

## Secrets of the Sacred Hills

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1996

Keywords: mountains, sacred places, culture.

In many societies mountains are seen as sacred places. As such, they can have a significant impact on the cohesion of local cultures and on the conservation of the environment.

Sacred mountains highlight the key role that culture plays in influencing how people regard and treat the environment as the highest and most central values and beliefs of societies and traditions around the world.

These values and beliefs determine to a great extent which natural resources people seek to exploit and which features of the land they strive to protect. Many indigenous cultures draw vitality and cohesion from their relationship to mountains and other sacred features of the Landscape. Destroying what makes such a site sacred may undermine a culture, resulting in negative social, economic, and environmental impacts as the society falls apart and traditional controls of land are lost.

Although in most traditions the sacred itself is ultimately indefinable, it is not amorphous. People experience the sacred nature of mountains; in particular, through the view they have of them such as the mountain as the temple of the gods, centre of the universe, or abode of the dead.

The power of many mountains comes from the perception of them as dwelling places of deities, often regarded as protectors of local communities.

The Sherpas of Khumbu in Nepal, for example, view the craggy, fortress like peak of Khumbila as the seat of the warrior god who watches over their homeland and protects their yaks. Actions that would make such a mountain unsuitable as the abode of its deity appearing to drive the god, spirit, or ancestor away may leave nearby villagers feeling vulnerable.

Another widespread theme is that of the mountain as centre. A number of mountains in Asia, such as Mount Kailas in Tibet and Gunung Agung in Bali, take on the character of the mythical Mount Meru or Sumeru, which stands as a cosmic axis around which the universe is organized in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. Such mountains help to orient people and give them a sense of their place in the world.

People tend to look up to the heights as sources of blessings most notably, water, fertility, life, and healing. Mountains such as Ausangate in Peru, Tlaloc in Mexico, and the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona are revered as abodes of weather deities, places of springs, and reservoirs of waters on which societies depend for their wellbeing and existence.

Shamans in Japan and Korea, many of them women, climb sacred mountains to charge themselves with healing powers and perform rituals for their patients. The leading spiritual doctor of the Wintun tribe in northern California feels that she gets her power to teach and heal from the great volcanic peak of Mount Shasta.

Another major theme is that of mountains as divine ancestors and places of the dead, often involved in origin myths. The forested summit plateau of Mount Koya in Japan has one of the most Impressive graveyards in Japan while the spirits of the dead were traditionally thought to go to the foot of Tai Shan, historically the most important of China's many sacred peaks. East Africans traditionally buried their dead facing sacred mountains like Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya.

Finally, mountains are frequently seen as places of spiritual revelation and transformation. Mount Sinai occupies a position of particular prominence in the Bible as the fiery site where God revealed the Torah, the basic teaching of Judaism, and the Ten Commandments, the basis of law and ethics in Western civilization. The granite cliffs and knife edge ridges of Hua Shan, the most spectacular of the five principal sacred peaks of China, are a favorite haunt of Taoist hermits intent on transforming themselves into immortals.

Many people today, both traditional and modern, seek out mountains as places of spiritual renewal and refreshment. Kuo Hsi, one of China's greatest landscape painters wrote, "The din of the dusty world and the locked ness of human habitations are what human nature habitually abhors; while, on the contrary, haze, mist, and the haunting spirits of the mountains are what human nature seeks."

In the United States John Muir, a major figure in the genesis of the environmental movement, founded the Sierra Club primarily to presene the Sierra Nevada as a place where people could go for spiritual and physical renewal. Such motivations continue to inspire interest and membership in wilderness conservation organizations today.

For many, the environment is not just the natural environment. It includes cultural and spiritual components that make it meaningful a source of life in its deepest and broadest sense. People who do rituals to draw water from a sacred mountain, for example, do not view the water and mountain simply as physical parts of the ecosystem needed to grow their crops. They see them as essential

components of a larger system of meaning, expressions of deeper reality that sustains them spiritually and culturally, as well as physically.

All this suggests that we adopt a broader approach to sustainable use, taking into account spiritual and cultural, as well as economic and ecological factors. Measures taken to preserve the natural ecology of a site without regard for what it enshrines may kill the spirit of the place, destroying its value for the local people who depend on it for the continued vitality of their society and traditions.

Just as we need to preserve biodiversity for its own sake and for the benefits it can bring, such as new pharmaceuticals, so we need to preserve cultural diversity for its intrinsic, human value and for the traditional knowledge and fresh points of view it can contribute.

### Pilgrims plant a forest

In 1993 Professor A.N. Purohit, a plant physiologist, visited Badrinath, the major Hindu pilgrimage shrine in the Indian Himalaya, and noticed how the surrounding slopes had been stopped bare of forest. Over 350,000 pilgrims a year come to Badrinath from all over India, arriving on roads built in the early 1960s. Their influx has had both good and bad impacts. Purohit decided to see if the Head Priest of the temple would use his religious authority to encourage pilgrims to plant trees for restoration of the site.

Greatly excited by the idea, the Head Priest said he would set a date for the joint undertaking. On the appointed day Purohit returned with 20,000 seedlings from the G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development of which he is Director, and placed them in rows outside the temple. When the pilgrims made offerings, the Head Priest stood near the gate of the temple and gave an inspiring talk highlighting religious beliefs about the spiritual importance of trees in the sacred Himalaya.

He concluded by encouraging the pilgrims to take the seedlings and plant them on the slopes as an act of religious devotion. There was a great rush, and all 20,000 seedlings were planted. Everyone benefited: the pilgrims received blessings, the Head Priest's reputation soared, and reforestation had begun.

Thinking of the future, Purohit put up a sign asking the pilgrims for donations to care for the seedlings. In no time they had contributed a generous amount. Badrinath, like other pilgrimage sites in India, has a long line of beggars. Purohit felt that if the beggars were offered in cash what they made from begging plus food many of them might choose to care for trees instead of begging. To his surprise all the beggars took him up on his offer: they were as eager to get spiritual blessings as physical nourishment.

In June of 1995, Dr PP Dhyani, a scientist of the Institute, and the Head Priest did another planting to expand the reforested area and include species that preserve the biodiversity of the region. The next stage of the programme will be to contact priests and community leaders at the nearby shrine of Kedarnath and Tungnath, setting in motion plans to expand reforestation to other pilgrimage sites and to include additional measures such as getting pilgrims to stop littering and encouraging truck drivers to take out rubbish in return for blessings.

The successful tree planting at Badrinath shows how science and religion can work together for the benefit of the environment and the preservation of spiritual values. It is an inspiring model for sustainable restoration wherever sacred sites and pilgrimages are important.

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#### Notes to readers

This article was published IN: IPPF, IUCN, UNFPA, WWF. 1996. People and the Planet: People and Mountains, Pinnacles of Diversity. Volume 5, Number 1. Planet 21, London.

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