

Talking Points for the UNDP-Sacred Sites and the Environment from and Indigenous Perspective –

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Submitted by

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Sacred Sites and the Promotion of the Environmental Sustainability in a Changing World

I. The Traditional Protection of Sacred Sites

In the world today, many look to indigenous peoples to provide historical context and traditional knowledge to help protect important environmental sites around the world, including sacred sites. Sacred sites are becoming more important in the discussions because of increased awareness of the role they play in the global ecosystem; because of this there is an evolving global consensus that indigenous peoples play a vital role in the greater dialog for global environmental sustainability of the world's ecosystems.

How indigenous people play this role lies in their traditional knowledge. Indigenous people provided hundred and thousands of years of knowledge about entire ecosystems in their homelands. But is knowledge alone enough, be it modern scientific or traditional, to save an ecosystem or lead to global environmental sustainability of earth's ecosystem? Perhaps, but perhaps not.

II. The Land And The People Are One

Indigenous and traditional knowledge relating to the environment is based on the people's intimate and interconnected relationships with the land. In other words it is not simply that indigenous peoples lived in a place for thousands of years that gives them supreme knowledge of that place, although this is important, what is more important, however, is their relationship to the land.

One of predominate Hawaiian religious tenets is "***Aloha `Aina***" or "**Love of or for the Land.**" This tenet is demonstrated in the famous Hawaiian place songs and chants. For example, the Hawaiian word ***Kahelahela*** is defined in the Hawaiian-English dictionary (Pukui/Elbert,1986) as "**The summation of productive forces of land and sea**"; and is often found in Hawaiian chants and songs that are about renowned or sacred places. The preceding lines in the song or chant continue on to describe the winds, the rains, the mountains, the waterfalls, the streams and the even the fragrance of the flowers of the place. (Lerma,2006)

These place songs often first appear as a love songs since the lines in the song ascribe the unique elements of the place and their beauty to a lover (i.e. Aloha `Aina) Most importantly however, the phrases following the word ***kahelahela***, describe the special place as in a "**perpetual state of beauty**" (i.e. Ua Nani Paniaua). The meanings contained in this kind of traditional song or chants of Hawai'i not only identifies sacred places, but further describes their role in the totality of life forces of the diverse, complex and expansive ecosystem. *Id.*

What is useful about the religious tenets of Aloha `Aina, contained in the songs and chants is that they outline the philosophy and relationship of the people to the land; and further provide instruction as to how these places are to be maintained, cared for and protected; in short the chants and song instruct us to keep them in a perpetual state of beauty, set apart and protected and that failing to do so violates the law of the land and the laws of the Maker.

If people maintain an intimate relationship to the land, it means they will treat it differently, than if they were to consider the land separate from themselves or from an economic standpoint (i.e. as a commodity). The Hawaiian people are not unique in their view of the world, or with the love of their land. In fact, there is clear and overwhelming evidence that most if not all people of the ancient world had very similar and interconnected relationships with their homelands. This is the fulcrum of our discussion today. To achieve true environmental sustainability we must return to our ancient memories for guidance and work to shift the modern-colonial paradigm.

III. Shifting The Paradigm--Is Recognition Of Sacred Sites Enough?

There is growing global consensus today that World Cultural and Heritage Sites, including Sacred Sites, play an important role the promotion and protection of the global environment and ecosystem. There is little dispute that these important sites, derive their status and importance from the inherent relationship that they share with indigenous peoples and cultures of the world.

Yet protection and preservation of sacred sites continues to be a predominant platform issue and rallying point for indigenous peoples throughout the world today. This is the case

not because there is no evolving global consensus supporting protections for these sites, or that indigenous peoples are not making strides for greater protection of these sites, or that there is no evolving global consensus supporting indigenous peoples involvement and or co-management of these sites.

This is the case, because sacred sites continue to be overseen and controlled by States and not by the very people that hold to be them to sacred. To change this, a paradigm shift must take place. The paradigm here is the modern “iron-triangle” of colonialism which holds that indigenous peoples are 1) not peoples and are therefore not entitled to the rights of self-determination, which is also to say they are not entitled to determine their own social, cultural, economic ...political status, 2) that indigenous religions are not valid or that dominant religions are to be respected above those of natives (i.e. Christianity), and 3) that economic growth takes precedent over other values (i.e. cultural or native religious values).

The conflicts arise in part because many activities occur on the land that are incompatible with the religious and cultural practices of the peoples (i.e. Strip mining, toxic waste dumping, tourism, astronomy development) which destroys the delicate environment and breaks down the religious and social fabric of their cultures. That State’s derive tremendous economic gain from the use of sacred sites increases a State’s reluctance to uphold the fundamental rights of self-determination when applied to indigenous peoples.

From this however, some might argue that these kinds of arguments places sacred sites in the political debate rather than in place for maximum protection and recognition. This maybe true, however, it can be argued that without basic human rights and political expression, nothing else can follow, including true protection. For example, sacred sites despite their recognition and importance to the worlds ecosystem, remain held by secular international actors (i.e. States), that do not necessarily hold these place to be sacred. While on the other hand the peoples that do hold these places to be sacred, generally are not afforded the right to oversee, manage and or control the sites which provides the environment and basis of their the religious expression?

IV. Mauna Kea Is A Temple of Worship

“We have a right to practice our religion in the environment of our belief”

Kamakahuilani von Oelhoffen (Hawaiian Religious Leader)

In English, generally the word “sacred” is applied to describe things of a religious nature or non-secular. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “sacred” as follows:

1 a : dedicated or set apart for the service or worship of a deity <a tree *sacred* to the gods> **b** : devoted exclusively to one service or use (as of a person or purpose) <a fund *sacred* to charity>

2 a : worthy of religious veneration : **HOLY** **b** : entitled to reverence and respect

3 : of or relating to religion : not secular or profane <*sacred* music>

4 *archaic* : **ACCURSED**

5 a : **UNASSAILABLE, INVIOLEABLE** **b** : highly valued and important <a *sacred* responsibility.

Does the above definition of sacredness apply equally to all? In Hawaiian cosmology it is understood that not all sacred places were created by man, in fact, those of the highest order are those that were created by the Heavens, such a place is Mauna Kea. The chants and

stories related to Mauna Kea reveal that this mountain was created by the Gods, to help man learn the ways of the Heavens. This is what establishes it as a sacred site.

In Hawai`i there are many temples both man made and natural. However, there is no temple, or sacred site in Hawai`i that is overseen, managed or controlled by the Hawaiian People. All temples and sacred places in Hawai`i are controlled either by State or Federal agencies, such as the National Park Service or the State's Board of Land and Natural Resources.

The problem with this is that if the same standards were applied to a dominant religion it would be considered outrageous. To fully embrace this inequality, one must only ask would a Christian church be treated the same way. The United States Constitution (the First Amendment) protects not only the people's free exercise of their religion but expressly bars the government from excessive entanglement in religion. While U.S. federal and states laws specifically bar the U.S. from controlling religious practice or use, they continue to control all of the Hawaiian cultural and religious sites, in Hawai`i.

To understand why the Hawaiian people continue to resist U.S. domination and control of their land, we only need look to how other religious institutions under U.S. jurisdiction are handled. Let us look at the Catholic Church. Would the parishioners of a Catholic church give their consent to the U.S. National Park Service to determine and dictate when, where and how they may perform their religious ceremonies? Or would Jewish people upon entering the Synagogue, expect to be greeted by a National Park Ranger in a Smokey the Bear hat, asking what kind of worship they intended to do that day? One need not be a lawyer to understand that the legal standards applied to Hawaiian religious practice are not the same as those applied to other religious practices in Hawai`i, constituting a violation of the law.

Unfortunately however, the reality for the Hawaiian peoples and their relationship with the land of their birth resembles the outrageous examples provided above. Therefore, we maintain, recognition of sacred sites alone without upholding human rights (i.e. religious freedom, and self-determination) of the peoples intimately associated with these sites means that sacred sites will continue to be threatened by the economic market forces of globalization and global environmental sustainability will not be achieved.

We thank you for your time. In Aloha we remain.

References:

Pukui, Mary Kawena and Elbert, Samuel H. 1986 Revised and Enlarged Ed, "Hawaiian Dictionary" University of Hawai'i Press.

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