

MPA NEWS



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Sacred MPAs: Where Protected Areas Hold Spiritual Value for Stakeholders, and How This Affects Management

Most of the discussion on marine protected areas focuses on their biological and material worth: how MPAs can be used to restore habitats and maintain biodiversity, make fisheries more sustainable, attract tourism, and so forth. For many people worldwide, however, protected areas are perceived not so much for these values but for something less tangible: as landscapes or seascapes of the Creation. Inspiring awe and appreciation for nature as the work or embodiment of a higher power, the spiritual value of protected areas can play an important role in planning and management - and has done so for hundreds of years in some cases.

Motivated by a session on spiritual and cultural MPAs at the First International Marine Protected Areas Congress (IMPAC1) in October 2005 *MPA News* examines the subject of sacred marine protected areas, including the challenges and opportunities involved in blending traditional beliefs and modern MPA management.

Integrating spiritual values

It has been suggested that the first MPAs were designated centuries ago by traditional fishing cultures in Oceania, who used closure-based practices to protect marine resources ("The original MPAs" *MPA News* 3:6). The right to fish in a particular area was controlled by a clan, chief, or family, and these authorities would establish permanent or temporary *tabu* or *kapu* areas, in which fishing was not allowed. This prohibition was often tied to a belief system.

Today, countless MPAs worldwide hold spiritual value for stakeholders. Whether a site plays a traditional role in a people's creation story, or is viewed more generally in terms of the spiritual inspiration and rejuvenation it offers, reverence for the site among stakeholders underlies a desire that it be protected.

In recognition of the sacred value of protected areas and what such value can provide to resource management, the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) has created a Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values. Composed of more than 70 members from 24 countries, the task force aims to help promote the integration of these values into policy, planning, management, and evaluation of protected areas, where appropriate. Among its activities has been the drafting of guidelines for management of sacred natural areas. The draft guidelines - available at <http://www.unesco.org/mab/SNS/guidelines.htm> - focus on traditional sacred natural sites, as opposed to "modern" protected areas viewed simply as offering spiritual inspiration.

The degree of that distinction - between traditional and non-traditional sacred natural areas - is open to some question. In Christianity, the Catholic Church in recent years has urged greater stewardship of the environment, including protected areas: in 2004, seven bishops in the Australian state of Queensland declared the Great Barrier Reef sacred and said any willful harm done to it constituted a diminishment of God ("Catholic bishops declare Great Barrier Reef sacred", *MPA News* 6:3). In the US, the National Association of Evangelicals, which reportedly represents 30 million Christian Americans, adopted an Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility that urged improved stewardship of "God-given dominion" through the "proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats" (http://www.nae.net/images/civic_responsibility2.pdf).

Allen Putney, who leads the WCPA Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values, appreciates this growing environmental concern among Christian churches. He says, however, that such calls for stewardship fall short of recognizing humans' place within nature, as a part of the natural whole. "While I applaud any movement by Christian churches to urge a greater concern for the environment, I do not see much evidence to indicate that mankind's stewardship capacity has proven to be up to the challenge of ensuring adequate environmental protection," he says. (For a full interview with Putney, see box, "[We are part of nature...not its steward](#)": Interview with Allen Putney" at the end of this article.)

The three cases that follow are examples in which traditional sacred values are playing a role in modern MPA management.

Gwaii Haanas: "All things are sacred and deserve respect and care"

Gwaii Haanas is the southern portion of the Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) archipelago on Canada's Pacific coast. These islands have been the home of the Haida (this term means *the people*) for more than 10,000 years, and continue to be home to about 2,000 Haidas. According to traditional beliefs, supernatural beings arrived in Haida Gwaii before the Haida, making their homes at every headland and mountain and giving birth to the female ancestors of today's Haida. The supernatural beings are believed to continue to live among the people today.

Since the arrival of Europeans to the islands in the late 18th century, the region's forests and their abundant resources have been heavily exploited, and the Haida population suffered drastic diminishment from Western diseases. From the mid-20th century, however, the Haida population has grown once more, and has committed to protecting the region's natural and cultural heritage from further impacts.

In 1985, the Council of the Haida Nation declared the southern portion of Haida Gwaii a Haida Heritage Site. Two years later, the Canadian federal government and the British Columbia provincial government agreed to set aside the area now known as Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, consisting of islands down to the high tide line. The two protected areas - the heritage site and the national park reserve - were formally combined in 1993 under an agreement between the Council of the Haida Nation and the federal government. This *Gwaii Haanas Agreement*, creating the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site, provides for an Archipelago Management Board, consisting of two representatives each from the Council of the Haida Nation and the federal government (represented by the Parks Canada agency). Under this co-management regime, board members share in the planning and management of the archipelago's land-based resources. Equal input from the Haida and the Canadian government is ensured, and the board works to reach consensus on all issues it faces.

Barb Wilson (*Kii7iljiuus*), Gwaii Haanas cultural liaison specialist for Parks Canada, is a Haida. "Haida culture in its simplest terms is the relationship of us to these islands," she says. "Our bodies are nourished by the land and the ocean and, after death, return to nourish land and the oceans. In this way we have kinship with all living things on these islands." Through the co-management board, she says, Haida values and concerns are an essential part of any management discussion, and spiritual values are protected.

Among her responsibilities, Wilson trains staff and Haida Gwaii Watchmen - Haida stewards - in local history and other traditional knowledge. The Watchmen serve from spring until fall as guardians of culturally significant sites, protecting them and educating visitors on the natural and cultural heritage of Gwaii Haanas. The park reserve and heritage site attracts visitors from around the world. Visitor orientations and maps instruct on the restricted use of certain cultural sites, and the need to be respectful. "We accept the visitors to be a positive thing, as their experience will affect their own relationship with the lands," says Wilson. "More people will be motivated to act to protect the lands and waters."

Provisions have been made in the *Gwaii Haanas Agreement* to designate the surrounding waters as an MPA - the proposed Gwaii Haanas National Marine Conservation Area. A collaborative management system similar to that of the park reserve and heritage site will be created to manage it. Negotiations between the federal government and Haida Nation are underway. "As with the terrestrial areas, the priority will be to look after those things that give us life," says Wilson. "All things are sacred and deserve respect and care." The website for Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site is <http://www.pc.gc.ca/pr-np/bc/gwaiihaanas>.

Sinub Wildlife Management Area: Spirits will deal with the rulebreakers

The traditional *tabu* or *kapu* areas used as part of customary marine tenure systems in Oceania, noted earlier, largely disappeared with the arrival of Western influences that centralized governance and downplayed the authority of traditional (village- or clan-level) leaders. However, in response to modern fishing pressure, some cultures in the region are reinstating them, particularly in nations where elements of traditional authority are being re-established. In Fiji in 2001, for example, local leaders established a new *tabu* site where a traditional one had once been - around a sacred point where Fiji's paramount chief is said to have descended (*MPA News* 3:6).

In Papua New Guinea, wildlife management areas (WMAs) may be designated and managed by local-level groups under the country's Fauna (Protection and Control) Act. Of the WMAs that have been

designated, several contain traditional sacred sites, or tambu in the local language. The Sinub WMA in the biodiverse Madang Lagoon on Papua New Guinea's northeast coast features an island with a rock that locals believe has healing powers. When someone is ill or has wounds, he or she need only swim in the water surrounding the rock, then touch it, to be healed. The rock has been worshipped for centuries.

Rebecca Samuel of WWF, who has worked with local stakeholders on the conservation of Sinub WMA, says this and another WMA in Madang Lagoon were mainly established to help rebuild once-abundant fish stocks. Protecting the healing rock or other sacred sites was not a primary motivation. Nonetheless, she says, at Sinub it is the healing site within the WMA that engenders the most respect among locals, rather than the remainder of the WMA. With no patrols, there is poaching inside the WMA at night, and blast-fishing remains prevalent in the lagoon, although not as common as in the past. The sacred site remains safe, despite its regular visitation for healing purposes.

"At this stage we are still experiencing difficulty in trying to penalize people who do not observe the WMAs, because people do not really understand the WMAs' existence," says Samuel. "But in terms of people breaking the rules of a sacred site, it is commonly believed that the spirits will deal with the culprits. So when something awful happens to someone, community members try to find out if that person has broken any rules of the sacred area. Usually the clan leaders offer some kind of gifts or a special speech to the spirits for forgiveness." Samuel is involved with the LMMA Network, an initiative to help locally managed marine areas (LMMAs) in the Western Pacific benefit from the collective experience of their practitioners ("Building Learning Networks' Among MPAs", *MPA News* 5:8). A LMMA Network report on WMAs in Madang Lagoon, from February 2005, is available at http://www.lmmanetwork.org/Site_Page.cfm?PageID=28.

Bijagos archipelago: Protection through culturally limited access

The Bijagos archipelago - a 10,000-km² region of mudflats, mangroves, savannah grasslands, and islands off the coast of Guinea Bissau in West Africa - is home to 25,000 people. The vast majority belong to the Bijago ethnic group, whose culture revolves around a number of holy places - inlets, capes, and islands - used for ceremonies and initiation rites. Traditionally, these sites have afforded de facto protection to the islands' biodiversity, including such symbolically important species as sea turtles, manatees, and hippopotamus, which are central to the Bijagos' belief system.

"Only people who have gone through the initiation ceremonies are allowed to access a sacred site," says Pierre Campredon, who coordinates an international program responsible for implementing a regional MPA strategy in West Africa. (The program is known as PRCM by its French acronym, and involves IUCN, WWF, Wetlands International, and Fondation Internationale du Banc D'Arguin, a French NGO.) Campredon co-authored a paper with Augusta Henriques for IMPAC1 on the sacred value of Bijagos. "The society is divided in age classes, and to go from one class to the next you have to complete a series of ceremonies," he says. Only advanced males have the right to disembark on Poliao Island, for example, site of the largest green turtle nesting area in the eastern Atlantic. The relatively low visitation to the island over time may be one reason why there is still such a high number of turtles there, says Campredon.

This sacred connection and the related natural and cultural heritage have been acknowledged through establishment of two national parks in Bijagos, and designation by UNESCO of the Boloma Bijagos Biosphere Reserve in 1996. Despite these protective efforts, however, the recent influx of migrant fishermen from elsewhere in West Africa and industrial fishing vessels from Europe and China are depleting fish stocks, and the potential introduction of offshore oil drilling and shipbreaking yards is posing additional challenges to these protected areas.

In this context, within the biosphere reserve, a community-based MPA has been designated to improve local living conditions and protect coastal resources from outside pressures. Comprising three islands of the archipelago, the 545-km² Urok Islands Community Protected Area has several co-management bodies (village committees, island assemblies, and the Urok Assembly, in addition to a Council of Elders) and a set of regulations, including a zoning plan decreed in 2005. Two of the three zones allow access (and limited fishing) by local residents only; the third zone allows commercial fishing by outsiders under specific conditions. Enforcement is via a joint system: fishermen serve as patrols, and inform local authorities when violators are seen.

The Urok Islands Community Protected Area, combining terrestrial and marine components, has several sacred sites in its upland areas, says Campredon. He hopes the example of this protected area will assist other communities in the region that face similar threats to their natural, cultural, and spiritual heritage. "The consultation and participatory management process that led to the creation of this community MPA are an experience in governance from which many valuable lessons can be drawn, to the benefit of Guinea Bissau and other West African coastal societies alike," he says.

For more information

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BOX: More information on sacred protected areas

WCPA Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values

<http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/theme/values/values.html>

PARKS magazine, June 2000 issue on "Non-Material Values of Protected Areas"

http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/pubs/pdfs/PARKS/Parks_Jun00.pdf

Note: Although *MPA News* uses the terms *sacred* and *spiritual* interchangeably, the WCPA Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values differentiates them. *Sacred* is associated with formal religion, it says, whereas *spiritual* allows for expression both inside and outside of a religious context.

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