

AN EVALUATION OF THE ROLE OF SACRED PLACES IN CONSERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

Elizabeth Onyedinma Ezenweke

&

Chikaodili Clementina Nwachukwu

*Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State*

Abstract

Conservation and environmentalism have become increasingly vital in addressing the pressing challenges of our time, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and habitat destruction. As societies strive to protect and restore the natural world, there is a growing recognition that exploring both scientific and cultural perspectives is essential for establishing effective conservation strategies. This paper examines the role of sacred places in conservation and environmentalism, focusing on how these sites can contribute to the preservation of natural resources and ecosystems. Sacred places hold deep spiritual and cultural significance for various communities and religions. They are often recognized as places where the physical and spiritual realms converge, fostering a profound sense of reverence and connection between humans and nature. Consequently, sacred places have the potential to play a unique role in promoting conservation efforts and fostering environmental stewardship. The paper investigates the potential of sacred places to serve as hubs for conservation and restoration by engaging local communities and collaborating with religious leaders, conservation organizations can harness the influence of sacred places to promote sustainable land management, reforestation, and wildlife preservation and all these not only enhance ecological resilience but also contribute to the well-being of communities residing near these sacred sites. Lastly, the paper discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating sacred places into conservation strategies. It emphasizes the importance of respectful dialogue and collaboration between the scientific and cultural domains, seeking to merge traditional knowledge with modern conservation approaches. Additionally, the paper suggests that understanding and harnessing the potential of sacred places can lead to more holistic and effective conservation strategies, fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world.

Keywords: Sacred places, Environmentalism and Conservation.

Introduction

Sacred places have long been revered as spaces of deep spiritual connection, serving as sanctuaries for religious, cultural, and communal practices. However, their significance extends far beyond the realm of spirituality, as these hallowed grounds often play a vital role in conservation and environmentalism across cultures and continents, sacred places have become synonymous with efforts to protect and preserve our planet's natural wonders such as religious sites, natural landscapes, and culturally significant areas which have long been revered by various communities around the world. These places often embody the cultural and spiritual identities of local populations, serving as repositories of traditional knowledge, values, and rituals (Verschuuren, Wild, McNeely, Oviedo & Cámara-Leret, 2014) and have frequently been associated with the preservation of biodiversity and the protection of ecosystems due to the reverence and respect accorded to them (Posey, 1999). Historically, sacred places have played a crucial role in establishing rules and norms for the sustainable use of natural resources. For instance, indigenous cultures have developed customary laws and rituals that govern their interactions with nature, ensuring the preservation of ecological balance and biodiversity (Gadgil & Guha, 1992). Additionally, sacred places often serve as refuges for rare and endangered species, as they are frequently protected from human interference due to their cultural and spiritual significance (Dudley, Stolton, Belorukova, Krueger, MacKinnon, Sandwith, Sekhran, & Watkins, 2010).

Despite these beneficial aspects of sacred places, a lot of them have been destroyed, mismanaged, left to ruin and also used for other purposes: schools, churches, hospitals. Understanding the role of sacred places in conservation and environmentalism is of paramount importance for several reasons. Firstly, recognizing and respecting the cultural and spiritual values attached to sacred places promotes inclusive conservation practices that empower local communities and foster sustainable development (Berkes, 2008). Incorporating traditional knowledge systems and engaging local communities in decision-making processes can lead to more effective conservation strategies that align with cultural and ecological priorities. Secondly, sacred places offer opportunities for collaboration and partnerships between religious or spiritual organizations, conservation agencies, and local communities. By establishing shared goals and values, these stakeholders can work together to preserve natural habitats, restore ecosystems, and promote sustainable land-use practices (Verschuuren, Wild, McNeely, Oviedo, & Cámara-Leret, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The role of sacred places in conservation and environmentalism is a topic of great importance as we navigate the challenges of preserving our natural resources and protecting the environment. Sacred places, such as holy sites, religious temples, or culturally significant landscapes, have long been recognized for their spiritual, cultural, and historical significance. However, these sanctuaries also hold tremendous potential to contribute to conservation efforts and foster a deeper respect and connection with the natural world.

Determining the best theory to describe the role of sacred places in conservation and environmentalism is complex, as various theories offer valuable insights into this relationship. One theory that stands out in its applicability is the concept of biocultural conservation. Biocultural conservation emphasizes the interconnectedness of nature and culture, highlighting the profound influence that cultural practices and beliefs have on ecological systems. Biocultural conservation recognizes that cultural diversity and ecological diversity go hand in hand. Sacred places represent the intersection of these two dimensions, serving as repositories of traditional knowledge, sustainable practices, and deep spiritual connections to the natural world. This theory acknowledges that the preservation of sacred places not only protects cultural heritage but also safeguards invaluable ecosystems and biodiversity that have coexisted with human presence for centuries and also emphasizes the importance of local communities and indigenous peoples as stewards of the environment. The biocultural conservation theory was propounded by Luisa Maffi in the late 1990s. Maffi, an anthropologist and linguist, introduced this framework to emphasize the intrinsic connection between biological diversity and cultural diversity (Maffi, 2001).

The background of the biocultural conservation theory can be traced back to the recognition that indigenous peoples and local communities have developed sustainable land-use practices and environmental management strategies based on their deep understanding of the natural world (Berkes, 2008). And the significance of the biocultural conservation theory lies in its ability to challenge the dominant paradigm of separating conservation efforts from cultural heritage preservation by acknowledging the inseparable link between biological and cultural diversity, this theory promotes a holistic approach to conservation that includes the protection of traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and language diversity alongside the preservation of ecosystems and species (Maffi, 2010).

Conceptual Clarification

Sacred Places

A sacred place can be defined as a location that holds spiritual, religious, or symbolic significance for individuals or communities. According to Levine, (2008), sacred places are physical locations that hold deep religious or spiritual significance and are often associated with divine presence or transcendental experiences. And for Bender, (1998), sacred places are sites imbued with symbolic meaning, representing the convergence of the natural, supernatural, and human realms. Sacred places can say to be a holy place where the divine interact with humans and Altman (2016), avers that sacred places are spaces where individuals and communities go to seek healing, renewal, and communion with the sacred. Sacred places being a place where the divine interact with humans can also be seen in Kearns, (2020), sacred places are geographical locations that serve as thresholds between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the mundane and the mystical. In portraying the importance of sacred places to Human, Taylor (2009), posits that sacred places are landscapes, buildings, or natural features that have been designated as holy by religious traditions and are treated with reverence and respect. Sacred places are spaces where individuals and communities seek solace, spiritual connection, and a sense of transcendence beyond everyday life. It is also an embodiment of religious beliefs and cultural traditions, infused with spiritual energy and serving as conduits between the human and divine realms. (Linnertz, Berke, & Lester, 2019). On the spirituality of sacred places, Yi, (2014,) avers that Sacred places are geographical features that possess spiritual meaning and cultural significance, connecting people to their ancestors and traditions and Fowler (2008) opined that Sacred places are sanctified environments that evoke devotion, reverence, and a sense of the extraordinary beyond ordinary reality. Knight, (2003) also avers that Sacred places are spaces where the sacred and profane intersect, inviting individuals to encounter the divine and experience spiritual transformation. Sacred places do not possess only spiritual importance but also aid biodiversity and promote culture. According to Bielo (2011), a sacred place is a location that is perceived to be set apart from the everyday world and to have a special significance for a community or individual. Canter Ella (2019) posits that a sacred place is a physical location that is considered to be holy or otherwise set apart from the mundane. Such places often have religious or spiritual significance for a community or group, and may be associated with rituals or other forms of worship, for McFarland (2019), A sacred place is a physical location that is considered to be imbued with spiritual significance, often as a result of a specific event or person associated with the location. Such places can be natural or man-made, and may be considered holy by a specific religion or culture.

McFarland is of the opinion that sacred places are specific to each religion, what Christians consider to be holy or sacred may not be to a Buddhist or a traditionalist. For Harrof (2019), a sacred place is defined as a space that is perceived as special or holy due to its association with a deity, religious event, or spiritual experience. He went further to write that these places may be natural features such as mountains, forests, or rivers, or they may be human-made structures such as temples, shrines, or churches. They can be found all over the world, from the Ganges River in India to the Vatican in Rome and also Obu Gad in Umueri in Anambra State Nigeria. Shaw (2020) posits sacred place is as a space that has been set apart or designated as special for religious or spiritual purposes. He also wrote that such places can be found in nature, such as mountains, rivers, or groves of trees, or they can be man-made structures like temples, churches, or shrines. Regardless of their location or form, sacred places are typically imbued with a sense of the numinous, or a feeling of the presence of something greater than oneself. They may also be associated with rituals or ceremonies that are performed there. Jacobs (2007) concurs with Shaws by defining a sacred place is any place that has been designated as special by a religious or spiritual tradition. According to Jacobs, in the Middle East, sacred places may be associated with Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or other faiths. These places can include mosques, synagogues, churches, temples, or other holy sites. They may also be natural features such as mountains, caves, or springs, or they may be man-made structures such as shrines, mausoleums, or cemeteries.

Environmentalism

According Hassan (2017) environmentalism is a social and political movement that seeks to address environmental issues and promote sustainable development through collective action, policy reforms, and grassroots initiatives.

Buell, (2005) in his definition of environmentalism concurred with Hassan and referred to it as the social and political movement advocating for the protection and preservation of the natural environment, often through activism, policy-making, and cultural changes. For Eckersley, (2012,) environmentalism involves efforts to address environmental issues, such as climate change, species extinction, and pollution, through collective action, policy reforms, and cultural transformations. Carolan, (2013) opined that environmentalism encompasses a range of ideologies, practices, and social movements that seek to address environmental problems, promote eco-friendly lifestyles, and foster sustainable development. And Büscher & Fuentes,(2019,)averred that environmentalism involves the recognition of the inherent value of nature, the need to protect biodiversity, and the pursuit of sustainable development that maintains the well-being of both humans and the environment while Johnson, (2019) asserted that environmentalism encompasses a set of

values, beliefs, and practices aimed at protecting the environment, addressing environmental challenges, and fostering ecological sustainability.

Conservation

Primack, (2017) defined conservation encompasses a range of scientific, political, and ethical approaches aimed at preserving and restoring ecosystems, species, and habitats in order to maintain ecological balance and prevent further loss of biodiversity. Conservation for Kareiva & Marvier, (2012) entails the wise and careful use of natural resources, guided by societal values and ethical considerations, in order to maintain ecological processes, preserve biodiversity, and secure the benefits that nature provides to humanity. For Lockwood, Worboys & Kothari, (2019) Conservation involves the active management and protection of natural landscapes, species, and ecosystems in a way that sustains their ecological integrity, cultural significance, and socio-economic values for present and future generations. While conservation simply means to manage and protect, Macdonald & Service, (2010) opined that conservation involves the application of scientific principles and techniques to identify, understand, and mitigate threats to natural ecosystems and species, with the goal of preserving biodiversity and ecological function and Brocking, Duffy & Igoe (2014) asserted that conservation is a socio-political process that strives to balance the needs of human societies with the protection of the environment, through the establishment of protected areas, sustainable resource management, and community-based conservation initiatives. Speth, (2008) averred that conservation involves the careful and responsible stewardship of the Earth's resources, including land, water, air, and wildlife, with the aim of maintaining ecological integrity and promoting sustainable development. Conservation can be understood as a multidisciplinary field that combines ecological understanding, social engagement, and policy interventions to protect natural ecosystems, mitigate climate change, and ensure the well-being of both humans and other species (Redford & Adams, 2009).

Roles sacred Places Play in Conservation and Environmentalism Habitat for Endangered Species

Sacred places are often defined as locations that are considered sacred or holy by a particular culture or group of people. They may be connected to a particular religion or spiritual tradition, or they may be associated with natural features or phenomena, like mountains, rivers, or forests. In some cases, sacred places are believed to be the dwelling place of gods or spirits, and may be sites of worship or pilgrimage. Sacred places may also be associated with specific rituals or ceremonies, they are expressions of dedicated efforts that cultures that have specifically, if not always consciously, cared for nature in

various ways. While sacred places are connected to the human spirit and intangible heritage, they also have strong material components. In addition to being places where animals and plant species survive, they provide resources such as water and medicines and other ecosystem services, they are the location of events and ceremonies, and traditionally are sites of education. According to Zannini (2007), sacred natural places are the oldest form of habitat protection in human history. Sacred natural places are becoming ever more important as reservoirs of biodiversity. In many places, they are the only refuges for endangered species and rare ecosystems. These places also face overwhelming threats, including deforestation, pollution, unsustainable extraction, melting glaciers and rising sea levels. They link to livelihoods in many ways and the concepts of cultural services and human well-being are associated with them (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005).

Sacred natural sites can provide important habitat for endangered species in several ways. First, they often have a long history of being protected from human activities like hunting, logging, and development, which can help to maintain the natural environment and prevent habitat loss. Second, many sacred natural sites are home to culturally significant species that are considered sacred or have spiritual significance, and these species may be protected by local people. Third, sacred natural sites often have a strong connection to traditional knowledge and practices, which can help to maintain the natural environment and sustain biodiversity. Sacred places play a critical role in providing vital habitats for endangered species. These unique locations often provide crucial habitat for species that are struggling to survive in the face of environmental changes and human activities. By protecting these sacred places, we can help to ensure the survival of these endangered species and the ecosystems they rely on.

For example, the conservation of Mount Kailash, a sacred mountain in Tibet, has been instrumental in protecting the habitat of the endangered snow leopard, the Cross River National Park, which is home to many endangered species such as the Cross River gorilla, Olumo Rock in Abeokuta, Nigeria, which is home to the vulnerable yellow-backed duiker, the sacred forests of Ghana are known for their biodiversity and for providing vital habitat for endangered species, including the pygmy hippopotamus and the white-napped mangabey also the Ivory Coast's Comoe National Park, a sacred forest that is home to more than 200 bird species, including the endangered white-throated guinea fowl. Sacred places are crucial for protecting endangered species; one of the ways that sacred places can serve as important habitats for endangered species is by providing areas that are free from human disturbance. Many sacred places are considered sacred because they are home to deities or spirits, and as a result, people often avoid entering or disturbing these

areas. This can create safe spaces for endangered species to live and breed without the threat of human activities.

Sources of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) refers to the profound understanding and wisdom that indigenous cultures have developed over generations, based on their intimate connection with the environment. Sacred places hold significant cultural, spiritual, and ecological importance for indigenous communities; they revered locations that embody cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance for indigenous communities worldwide. They play a crucial role in facilitating the maintenance and transmission of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). TEK encompasses a deep understanding of the natural world, including plant and animal behaviour, weather patterns, and sustainable resource management practices. The preservation of TEK is vital not only for indigenous peoples but also for the broader global community as it offers alternative approaches to environmental conservation and sustainability.

According to Johnson & Reo (2017), sacred places serve as repositories of ancestral wisdom, which is often passed down through oral traditions within indigenous societies. These locations are imbued with stories, myths, and practices that convey ecological knowledge to future generations. For instance, the Igbo people Nigeria share TEK about bush food gathering and medicinal plant. Similarly, the Nenets of Siberia perform rituals near sacred lakes to teach younger generations about fish migration patterns and the impacts of climate change (Forbes, 2016). These oral traditions connect indigenous communities with their land, fostering a sense of identity, pride, and responsibility. For Cortés-Vázquez and Ballesteros (2020), sacred places often serve as natural laboratories for observing and interacting with ecosystems. Indigenous communities employ sustainable resource management practices developed over generations, with sacred places acting as focal points for monitoring biodiversity and ecosystem functions. For example, Nigeria people have through traditional practices preserved their agro forestry systems for centuries by designating certain forests and mountains as sacred spaces and these spaces offer opportunities for knowledge generation and experimentation, enabling indigenous peoples to maintain resilient and sustainable practices in the face of environmental change. Some of these places are Aroji, Osun Osogbo sacred groves.

Promoting Ecotourism

Sacred places for Zaharia, Sayre, Thornton, & Notenbaer (2018) play significant role in promoting ecotourism, which can contribute to economic development for indigenous communities. By sharing traditional ecological knowledge with visitors, indigenous

groups can generate income while simultaneously preserving their cultural heritage and ecosystems. For instance, the Maasai people in Kenya have established community-based ecotourism initiatives that allow visitors to experience their sacred lands and learn about sustainable wildlife management practices (Such initiatives empower indigenous communities economically and incentivize the continued conservation of sacred places and associated traditional ecological knowledge.

Sacred places act as living libraries that hold invaluable Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). These spaces enable the preservation and transmission of ecological wisdom, passed down through generations within indigenous communities. The cultural significance of these places, coupled with their ecological importance, makes them essential for indigenous peoples and the conservation of biodiversity. Recognizing the importance of sacred places and valuing traditional ecological knowledge is crucial for fostering sustainable practices and respecting the rights of indigenous communities.

Shaping the Identity of Local Communities

Sacred places can play an important role in shaping the identity of local communities, as they often serve as a source of cultural heritage and pride. For example, the temples and monasteries of Tibet are not only places of worship, but also serve as living examples of the region's rich artistic, architectural, and spiritual heritage. In addition, the rituals and practices associated with sacred places can help to foster a sense of community and belonging among the people who live near them. Many sacred places, such as pilgrimage sites, also provide opportunities for people from different communities to come together and share their cultures and traditions. In Nigeria, example of such sacred place that serves as a source of identity for the local community is the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, located in the southwestern state of Osun. The grove is home to a number of shrines and sculptures that are associated with the Yoruba religion, and it is considered to be a spiritual centre for the Yoruba people. In eastern Nigeria, a well-known sacred place that is closely connected to the local community is the Ikom Monoliths in Cross River State. The monoliths, which are carved stone pillars, are believed to have been erected by the ancestors of the local community as a way to communicate with the spirits. The monoliths have been passed down through generations, and they continue to play an important role in the culture and identity of the local people another example is the Nsude Pyramids in Enugu State.

Indigenous land rights advocacy:

Many sacred sites are located on indigenous lands. Advocacy for the protection and recognition of indigenous land rights contributes to conservation efforts and ensures the

preservation of sacred places (O'Neill & Roncoli, 2010). Sacred places often play a significant role in this advocacy. Here are some key points on how sacred places contribute to indigenous land rights advocacy in relation to conservation and environmentalism:

1. Recognition of ancestral territories: Sacred places are often located within indigenous ancestral territories. Recognizing and respecting the spiritual significance of these sites reinforces the recognition of indigenous land rights. Advocacy for the protection and preservation of sacred places contributes to the broader movement for indigenous self-determination and control over their lands.

2. Protection against encroachment and exploitation: Sacred places often face threats from external forces, such as land encroachment, resource extraction, or infrastructure development. Indigenous communities, with their deep connection to these sites, engage in advocacy efforts to protect sacred places, asserting their land rights and fighting against activities that could harm the environment or undermine their cultural heritage.

3. Cultural preservation and traditional knowledge: Sacred places hold immense cultural and spiritual significance for indigenous communities. Advocating for the protection of these sites is intrinsically linked to preserving indigenous cultures, traditions, and traditional knowledge systems. Indigenous land rights advocacy aims to safeguard these cultural elements, which often include sustainable land-use practices and ecological wisdom passed down through generations.

4. Collaborative management and co-governance: Many sacred places serve as examples of successful collaboration between indigenous communities, governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Through advocacy efforts, indigenous groups seek to establish co-governance models, allowing them to actively participate in the management and decision-making processes related to their ancestral lands and sacred places. This collaborative approach promotes more sustainable and culturally sensitive conservation practices.

5. Land restitution and reparation: In cases where indigenous communities have been displaced from their ancestral lands, land restitution becomes a critical aspect of indigenous land rights advocacy. Recognizing the spiritual significance and connection of sacred places to indigenous peoples bolsters the legal and moral arguments for land restitution. Restoring indigenous control over these lands not only upholds their rights but also provides opportunities for more effective conservation and environmental management.

6. Environmental justice and social equity: Indigenous land rights advocacy within the context of sacred places often intersects with broader struggles for environmental justice

and social equity. Advocates highlight the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation on indigenous communities and emphasize the importance of protecting sacred places as a means to address these injustices and create more equitable and sustainable societies. The advocacy for indigenous land rights, in relation to sacred places, is a crucial component of broader conservation and environmental movements. By recognizing the spiritual and cultural value of these sites, we can promote meaningful collaboration, empower indigenous communities, protect vital ecosystems, and contribute to a more just and sustainable future for all.

Ethical Tourism

Sacred places attract tourists seeking spiritual experiences. Responsible tourism practices associated with sacred sites promote sustainable development and conservation efforts (Buckley, 2012). Ethical tourism is crucial when it comes to conserving sacred places and promoting environmentalism. It encourages visitors to respect and appreciate the cultural and spiritual significance of sacred places. It promotes understanding and sensitivity towards local customs, rituals, and beliefs associated with the site. This helps to maintain the integrity of the sacred place and fosters a harmonious relationship between tourists and local communities.

Ethical tourism strives to minimize the environmental footprint of visitors. This includes practicing responsible waste management, using eco-friendly transportation options, and reducing energy consumption. By implementing sustainable practices, such as avoiding littering or damaging vegetation, tourists can help protect the natural environment surrounding sacred places; it also recognizes the importance of supporting local economies and communities. Visitors are encouraged to engage in culturally appropriate and sustainable economic activities, such as purchasing locally made crafts or staying in accommodations that employ local staff. This direct support helps generate income and opportunities for local communities, fostering economic resilience and incentivizing the conservation of sacred places. Finally, by promoting sustainable practices beyond visit, ethical tourism encourages visitors to take what they learn from sacred places and apply it to their daily lives. This may involve adopting sustainable habits, such as reducing water consumption or choosing environmentally friendly products. Encouraging responsible behavior even after leaving the sacred site extends the impact of the visit and promotes long-term environmental stewardship.

Water resource management

Sacred water bodies, like rivers, lakes, and springs, are often conserved and revered by communities. This reverence promotes sustainable water resource management practices,

preventing pollution and over-extraction (Agrawal & Rao, 1997). Water resource management is a crucial aspect of environmental conservation, and sacred places can play many significant roles in promoting sustainable water management practices. Some of these roles include:

1. *Protection of sacred water bodies:* Many sacred places are located near or encompass water bodies such as rivers, lakes, and springs. These water bodies are often considered sacred and are protected by local communities due to their spiritual significance. The reverence for these water bodies leads to their preservation, preventing pollution and over-extraction (Gunnarsdotter and Pape, 2019).
2. *Traditional water management practices:* Sacred places are often associated with traditional ecological knowledge and practices related to water management. Local communities have developed centuries-old systems for sustainable water use, including irrigation techniques, rainwater harvesting, and communal water management. These practices can provide valuable insights into sustainable water resource management (Adams, 2018).
3. *Advocacy for clean and accessible water:* Sacred places often become focal points for advocating clean and accessible water for all members of society, including marginalized communities. These sites can be used as platforms to raise awareness about water-related challenges, promote equitable access to clean water, and advocate for policies that protect water resources (Singh, Rana, Pravin, Kumar and sarvesh, 2020).
4. *Rituals promoting water conservation:* Ceremonial activities and rituals performed at sacred places often emphasize the importance of water conservation and respect for water as a sacred element. Such rituals reinforce cultural norms and practices that encourage responsible water use, minimizing wastage and promoting a sustainable relationship with water resources (Coles, 2018).

Land restoration and regeneration

Sacred places inspire restoration initiatives. For example, the restoration of culturally significant landscapes, such as the groves in Nigeria, combines ecological restoration with preservation of cultural heritage. Land restoration and regeneration are important roles that sacred places can play in conservation and environmentalism. For example, Sacred groves are protected and revered due to their spiritual significance and the preservation of sacred groves contributes to land restoration and regeneration by maintaining healthy ecosystems and promoting natural regeneration processes (Orimoogunje, Fashae,

Oke, 2016). Other ways that sacred places can aid land restoration and regeneration are through:

1. Traditional land management practices: Many sacred places are managed according to traditional ecological knowledge and practices. These practices emphasize the protection of natural resources, sustainable harvesting, and reforestation efforts, leading to land restoration and regeneration.

2. Agroforestry systems: Sacred places, such as sacred trees or shrines within agricultural landscapes, contribute to land restoration and regeneration through agroforestry systems. These systems integrate trees within agricultural fields to enhance soil fertility, prevent erosion, and promote biodiversity. One example is the Mami Water Shrine in Ile-Ife, where farmers protect sacred trees, and their branches are pruned and used as mulch in agricultural practices, thus improving soil health and promoting ecosystem restoration (Adedeji, 2020).

3. Ecological restoration initiatives: Some sacred places serve as focal points for ecological restoration projects. These initiatives involve tree planting, removal of invasive species, and community engagement, resulting in the revival of the ecosystem and the restoration of ecological processes (Orimoogunje, Fashae, Oke, 2016).

4. Community-led conservation efforts: Sacred places often involve local communities in land restoration and regeneration activities. This engagement leads to active participation in reforestation, fire prevention, and protection of endangered species, contributing to the restoration and conservation of the forest ecosystem.

Conclusion

The role of sacred places in conservation and environmentalism is of paramount importance. Throughout history, sacred places have served as sanctuaries for biodiversity, cultural heritage, and spiritual practices. Their significance extends beyond their religious or cultural value, as they often embody unique ecosystems, encompass rare flora and fauna, and act as important water catchment areas.

Sacred places promote a deep connection between humans and nature, emphasizing the interdependence and harmony between the two. They often contain traditional knowledge and practices that have sustained sustainable interactions with the environment for generations. By recognizing and respecting the sacredness of these places, conservation efforts can be enhanced, ensuring the preservation of both natural and cultural values.

One key aspect of sacred places in conservation is their ability to foster a sense of stewardship and responsibility among local communities. Traditional custodians and religious leaders play an integral role in safeguarding these sites, acting as gatekeepers for sustainable practices and promoting environmentally friendly behaviours. Their deep-rooted beliefs and practices highlight the need for a balanced and respectful relationship with the natural world. In addition, sacred places can serve as catalysts for community-led conservation initiatives. Local communities often rely on sacred sites for livelihoods, cultural identity, and social cohesion. Recognizing and supporting these connections can empower communities to take an active role in conservation efforts, leading to the development of sustainable management practices and community-driven initiatives. Furthermore, the protection and sustainable development of sacred places hold great potential for ecotourism. These sites attract visitors seeking spiritual experiences, cultural immersion, and encounters with pristine natural environments. When managed in a sustainable manner, tourism can generate economic benefits for local communities, contributing to their well-being and incentivizing conservation efforts.

However, it is crucial to approach the repositioning of sacred places for sustainable development with sensitivity and respect. Indigenous rights and traditional knowledge must be upheld, ensuring meaningful engagement and participation of local communities throughout the process. Collaborative efforts involving governments, NGOs, academia, and religious institutions are essential for designing and implementing strategies that prioritize both cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. Sacred places play a vital role in conservation and environmentalism. Recognizing their significance, protecting their ecological integrity, and engaging with local communities are pivotal steps towards achieving sustainable development goals while honouring cultural heritage and fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world.

References

- Adams, W. M. (2004). *Against extinction: The story of conservation*. Earthscan Publications Ltd. (London, UK)
- Nazarea, V. (2006). "Local Knowledge and Memory in Biodiversity Conservation." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35, 317-335.
- Adams, R. (2018). "Sacred Places and Water: Considering the Role of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations in Global Water Crises." *Water*, 10 (8), 1008.
- Berkes, F. (2008). *Sacred ecology: Traditional ecological knowledge and resource management*. Taylor & Francis.
- Maffi, L. (2001). On the interdependence of biological and cultural diversity. In J. R. McNeely (Ed.), *Cultural and spiritual values of biodiversity* (pp. 71-86). United Nations Environment Programme.

- Maffi, L. (2010). Biocultural diversity and sustainability. In D. A. Posey & M. J. Balick (Eds.), *Human impacts on Amazonia: The role of traditional ecological knowledge in conservation and development* (pp. 47-55). Columbia University Press.
- Adebayo Adedeji (2020). *Eco centricity: In defence of the living world*. publisher: Palgrave Macmillan, New York city
- Agrawal, A., & Rao, P. (1997). "Decentralization and Participation: The Governance of Common Pool Resources in Nepal's Terai." *World Development*, 25(3), 341-354.
- Berkes, F. (2018). *"Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management."* Routledge.
- Biersack, A. (2006). "Reimagining Political Ecology: Culture/Power/History/Nature." In E. Greenberg & A. Stroup (Eds.), *"Companion to Political Geography"* (pp. 257-273). Blackwell Publishing.
- Brockington, D., Duffy, R., & Igoe, J. (2014). *Nature unbound: Conservation, capitalism, and the future of protected areas*. London: Routledge.
- Bubb, P., Yanagisawa, N., Ketphanh, S., Hughes, M., & Stacey, P. (2014). *"Protecting Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples."* IUCN.
- Buckley, R. (2012). "Sustainable Tourism: Research and Reality." *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2), 528-546.
- Buell, L. (2005). *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Büscher, B., & Fuentes, R. (2019). Environmentalism and Conservation. In the *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Sociology* (pp. 5-13). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Canter. (2019) A Social History of Sacred Places. Volume 109
- Carolan, M. (2013). The Socio-Economic System and Environmentalism. In the *Sociology of Food and Agriculture* (pp. 1-26). Routledge.
- Carolan, M. (2013). The Socio-Economic System and Environmentalism. In the *Sociology of Food and Agriculture*. London: Routledge.
- Cortés-Vázquez, J. A., Ruiz Ballesteros (2020). Sacred natural sites contribute to the maintenance of the landscape mosaic in the region of Calakmul, Mexico. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 22(6), 5165-5182.
- Forbes, B. C. (2016). Sea ice, rain-on-snow and tundra reindeer nomadism in Arctic Russia. *Biology Letters*, 12(10), 20160466.
- Johnson, J. T., & Reo, N. J. (2017). Nature-culture constructs in climate change and Indigenous peoples: A systematic review of the literature. *WIREs Climate Change*, 8(2), e438.

- Zaharia, L., Sayre, N, Thornton.,&Notenbaert, A. (2018). The role of sacred sites in supporting pastoral communities' adaptive capacity in Kenya. *Pastoralism*, 8(1), 23.
- Eckersley, R. (2012). *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harroff, D. (2019). *Sacred Places in the 21st Century: Religious Sites of Peace and Power*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shaw.M.(2020). *Sacred Places of Asia: Exploring the Sacred Sites, Festivals, and Pilgrimages of the East*. Singapore: Tuttle.
- Hassan, S. (2017). Environmentalism as a social movement: The role of modern communication technologies. *Environmental Sociology*, 3(2).
- Humphries, M. (2010). "Designing with the Sacred: Sustainable Design in the 21st Century." In K. Wigglesworth (Ed.), *"Creating Spaces for Sacred Places"* (pp. 71-80). Taylor & Francis.
- Jacobs.S.(2007). *Sacred Places in the Holy Land: A Companion to the Sacred Sites of Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon.*, Santa Barbara: ABC_CLIO.
- James S. Bielo (2011), *The Anthropology of Sacred Places: Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, Vol. 17. Retrieved from online on May 21st, 2023.
- Johnson, E. W. (2019). Environmental Justice and Environmentalism. In the *Palgrave Handbook of Criminology and the Global South* (pp. 1-18). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kareiva, P., &Marvier, M. (2012). *Conservation science: Balancing the needs of people and nature*. Greenwood: Roberts.
- Katarina Tytlecote. (2018). "Chaotic Conservation: Water, Sacred Sites, and Indigenous Resource Management in New Zealand." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 4(1), 217-237.
- Gunnarsdotter, Y, Dr Ulla Pape. (2018). "Sacred Waters in Sweden: Cultural and Spiritual Values, Threats, and Conservation." *Water*, 11(9), 1800.
- Li, Y., Long, H., Zhang, J., Li, X., & Cao, S. (2016). "The Impact of Culturally Inspired Landscape Restoration on Cultural Ecosystem Services and People's Well-Being." *Sustainability*, 8(11), 1214.
- Lockwood, M., Worboys, G. L., & Kothari, A. (2019). *Protected area governance and management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McFarland. S.L. (2019), *Sacred Places: Exploring the World's Most Holy Sites*. Leiden: Brill
- O'Neill, K., & Roncoli, C. (2010). "Land Use Change, Soil Degradation, and Forest Fragmentation in the Highlands of Tanzania: Linking Environmental/Human Well-Being and Human Rights." *Human Ecology*, 38(5), 639-653.

- Ramirez-Marcia, N., Gonzalez-Espinosa, M., Equihua, M., & Peters, E. (2001). "Etnoecología, diversidadbiológica y manejo de los bosquestropicales de México." *Investigaciones Geográficas*, 44, 73-91.
- Primack, R. B. (2017). *Essentials of conservation biology*. Sinauer Associates, Inc. (Sunderland, MA, USA)
- Redford, K. H., & Adams, W. M. (Eds.). (2009). Protected areas and human livelihoods. Wildlife Conservation Society. (Washington, D.C., USA)
- Shaw, P. The Ikom (1984). Monoliths: A Puzzle in Post-Igbo-Ukwu Archaeology *African Archaeological Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1.
- Berkes, F. (2008). *Sacred ecology: Traditional ecological knowledge and resource management*. Taylor & Francis.
- Dudley, N., Stolton, S., Belokurov, A., Krueger, L., Lopoukhine, N., MacKinnon, K., Sandwith, T., Sekhran, N., & Watkins, G. (Eds.). (2010). *Natural Solutions: Protected Areas Helping People Cope with Climate Change*. International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- Gadgil, M., & Guha, R. (1992). *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Posey, D. A. (1999). *Cultural and spiritual values of biodiversity*. United Nations Environment Programme.
- Verschuuren, B., Wild, R., McNeely, J., Oviedo, G., & Cámara-Leret, R. (Eds.). (2014). *Sacred natural sites: Conserving nature and culture*. Earthscan.
- Singh, P. Rana P.B, Rana Pravin, Kumar Sarvesh (2020). "Sacred Ponds: Integrating Traditional Practices for Community-Led Water Conservation in India." *Frontiers in Water*, 2, 1-10.
- Speth, J. G. (2008). *The bridge at the edge of the world: Capitalism, the environment, and crossing from crisis to sustainability*. New Haven: Yale University Press.