species. Their role as gene pools for biotic resources can directly contribute to the conservation of species and ecosystems that are susceptible to disturbances. In particular, in areas suffering from excessive human impact resulting in environmental degradation, they can serve as “indicator sites” for the restoration and rehabilitation of degraded systems. Based on species inventories in SNS, strategies can be formulated for the reintroduction of native and endemic species in a wider spatial context other than the area covered by the SNS itself.

#### (B) SNS often have a more sustainable dimension of protection than legally protected areas

SNS are community-based conservation areas. As they are fully in line with traditional belief systems and values, they tend to be more sustainable than classic legally protected areas. Local people often manage SNSs in ways that have proven to be quite effective in protecting natural habitats and human livelihoods over long periods of time. In fact, their long-term preservation resulting from “voluntary protection” can enable long-term biological successions in the SNS. This long-term preservation can be used as a public awareness demonstration site offering children the opportunity to witness active sustainable resources management and nature conservation.

#### (C) SNS can be model sites for management

SNS reflect a more holistic view of Man-Nature interactions. They integrate cultural and natural values in a single management system. As SNS are community-based conservation areas, they can be considered as model sites for participatory conservation strategies and practises. As local people clearly understand the importance of protecting “their” SNS, such culturally important sites facilitate community participation in overall resource management and development. In this context, much can be learned from formulating buffer zone management schemes around protected core areas. Moreover, in legally protected areas with a resident population, the integration of SNS can improve people’s attitude to strictly protected area regulations.

(D) SNS are important for preserving traditional knowledge

Classical western science (in the Cartesian sense) is not the only path to “knowledge” acquisition. Local and traditional knowledge of adapted land use practises have model character and are found in SNS. Many SNS serve as “healing sanctuaries” (often coupled with traditional knowledge on medicinal plants) that provide a much wider range than the one spatially covered by a SNS. Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), through an intimate knowledge of local plant and animal resources, is often applied with regard to managing SNS, thus providing good opportunities for integrating western science and traditional knowledge systems. The analysis of traditional ecological knowledge can help to arrive at formulating concepts and approaches for sustainable biodiversity management, they can also be used for educational purposes (both in culture and nature).

(E) SNS are important manifestations of culture and cultural diversity

As carriers of culture-specific worldviews and traditional belief systems, SNS have tremendous cultural value. In many cases, SNS are reference points of cultural, religious and national identity. In other cases, cultural rites and practices (music, song, dance, poetry, folklore), which should be preserved in the context of maintaining cultural diversity, are associated with SNS. The recognition of SNS offers a possibility to support fragile and disappearing cultural systems, particularly through the transmission of traditional knowledge passed on by the elders. As beacons of indigenous values, SNS can also help to recognize overall rights and cultures of indigenous peoples and the livelihoods within which they are sustained.

(F) SNS as destinations for eco-tourism

SNS are a cultural and natural heritage of a specific group of people. At the interface of culture and nature, they can provide important opportunities for eco-tourism development, assisting visitors in experiencing new cultures while learning about nature. If practised and managed well, eco-tourism linked to SNS can benefit local people directly, particularly if due respect is paid to indigenous and local peoples as *full partners*, in the development of conservation and eco-tourism policies. Moreover, SNS can provide an intercultural space to examine human-nature relationships from different cultural perspectives, as such, they can serve to build bridges for intercultural relationships with peoples that often have been subject to discrimination and racism.

(G) The sacredness of a SNS is a value in itself

The “sacred nature” of the SNS has an intrinsic value, which should be respected and preserved. It is most interesting to note that there are shared, fundamental religious/spiritual/philosophical values that exist between different cultures illustrating that cultural and biological diversity are again intertwined and are reinforced by such unique and long-established relations between people and place as embodied in SNS

## **II. Threats/Weaknesses of SNS**

(A) Insufficient recognition of SNS

SNS suffer from their lack of recognition, both by governments and the wider public. In particular in many countries, modern national policies and their legal systems do not acknowledge the importance of SNS and therefore their conservation and management is not

integrated into policy-making. Overall land management strategies do not include indigenous peoples in decision-making processes as regards SNS. It is often very difficult to obtain public funding for the conservation of SNS. Knowledge about sacred natural sites, and their importance for cultural preservation and biodiversity conservation, is not included in school curricula. Finally, local and traditional knowledge – often linked with SNS – is not recognized in many scientific circles and at the policy level. The lack of recognition of SNS may be a result of the diversity of cultural traditions associated with SNS and governments often find it difficult to integrate all these aspects into one coherent policy.

(B) The secrecy of the sacred

Secrets held by custodians of the SNS may result in its non-recognition. This is often due to the reticence of indigenous/traditional peoples to reveal their spirituality or disclose their knowledge to outsiders. The spiritual aspects of the SNS may be confined to only a few initiated individuals, therefore general knowledge transfer of the SNS is restricted or taboo. Also when SNS are exposed to outsiders who do not share/respect their cultural or sacred beliefs, they may lose their significance or meanings or be exposed to abuse. Finally, access to SNS can be restricted to specific ethnic groups only thus reinforcing cultural differences and conflicts.

(C) “Arbitrary” selection of SNS

From a biodiversity conservation perspective, SNS are “arbitrarily” selected and do not follow a systematic pattern, which would enhance species diversity and conservation. For biodiversity conservation to be viable, SNS may be too small or fragmented. If an integrated landscape management strategy is not adopted for both within and outside the SNS, there is a risk to environmental conservation generally. On the other hand, great caution should be exercised so that spiritual values are not disregarded with ecological features being the sole consideration.

(D) SNS as artificial ecosystems

SNS are not necessarily pristine wilderness areas, but have been shaped by humans (e.g. by favouring a specific species over another species). Some SNS may have a limited number of species and/or territory to be considered for biodiversity conservation. They do not have specific conservation targets and thus cannot meet modern biodiversity conservation standards as the SNS might not be linked to biodiversity conservation but associated with other functions. They can be artificially maintained ecosystems/biomes created by people. Population growth and population pressure may damage the “nature” in the SNS.

(E) Cultural changes affect the integrity of SNS

SNS are subject to changing value systems and cultures and therefore may “lose or gain their sacred value” and with this their environmental conservation function. Modern economic development and associated changes of societal value systems may/will significantly reduce the number and integrity of SNS in the future. Traditional cultural values disappear gradually as younger generations no longer share the same values of older generations and subscribe to modernism, particularly in countries with very rapid transformation patterns. External influences from foreign and “modern” cultures jeopardize the integrity of the SNS. Moreover, the transmission of traditional knowledge is collapsing, partly also as a result of formal school education. At the same time, it must be recognized that culture is always dynamic and should not be artificially “fossilized”, as even the documentation and preservation of the SNS could prevent their evolution.

(F) Economic benefits deriving from SNS

Custodians of SNS are often not strong enough to resist the destructive forces that impact adversely on SNS. For example, if eco-tourism is developed around SNS, local people may not always benefit from the economic returns nor are they in a position to maintain the spiritual and physical integrity of the SNS. In the context of eco-tourism, great take care must be taken not to “romanticize” SNS.

(G) Scant scientific information on traditional ecological knowledge and SNS

While traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is often tied to SNS, the study and validation of TEK is often carried out when deemed useful to western science thus stripping the knowledge from both its context and control of those who maintain it. This process denigrates the value of other kinds of knowledge held by a certain group and their integrity.

The diversity of SNS in different cultural regions of the world necessitates the setting up of criteria for identifying and classifying SNS so that their recognition is facilitated by national governments for policy implementation concerning the preservation of culture and nature. An international network to carry out studies on SNS is needed as the management of SNS is often not documented.