

Faith and traditional knowledge for preserving Biodiversity and Water resources: “Sacred” Forests and Water Bodies

Working Group on Nature Based Solutions
Water and Climate Change Task Force, IWRA

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INTRODUCTION

- Biodiversity loss: The Earth has lost ~70% of its wildlife populations since 1970 on an average (WWF 2022).
- 83% decline in freshwater species.
- Climate Change is increasing the pressure on global natural resources.
- Faith communities: more than 80% of the world population identifies with a religious group (PEW Res 2012).
- Faith communities have historically played a role in environmental stewardship and conservation efforts.

Faith and its Relationship with Nature

- **Interconnectedness:** Many religious and spiritual traditions recognize the interconnectedness of all living beings.
- **Sacredness of nature:** Faith traditions across the globe view nature as sacred and deserving of protection.
- **Inspiration for stewardship:** Faith-based teachings and texts inspire followers to care for the environment and its creatures.
- **Rituals and practices:** Various faiths incorporate rituals and practices that foster a sense of reverence and responsibility towards nature.

Traditional Knowledge and its Role in Conservation

- Indigenous knowledge: Indigenous and local communities possess valuable knowledge about ecosystems and natural resources.
- Sustainable practices: Traditional knowledge includes sustainable resource management practices developed over centuries.
- Ecosystem guardians: “Indigenous Land” encompass approximately 20% of the Earth's land surface and support 80% of global biodiversity (IISD 2022).

Importance of Sacred Forests and Water Bodies

- Biodiversity hotspots: Sacred forests and water bodies are often biodiversity hotspots, hosting unique and endangered species (Smithsonian Mag 2018).
- Cultural and spiritual values: These sites hold deep cultural and spiritual significance for communities around the world.
- Ecosystem services: Sacred forests and water bodies provide vital ecosystem services, such as water filtration and climate regulation.
- Conservation legacies: Sacred sites act as living museums, preserving not only biodiversity but also cultural and spiritual heritage.

CASE STUDIES AND EXAMPLES

Mijikenda people's sacred groves:

- Mijikenda people's sacred groves: The Kaya forests of Kenya protected as sacred groves harbour a rich diversity of endemic plant species.
- The site is inscribed as bearing unique testimony to a cultural tradition and for its direct link to a living tradition (UNESCO heritage, 2009).
- Issues: felling of trees and threat to caretakers of Kayas



The Ganges River in India

- The Ganges River in India: Revered as sacred, the Ganga River inspires millions to participate in rituals that honour and protect its waters.
- City populations along the Ganges have grown at a tremendous rate, while waste-control infrastructure has remained relatively unchanged.
- Yamuna, the second holiest river of India, remains highly polluted due to untreated effluents.



Maasai community's land management:

- Maasai community's land management: The Maasai people in Eastern Africa practice holistic land management to maintain biodiversity and water resources.
- Droughts have become increasingly severe, many of the wild plants disappeared and occasional heavy rainfall had washes away the soil.
- Maasai people had to abandon their pastoralist nomadic lifestyle and their cattle.



Native American tribes

- Sacred natural sites of the Native American tribes: Numerous Native American tribes protect and conserve sacred sites, including water bodies, that are integral to their cultural and environmental well-being
- Issues: legal and cultural barriers to conservation, water contamination, development, etc.



Balinese water temple system:

- Balinese water temple system: The subak irrigation system, managed by Balinese water temples, demonstrates the integration of spiritual beliefs and sustainable water resource management.
- Water temples provide a fascinating insight into how farmers combine religion and engineering to manage water.



CHALLENGES: let's do something

- Threats to sacred sites: Rapid urbanization and industrialization pose significant threats to sacred forests and water bodies.
- Cultural erosion: Globalisation and modernisation often lead to the erosion of traditional cultural practices and knowledge.
- Indigenous partnerships: Collaborating with indigenous communities and recognising their rights and knowledge can lead to successful conservation efforts.
- Policy and advocacy: Governments and organizations can support policies and initiatives that integrate faith and traditional knowledge into biodiversity and water resource conservation

COLLABORATION

- Research and documentation: Conducting research and documenting traditional knowledge to enhance scientific understanding and inform conservation strategies.
- Capacity building: Empowering local communities and indigenous peoples through capacity building programs to strengthen their role in conservation efforts.
- Sustainable practices: Encouraging sustainable practices at individual and community levels, such as responsible consumption and waste reduction.

CONCLUSION

- ▶ Indigenous traditions should be respected. These peoples have a deep connection with the natural resources and have been using them cautiously and sustainably for a very long time.
- ▶ Fortress Conservation efforts should be avoided and traditional knowledge should lead the path to conservation.
- ▶ Collaborating with indigenous peoples and creating such awareness among local communities and conservators will be helpful in a harmonious conservation strategy.
- ▶ “Leave no one behind” should be the motto of conservation.



*«We don't inherit the Earth from
our Ancestors;
we borrow it from our children»
Ancient Native American Proverb*

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