

Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples in Mexico

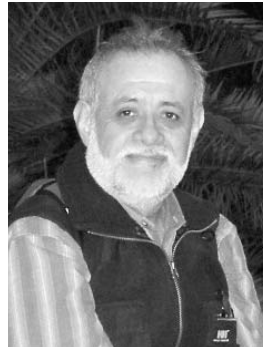
A Methodology for Inventorying

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Introduction

Indigenous and traditional peoples' cultural values and spirituality have often led to the creation and ongoing protection of Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) that are natural environments containing significant wilderness, biodiversity, and spiritual values. Worldwide, many natural elements such as mountains, rivers, lakes, marshes, caves, forest groves, coastal waters, and islands constitute natural temples for local people, and are protected as such for diverse spiritual and sacred reasons. Sacred Natural Sites are key components of the spiritual connections between traditional peoples and the universe, and play a key role in the vitality and survival of indigenous and traditional cultures.

Although published literature points to the high biodiversity and cultural values of many SNS around the world, globally there is only limited quantitative and scientific data on their biodiversity and cultural significance (Oviedo and Maffi 2000; Jeanrenaud 2001; Oviedo 2003; UNESCO 2003; Luque and Robles 2006; Otegui-Acha 2007). To our knowledge, there have been no previous attempts to develop a methodology to systematically inventory SNS at the national level, using as a basis an analysis of both ecosystem and habitat types. The United Nations Environmental Program on World Conservation Monitoring Centre has recorded some SNS, but its database is limited; at the national level, there is no systematic information and literature that documents SNS in a more detailed way from the conservation perspective. Therefore, a large information and documentation gap exists, constituting a major obstacle to ensuring support and effective management of biodiversity and culturally rich SNS worldwide.



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In Mexico, SNS can be considered an expression of the country's biological and cultural richness. To date, and despite many external threats and challenges, many of these sites are managed to continue to protect natural, cultural, and spiritual values of the communities. However, little is known about their number; distribution; owner or manager communities; state of conservation; management approaches; legal status; pressing threats; or natural, cultural, and spiritual characteristics; and other information. It is presumed that many formal protected areas in Mexico include SNS within its boundaries.

Such gaps in knowledge do not allow for appropriate planning, action, and support for the conservation and sustainable management of SNS. As a result, many will likely disappear before they are known or registered. The situation of most countries in the world is not too different from that of Mexico regarding the lack of knowledge regarding SNS. Therefore, there is a need to register, document, recognize, and support those existing SNS currently lacking support and



Figure 1—A Seri shaman (Comcaac) lives in the Sonoran desert near the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California). Photo by Alonso Martinez Jimenez.

exposed to innumerable threats, while respecting both the desire for secrecy and the custodians' right to control the data collected from such sites.

In response to this knowledge gap, experts participating at the Fifth World Protected Areas Congress in 2003 and similar meetings have reiterated the usefulness of building up registries of SNS, based on voluntary disclosure and informed consent of their traditional owners and managers. It is noted that building up such inventories is not a simple task. On the one hand, all the concerned communities need to be contacted, informed, consulted, and their consent sought; on the other hand, appropriate tools and methodologies are needed, from consultation and consent protocols to classification criteria and matrices. Tools and methodologies need to be

developed, although some existing instruments could be adapted for this purpose.

The Biocultural Unit of Pronatura Mexico has developed a methodology and tools for systematically inventorying SNS that is based on an analysis of ecosystem and habitat types. Mexico, due to its cultural and biological richness, the SNS it contains, and its ample and documented experience in protected areas and other conservation strategies, as well as in the studying of indigenous and traditional cultures, is a very appropriate host country for testing a methodology and tools leading to the eventual creation of a national inventory of SNS.

Working Assumptions

The term *Sacred Natural Site* (SNS) is used in the methodology to mean

“sacred entities that are venerated and held in awe while acting as a linkage between nature and culture/spirituality for the communities involved.” Thus, whereas the term may refer to sites of spiritual importance, it also encompasses places that are of symbolic significance—where space, place, memory, and spiritual meaning come together.

Other key working assumptions for developing the methodology were:

- **SNS of indigenous and traditional peoples:** the methodology focuses on the SNS of indigenous and traditional peoples, currently “in ritualistic use,” rather than sacred sites of the world’s major faiths. The relationship between the SNS of indigenous and traditional peoples with the world’s major faiths has had in some cases a complex and troublesome history. Many traditional SNS have been appropriated or destroyed because they were considered pagan or idolatrous by newly emerging world faiths. In some instances, religious buildings were forcefully superimposed upon traditional sites.
- **SNS is a viable concept for biocultural conservation:** the methodology is to concentrate on SNS that possess and combine both a spiritual and cultural significance and biodiversity value. The methodology targets SNS on the basis of their contributions to biodiversity, regardless of their state of naturalness. This working approach has dual consideration of cultural and spiritual features and environmental significance.
- **SNS and protected areas:** the methodology seeks to identify SNS located both within and outside the boundaries of legally designated protected areas. Many

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times when integrated into protected areas, SNS lack the recognition of the government agencies managing these areas. When located outside these protected frameworks, SNS face many threats and pressures to their very existence.

- **The secrecy of the sacred:** many SNS are secret to a community at large, or to a specific gender or age group, so their existence cannot be revealed and their secrecy compromised. The methodology respects the confidentiality of such sites and proposes to conduct the inventorying of *only* those sites disclosed on a voluntary basis by the indigenous and traditional communities involved. Pronatura Mexico as an institution is particularly committed to this principle.

Why Support the Conservation of SNS?

Most SNS are effective and viable conservation mechanisms in their own right. This assumption is based on the following evidence:

- **SNS conserve biodiversity:** Many SNS of indigenous and traditional peoples are areas of great importance for the conservation of biodiversity because the reasons for protecting their lands, their spiritual connections, the Earth, and biodiversity are inseparable. In most cases, a deep and well-rooted sense of sanctity or sacredness, established and strengthened through several hundred years of contact with, observation of, and learning about the functions of a Sacred Natural Site, has assured the survival of such habitats in an almost pristine state due to self-imposed restrictions in use and access.
- **The role of SNS in protecting**



Figure 2—A Seri shaman with Tiburon Islands in the background, in Mexico's Sea of Cortez. Photo by Alonso Martinez Jimenez.

nature: The main objective of the traditional management of SNS is to maintain their separateness or sanctity by controlling access to them and applying use restrictions. This is achieved largely through the strength of spiritual beliefs and social rules and norms. Active physical policing of sacred places by custodians has tended to be more the exception than the rule. More commonly, taboos and other religious observations have been applied, a sort of “spiritual police,” regulating access to a small circle of people and promoting appropriate conduct at the sites, threatening dire punishment from the spirit world for those who disobey the rules. These cultural restraints have proven fairly effective in reinforcing self-restraining among individual members of the group. If a breach does occur, purposely or not, intervention or intercession by spiritual leaders would be required to ward off harm to the trespasser. As a consequence of their taboo status, access, and use restrictions, most

SNS have served as important reservoirs of biological diversity, preserving unique and rare animal and plant species.

- **Value of SNS for ecological research and protection:** In some areas, SNS are valuable sources of genetic material for rehabilitating degraded ecosystems and can serve as indicator sites in assessing the potential primary vegetation of highly eroded ecosystems. When, and if, any original vegetation is left “untouched,” SNS could eventually give an idea of the area's climax or subclimax vegetation. Again, the literature shows that these sites have survived environmental destruction because they are deeply embedded in local cultures and traditional belief systems, becoming sanctuaries for rare or endangered species.
- **SNS support indigenous and traditional peoples' ways of life:** SNS are important for the vitality and survival of indigenous and traditional cultures and their associated values. SNS conservation further promotes and is intrinsically



Figure 3—Some Himalayan mountains are sacred sites for different religious and cultural groups. Photo by Alonso Martinez Jimenez.

associated with indigenous and traditional peoples' heritage, cultural identity, linguistic diversity, livelihoods, traditional ecological knowledge, and human rights issues.

Rekindling Interest in the Sacred

Ideas of the spiritual and sacred are not new within international conservation. As Jeanrenaud (2001, p. 11) points out, "Early conservationists were often inspired and awed by what they termed the wisdom of wilderness and the infinite capacity of nature to uplift the human spirit." Such values were frequently invoked and appealed to in the early protected-areas movement. However, although early conservation efforts were undertaken for the benefit of humankind, as part of the universal human heritage, SNS of indigenous and traditional peoples were either overlooked or alienated from indigenous peoples as they were assimilated into parks or even destroyed (Jeanrenaud 2001).

The current international policy discourse on protected areas and the

programmatic themes of international organizations pay scant attention to intangible and spiritual values: some notable exceptions are the World Heritage Convention and the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Program. There is a growing appreciation within the international conservation movement of the need to *reengage* with the sacred (Jeanrenaud 2001), thanks to groundbreaking initiatives, such as that promoted by the IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) via its Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values. This does not preclude scientific knowledge or approaches, but rather encourages the idea that nature can be contemplated in ways that are more significant to people; in short, nature's many dimensions provide opportunities to engage with people in a wide array of meaningful, and some intangible, ways (Jeanrenaud 2001; Harmon and Putney 2003).

Hence, there is a need to make explicit the *intangible values* that impact the way we perceive, select, establish, and manage protected areas without trying to force them into some sort of scientific, ethical, or economic frame-

work. Indeed, it is hoped that an increased recognition of the full spectrum of protected areas' intangible values will generate increased public support and improve the process of selecting and managing them, while opening an opportunity for the general public to appreciate the role performed by SNS (Harmon and Putney 2003).

Developing a Methodology and Tools

The proposed framework for implementing the methodology and tools is divided into five distinct phases:

1. Initial evaluation leading to a situational analysis;
2. Potential SNS distribution areas resulting from applying different criteria based on a GIS-based methodology;
3. Field prospecting and eventual inventorying of those SNS identified;
4. Information Compilation Phase; and
5. Final results dissemination.

In each of these phases the methodological steps and tools used are identified and explained, together with the participating key stakeholders. The time invested in each phase is specified together with benchmarks for monitoring and assessing progress up to the eventual completion of the implementation of this framework (see table 1).

Benefits of This Research Project

This project is the first systematic approach at a national scale to develop, test, and implement a methodology and tools for inventorying SNS based on an ecosystem and habitat types approach. The project serves as an instrument to increase the understanding of the value of SNS and the need for their protection, and will:

- empower Mexican indigenous and local communities with key information to allow them to devise better strategies and tools to protect their SNS, and to gain support from national and international agencies;
- provide a tool for relevant national conservation authorities and agencies to assess the importance of SNS and their distribution, and discuss their future viability within and outside protected area networks;
- contribute to the creation of a national enabling environment to ensure the protection of SNS by increasing awareness among stakeholders and the general public about their conservation;
- offer indigenous and community

Table 1—Proposed implementation framework of a methodology and tools for inventorying Sacred Natural Sites

Methodological steps proposed	1. Evaluation phase		2. Potential SNS distribution sites/areas phase		3. Prospecting and inventorying phase	4. Information compilation phase	5. Results dissemination phase
			Coarse filter criteria	Fine filter criteria			
Tools to be used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bibliographical review • Key stakeholders questionnaires • Open-ended interviewing • Development of research protocol 		GIS mapping	GIS mapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registration Template • MoU • FPIC 	Excel Database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidelines on how to apply the methodology • Webpage • Publications • Bulletins • Magazines
Key stakeholders involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation • Government • Indigenous • Cultural • Research • Academic 	Representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation actors • GIS specialists • Researcher(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation actors • GIS specialists • Researcher(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous and traditional • Rightful representatives • Researcher(s) • Government authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher(s) and associated institution(s) • Database expert • Ind. and trad. rightful reps. • Government Reps 	Various venues at the national, regional, and international level
Duration	3 months		3 months		12 months	2 months	6 months plus long-term dissemination activities
Benchmarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaires completed and evaluated • Protocol developed and ready for implementation 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic GIS maps produced and final map detailing potential distribution of SNS resulting from applying coarse and fine filters 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SNS information captured • MoU accorded upon and implemented • FPIC accorded upon and implemented • Community rightful reps. participating in project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Database on registered SNS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissemination tools implemented

organizations, the conservation community, and other decision makers of the country a methodology and set of tools that increase the availability of information at the national level; and

- offer the opportunity to link the information collected to worldwide databases aiming at similar objectives of protecting SNS based on the communities' voluntary disclosure of information.

The Challenges Ahead

The management conditions of most SNS are difficult as they face many challenges and have little resources to address them, especially considering the lack of enabling legal, political, and institutional mechanisms. There is a need for effective action to support the preservation and effective management of SNS that will have a large impact on enhancing biodiversity conservation, as well as on the long-term vitality of the cultures that created them (see table 2). A multifaceted and strategic approach is required to effectively contribute to the protection of biodiversity, related cultural and spiritual values, traditional knowledge, and belief systems in SNS. The best approach seems to be one where an enabling environment is pursued, globally and nationally, so that all actors involved in biodiversity conservation recognize the value of the issue and are prepared to mobilize resources and efforts to support it. This approach:

- Strengthens legal and policy frameworks to promote and improve the laws, policies, instruments, and institutions that enable the protection and long-term management of SNS, on the basis of principles that respect the human and cultural rights and interests of the communities.

- Improves and supports capacity building for indigenous peoples' institutions to protect and sustainably manage SNS, while building up strategic alliances with relevant public and private institutions.
- Broadens the availability of lessons and field-tested tools from improved management of selected case sites, while developing field-tested tools that can be further

applied nationally and locally, as well as potentially worldwide.

- Builds up on the body of information and knowledge as the basis for action to increase the level of awareness of the conservation community, including government agencies. There is a need to register, document, recognize, and support existing SNS by establishing a global registry of such places, based on their voluntary

Table 2—Summary of recurrent characteristics of Sacred Natural Sites of indigenous and traditional peoples (Jeanrenaud 2001; Otegui Acha 2003; Oviedo and Maffi 2000)

- Sense of sacredness, awe, secrecy, worshipping, benevolence, and respect associated with sacred entity
- Identifiable spiritual/cultural authority in charge
- Currently "under ritualistic use" versus those archaeological sites that may be sacred though no longer in active use by a community
- Limited access and restricted use usually linked to taboo and prohibitions related to resident deity/creational myth
- Occasional and sustainable contributions to local livelihoods guided by traditional ecological knowledge practices
- Can be the object of worship for various ethnic groups
- Variable size
- Some destroyed and/or under peril by institutionalized religions (except some Eastern traditions)
- In most cases, conflictive relationships with traditionally established Protected Areas Systems
- Variable land tenure
- Rich cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity
- High degree of acceptance and respect from communities: deeply embedded in traditional belief systems
- Some in search for appropriate legal protection
- An anchor for cultural identity and social cohesiveness
- Important value for biodiversity conservation, for example:
 - as areas of high biological diversity
 - as sanctuaries for rare or threatened species, some of which are considered to be sacred
 - as gene pools
 - as vegetation islands
 - as sites that protect freshwater sources
 - as indicator sites showing potential natural vegetation in areas subject to environmental degradation (important for the restoration and rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems)

disclosure and prior informed consent. This research article offers a methodological approach and tools to increase the current body of information and knowledge about SNS.

Conclusion

The goal of this project, by the authors and the Biocultural Conservation Unit of Pronatura Mexico, was to develop a methodology and tools and offer these products as effective instruments for conservation actors to further demonstrate and consolidate the potential of SNS as viable biocultural conservation mechanisms. The methodology and tools developed in this project need to be used by national and international conservation authorities, organizations, and funding agencies to test their validity and effectiveness. If proven viable, the methodology and tools proposed will be the stepping stone for SNS inventorying exercises to tackle the current information and documentation gap; otherwise, many SNS are bound to disappear even before they are known or registered. SNS registries must be built based on voluntary disclosure and free, prior, and informed consent of their traditional owners and managers.

We call on all conservation colleagues to offer a fair chance for the concept of biocultural conservation to support those indigenous and traditional conservation methods that, by respecting the inherent sacredness of nature, have proven successful and viable throughout the ages. SNS are a living proof of the inherent sacredness of nature. **IJW**

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Figure 4—A Tibetan mother and son in cultural clothing. Photo by Alonso Martinez Jimenez.

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