FACTSHEET

Spiritual experience, sense of place and identity

1. In a nutshell

Nature is a common element in all major religions. Natural heritage, traditional knowledge, and associated customs are important for creating a sense of belonging.

2. Role for human well-being

Cultural identity is strongly connected to the human environment and thus to the diversity of landscapes. In many parts of the world, natural features such as specific forests, caves or mountains are considered sacred or have a religious (and cultural) meaning.

Ecosystems provide spiritual and religious values that are connected to specific places and natural arrangements. This is essential for human well-being and health. The meaning of sacred places is not only based on religion but is always embedded in a specific local, socio-cultural context and is often based on ancestral connections. Therefore such spiritual sites create a sense of place and foster collective identity.

It has been observed that there is an interconnection between sacred areas, cultural and biological diversity. Traditional spiritual behaviour can have a beneficial effect on nature and its preservation. Conservation therefore needs to consider spirituality and preserve the traditional or indigenous knowledge that is an inherent part of the spiritual use of ecosystems.

3. Typical threats

Land use changes and degradation caused by unsustainable use are particular threats to sacred places. A case study from Gunung Lumut, Kalimantan Indonesia (p. 117-119) highlights how the forests of the Lumut Mountains were integrated in the traditional belief system of the indigenous people there. However, the forests are threatened by illegal loggers and gold miners. Semi-natural areas such as cultural landscapes are also vulnerable to land use changes and degradation. Changes in socio-cultural conditions, e.g. the decline of religious influence, as occurred with the sacred Gumpa Forests, Eastern Himalayas (p. 91-92), can also lead to the degradation of sacred places.

4. Example indicators

It is difficult to measure and quantify the non-material benefits of cultural services, which is based on subjective perceptions. Nevertheless, attempts can be made to assess the ecosystem service 'spiritual experience' based on the following indicators:

• Number and area of sacred sites

• Species diversity (since this is often higher at sacred sites)

• VITEK - Vitality Index of Traditional Knowledge is a new indicator developed to measure the vitality of traditional environmental knowledge across generations in communities or populations.

For further information regarding the lack of measures and insufficient data availability on cultural services see TEEB Ecological & Economic Foundation Ch. 3 p. 24 & 32 (p. 131 & 137 in book version).

5. Example methods

For **assessing the value** of this ecosystem service:

It is crucial to emphasize the spiritual value in ecosystem service assessments, since it is often underrepresented and therefore underestimated in its importance. As cultural services are deeply interconnected with each other, it is difficult to use methods which can segregate spiritual services or sense of place from others. If this is the only service to be assessed, it is necessary to emphasize how spirituality or sense of place is related to specific land cover patterns. This could be done by using questionnaires or semi-structured interviews with local communities, residents and traditional or religious leaders. It could be helpful to find out:

- How are areas traditionally used for religious rituals?
- Which animals or plants are important in terms of religion or tradition?

For **assessing the condition** of this ecosystem service:

- Maps showing land use changes in combination with questionnaires, as mentioned above.

- The VITEK - Vitality Index of Traditional Environmental Knowledge methodology has been developed for gathering and analysing traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) data and for building a locally appropriate indicator of trends in the retention or loss of TEK over time.

- See Social assessment of conservation initiatives - A review of rapid methodologies for the strengths and weaknesses of methods and for guidance on how to select appropriate indicators.
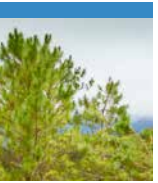
6. Managing this service

Cultural values beyond those related to the ecosystem service 'tourism' are often underrepresented in decision making processes. Even if these values are difficult to measure, they are crucial in many decision making situations related to ecosystem service management/trade-offs. For example they are key in most conflicts between development and conservation activities. Cultural values such spirituality are often implicitly integrated if broad participation is a central element in the assessment and/or decision making processes. This is especially the case if methods such as social valuation, MCA, group model building or interactive mapping tools are used. In these cases participatory assessment processes may be closely bound up with decision making processes.

See, for example, the case studies Ranchería river basin in Colombia (social valuation) and Baja California, Mexico (MCA), where an implicit inclusion of cultural values was crucial in resolving conflicts affecting the management of ecosystem services.

- In Gunung Lumut, Kalimantan Indonesia (p. 117-119) efforts have been made to create a National Park. This includes collaboration between the government and the local communities to maintain the traditional use of natural resources as well as the livelihoods and culture of the local people, which ultimately strengthens their identity.

- Cambodian monks show how forest protection and belief can go hand in hand. As trees are a symbol of life and are sacred in Buddhism, the monks have used this principle to raise environmental awareness. They have also developed co-management strategies with the local communities and have created links between government authorities and non-governmental organisations.

By managing this service connection of spiritual motivation with development or conservation issues is crucial. Further information is provided by the:

- **Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC):** This NGO seeks to help religious groups develop their own environmental programmes by drawing on their core beliefs, values and practices. See the WWF-ARC publication `Beyond Belief´ for case studies on connecting sacred places and conservation efforts as well as on the strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

- IUCN group on **Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA):** This group seeks to identify, define and provide guidelines for managing the cultural and spiritual dimensions of protected areas. See the IUCN & UNESCO **Guideline on sacred natural sites in protected areas**.

There are a growing number of resources on the importance of this ecosystem service. See for example

- **Terralingua - Unity in Biocultural Diversity**