Sacred Sites, Conservation and Tourism

David Peaty

Ⅰ. Sacred Sites

In describing a landscape in his native South Africa, Alan Paton writes "Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator'. Veneration for a particular landscape is a worldwide phenomenon, common to most religions, but especially those with animist roots and a tradition of ancestor worship. There are sacred forests, groves and trees, holy springs, rivers, waterfalls, lakes, ponds and wells, sacred mountains, rocks, caves and burial sites. Some are sacred because of the awe they inspired in indigenous peoples, or the myths that evolved around them. Others are venerated because of the saints and mystics who spent time there, experienced revelations, performed miracles or are buried there. Many have religious buildings that were built on holy land; others became sacred when a religious structure was erected there.

There are many sacred mountains. According to Bernbaum, mountains are often seen as "the temple of the gods, centre of the universe, or abode of the dead". They provide indigenous people with "a sense of their place in the world"; they are the source of "blessings – most notably, water, fertility, life and healing"; and some are "revered as abodes of weather deities, places of springs, and reservoirs of water ...". In Bhutan, all mountains are sacred, and climbing the Himalayan peaks there has been banned for a number of years. In Nepal, too, there are sacred peaks, such as Machupuchare, where climbing is not permitted. The holiest mountain of all is Kailash, in Tibet. This mystical mountain is venerated by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and believers of Bonri, the ancient Tibetan religion. While thousands of pilgrims walk around the mountain each year, only those who have completed 13 koras (complete circuits of the mountain) are allowed to enter the extremely sacred inner sanctuary. Japan also has its sacred mountains or *reizan*, of which Fuji is the most famous.

In Sikkim, there are sacred landscapes that include not only a holy mountain but also the rivers and lakes below. According to Little, the Lepchas worship all things in nature, including animals

and rivers, and each clan has a sacred mountain and lake. Demazong is a sacred and mythological landscape in West Sikkim, belonging to Kanchenjonga – the world's third highest peak. The local people believe that Padmasambhava, a great Buddhist saint, came to Sikkim and 'subdued many evil spirits, blessed the land and sanctified it' (Jain et al.). He 'concealed innumerable scriptures, wealth and sacred objects'. Demazong contains four sacred sites, of which one is a lake named Khecheopalri. Fishing and boating are strictly prohibited. There are many other religious sites around the lake that are sacred to Hindus as well as Buddhists.

Japan also has a concept of sacred landscapes. Examples include Kasuga Shrine in Nara and the Kumano shrines (Iwatsuki). There are interesting similarities between illustrations of Demazong (see, for example, Ramakrishnan) and Japanese mandalas such as the view of Nachi Waterfall reproduced in Kousaka, pages 29-30. The sacred landscapes include not only mountains and waterfalls but also islands such as Itsukushima (like the Kumano shrines, a World Heritage site) and groves such as Tadasunomori in Kyoto. In China, mountains are regarded by Daoists as the realm of the immortals; there is even a range of mountains called the Celestial Mountains (Tienshan); and many other mountains are regarded as holy by Buddhists. Mongolia has around 800 sacred sites including holy mountains, sacred lakes and *ovoo* (cairns similar to the *chortens* seen throughout the Himalayas) (Urtnasan). Many of these even have their own sutras.

The UK has a large number of sacred sites dating back over four millennia. These include neolithic stone circles, of which Stonehenge is by far the most famous, the tombs of saints and holy wells. Palmer and Palmer point out (page 76) that the oldest living things in Britain are three sacred yew trees that are over 5000 years old, including one in Fortingall churchyard that is considerably older. There is evidence that the latter was sacred long before the arrival of Christianity. The hot springs of Bath were originally dedicated to Sulis, a Celtic deity, and later to Minerva, a Roman goddess. There are also many holy wells – often indicated by a place name such as Holywell – and some are accompanied by a holy tree, usually a yew or an ash.

Ⅱ. Sacred sites and conservation

Most sacred sites are protected by those for whom they are sacred, through long-standing customs and taboos. Among them are wilderness areas that remain almost intact at a time when much of the natural environment elsewhere has been seriously damaged. However, they are constantly under threat from mining, cattle farming and other economic activities. It is thus important that their value in terms of cultural heritage and biological diversity be formally recognized and that stronger measures be taken to protect them permanently. This was recognized by UNESCO in 1996 (Schaff) and led to an international workshop held in Yunnan, China, in 2003, and a report entitled 'The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation'

(UNESCO). It also led to the establishment of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC). At the World Parks Congress of 2003, the ARC, with support from WWF, proposed that sacred natural sites be subject to international protection in the same way that nature reserves are.

UNESCO and the ARC have identified more than a hundred sacred lands around the world (Dudley et al.). These are located within national parks, and thus already protected to a greater or lesser extent from resource extraction, the dumping of toxic waste and other threats. However, many others are protected not through official recognition as nature reserves but only through their religious status among the indigenous peoples. Such protection may not suffice to save them from logging and mining companies and other enemies of the environment. Yucca Mountain in Nevada, for example, is sacred to the Shoshone and Paiute Indians. However, the US Government approved a plan to build a nuclear waste repository deep inside the mountain that was only cancelled when it turned out the environmental impact assessment was falsified (www.sacredland.org/yucca-mountain). Sacred springs, streams and wells in Arizona venerated by the Hopi are drying up, because a coal mining company is pumping up over a billion gallons of water each year from the aquifer beneath (Taliman). In Australia, uranium deposits have attracted mining companies with little respect for Aboriginal sacred sites – even those situated within national parks. In Sikkim, a dam project that threatened the sacred landscape of Dzongu was fiercely resisted by the local Lepcha, who believe "their souls go to Dzongu when they die" (Little).

Ⅲ. Sacred landscapes and tourism

Resource extraction, dam construction and the dumping of toxic waste are not the only threats to sacred sites and their environment: tourism also has significant impacts. According to the CBD Guidelines, impacts of tourism in relation to the environment and biological diversity may include the use of land and resources, extraction of building materials, destruction of ecosystems and habitats, erosion, disturbance of wildlife, increased risk of fires, damage to flora and fauna by tourists and for souvenir production, the introduction of alien species and pathogens, increased water demand and groundwater extraction, deterioration in water quality, contamination of land and water, and noise. It should also be noted that the planes on which tourists travel discharge large quantities of carbon dioxide, the main cause of global warming, which is a major threat to biodiversity and responsible for the melting of glaciers on holy mountains and the consequent loss of sacred springs.

Some sacred sites attract large numbers of pilgrims. The yatra sites in the Indian Himalaya are visited by more than a million Hindus every year. One might not expect pilgrims to be a threat to places of worship, but according to Mountain Agenda (p.35), "heavily frequented sites like Gangotri and Badrinath in India have been severely degraded." A report on yatra pilgrimages to

Garwhal, India, points out that sacred sites have become crowded and surrounded by shops and non-vegetarian restaurants that 'detract from the religious atmosphere' (Mountain Voices). The kora trail around Mount Kailash is littered with plastic bags, oxygen containers and even medical syringes discarded by Indian pilgrims (the Tibetans cannot afford such luxuries).

Sacred sites also attract an increasing number of tourists, many of whom seek a cultural or religious experience. Sacred site tourism is a comparatively new trend, as might be seen from the sharp increase in the numbers of visitors to destinations such as Ankhor Wat (Cambodia) and the Potala Palace (Lhasa) in recent years. In some cases, tourists far outnumber believers, and their impacts on the site and its surroundings can be very disturbing. The number of tourists visiting the sacred sites of Angkor, for example, increased from 7,650 in 1993 (soon after it became a World Heritage site) to approximately 900,000 in 2006, and was predicted to reach 3 million by 2010 (Smith). The stone steps and walkways are being worn away by the daily horde of visitors; and the very ground on which the monument stands is sinking due to the pumping of groundwater to supply tourist hotels and restaurants.

Tourism can do harm in other ways. According to Patterson, "Tourism development has played a major role in the destruction of ancient Hawaiian burial grounds, significant archaeological historic sites and sacred places" with "no respect or concern for the culture and identity of the Hawaiian people." For example, an ancient burial ground 22 acres in size at Keonaloa, on Kauai Island, was excavated in order to build a tourist resort. Other sacred sites have been "turned into tourist attractions and are desecrated in their use and misuse." Patterson concludes that tourism "must be understood as an invasion of all that is sacred to a people."

The Balinese, whose sacred landscapes and rituals are both an essential part of daily life and the main attraction for tourists, recognize that tourism is responsible for their relatively high living standards, but are nervous about its cultural impacts. Bali has around 20,000 temples and shrines, and an abundance of gods and goddesses. Religious festivals are held almost daily, as are performances of sacred dances. Tourists are generally welcome, but many Balinese are nervous about the commercialization of their culture. "Sacred temples are overcrowded by foreigners; dances normally performed only every 60 years are now requested and organized by hotels on a weekly basis" and "many masks, costumes and jewelry used for religious rituals are in great demand in antique shops" (tanahlot.net). In a discussion of the 'macabre' commercialization of cremations in Bali, McLaren (p.48), reports on a funeral procession followed by two tourists on motorbikes who were wearing swimsuits and waving bottles of beer. A plan to build a tourist resort near Tanah Lot, one of the most sacred temples, was seen as a threat to the temple's "cosmological primacy" (tanalot.net). The local people were understandably opposed to the construction of a 300-room hotel, an 18-hole golf course, 156 villas and 380 resort homes within 2 kilometers of a sacred place. Eventually, the resort company agreed to build a hill and plant trees to prevent the

resort from desecrating the sacred landscape seen from the temple.

Another example of the impact of tourism on holy sites is Uluru, a sacred mountain for the Anangu (an Australian aboriginal community) and a major tourist attraction. According to Weaver, the tourism industry was controlled by outsiders until 1985, and the Anangu had no share of the profits and no say in how the visitors behaved. Tourists climbed the hill, violating its sanctity, and some even fell to their deaths, greatly distressing the Anangu. There were problems of garbage, litter, graffiti and intoxication. None of this behavior would be acceptable in a cathedral, but the tourists either did not know or did not care that Uluru was a sacred place. In 1985, the federal government recognized the ownership of the Anangu and now the Uluru National Park is jointly managed by the Aborigines and Parks Australia. The Anangu receive 20% of all entrance fees. However, they have no control over the number of visitors, estimated at half a million per year, nor whether or not they climb the mountain. Despite signs and leaflets asking visitors not to climb, an estimated 40% still do.

Not all tourism impacts are bad. Developing countries tend to welcome foreign tourists for financial reasons: tourism generates jobs, profits, tax revenue and economic development. Although the industry is susceptible to sudden fluctuations due to unpredictable events such as increases in fuel prices, terrorist attacks and natural disasters (tsunami, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and so on), and most of the money spent by tourists is pocketed by tour operators, airlines and hotels, tourism nevertheless has a bigger potential than other industries to alleviate poverty in rural areas. While jobs in tourism tend to be low-paid and seasonal, the fact that so many people choose to work in the tourism industry suggests that for most, it is better than the alternatives.

Another positive impact of tourism occurs when governments decide to protect a sacred site from mining, logging and other destructive activities in order to preserve it as a tourism asset. Tourism also provides "a major source of support for dancers, musicians and artists" (tanahlot.net), and admission fees often help fund the maintenance and protection of sacred sites and religious structures. Moreover, seeing how impressed western tourists are by their sacred temples and ceremonies, local youths may develop a new respect for their culture.

Ⅳ. Tourism management

It is clear that properly-managed tourism has an important role to play in the conservation of sacred sites. What does proper management entail? In the case of fragile monuments, the most effective is a policy of 'look but don't touch'. At Stonehenge, a fence was erected and tourists can now only view the monument from a distance. It would be difficult for the managers of Ankhor to take such drastic action, given the importance of tourism revenue to the local and national economy. The Bhutanese policy of 'high-value, low-impact' might be more appropriate. This would

involve a sharp increase in entrance fees, reducing the number of tourists while maintaining revenue. Dispersal is another common strategy. Tourists can be encouraged to avoid peak season by means of off-season discounts or peak-season quotas and to visit less crowded areas of the site by means of hourly quotas and variable pricing. The mere fact of having to queue for hours may be enough to deter many tourists from visiting during peak season. Proper guidance can also be helpful. As Levi and Kocher point out, "interpretation can help the tourists better appreciate what they are seeing, reduce congestion and crowding by making tourists aware of alternative sites to visit, and explain appropriate tourist behavoirs that minimize impacts on the site and its religious use." Proper management also requires that the key stakeholders – not just the civil authorities and the tourism industry but also the people for whom a site is sacred – be involved in the decision-making process. In China, for example, WWF have begun an ecotourism and awareness-raising project with the regional Daoist Association and the government of Shaanxi Province to protect the local panda population, along with many other species (ARC, p.99).

Ⅴ. Conclusion

Sacred natural sites have survived man's constant quest for timber, minerals and farmland thanks to their sanctity and to the taboos maintained by the local people. Many of them are oases of biodiversity. By registering them as Sacred Natural Sites in the same way that wetlands are registered under the Ramsar Convention, governments can help protect them from loggers, hunters, farmers, mining interests and other threats. The proposal by UNESCO and ARC is thus to be welcomed.

References

Bernbaum, E. Secrets of the Sacred Hills. *People and the Planet*. Vol. 8, No. 5. 1996.

CBD Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development. Retrieved from: http://www.cbd.int/tourism/

Dudley, N. , Liza Higgins-Zogib and Stephanie Mansourian. Beyond Belief: Linking faiths and protected areas to support biodiversity conservation. WWF. 2005.

Iwatsuki, K. Japan's Sacred Mountains. In: The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation. Proceedings of the International Workshop held in Kunming and Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve, People's Republic of China, 17-20 February, 2003.

Jain, A., H. Birkumar Singh, S.C. Rai and E. Sharma. Folklores of Sacred Khecheopalri Lake in the Sikkim Himalaya of India. In: *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 63, 2004: 291-302.

Levi, D. and Sara Kocher. Understanding Tourism at Heritage Religious Sites. *Focus* 2009, Vol. 6. Retrieved from: http://calpoly.edu/

Little, K. Lepcha Narratives of their Threatened Sacred Landscapes. In: *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, February, 2008.

McLaren, D. *Rethinking Tourism and Ecotravel*. Kumarian Press, 2nd Ed., 2003.

Mountain Agenda. *Mountains of the World*. Mountain Agenda. 1999.

Mountain Voices. Tourism. Retrieved from: http://www.mountainvoices.org/

Palmer, M. and Nigel Palmer. *Sacred Britain*. Piatkus. 1997.

Paton, A. *Cry the Beloved Country*. Penguin Books, 1958.

Patterson, K. Tourism's Negative Impact on Native Hawaiians. Retrieved from: http://mphawal.tripod.com/Tourism.

Ramakrishnan, P.S. Biodiversity Conservation: Lessons from the Buddhist 'Demajong' Landscape in Sikkim, India. In: The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation. Proceedings of the International Workshop held in Kungming and Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve, People's Republic of China, 17-20 February, 2003.

Schaaf, T. UNESCO's Experience with the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation. In: The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation. Proceedings of the International Workshop held in Kungming and Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve, People's Republic of China, 17-20 February, 2003.

Smith, J. Tourist invasion threatens to ruin glories of Angkor Wat. *The Observer*, 25 February, 2007.

Taliman, V. Sacred Landscapes. *Sierra Magazine*, November/December 2002. The Sierra Club.

UNESCO The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation. Proceedings of the International Workshop held in Kungming and Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve, People's Republic of China, 17-20 February, 2003.

Urtnasan, N. Mongolian Sacred Sites and Biodiversity Conservation. The Importance of Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation. Proceedings of the International Workshop held in Kungming and Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve, People's Republic of China, 17-20 February, 2003.

Weaver, D. *Ecotourism*. Wiley. 2001.