

Recognizing the importance of traditional protected area systems

Draft Message from WG3 on Culture/Traditions and Protected Areas

Long before governments institutionalised national parks or policies in defining areas worth protecting, societies including those in Asia were already involved in 'traditional' conservation efforts based on the identification and protection of sacred natural sites. These sites were believed to be of important spiritual significance, based on the common belief that the physical and spiritual world were intersected by a "spiritual landscape". These spiritual and religious-based phenomena have evolved traditionally and are considered to be the fundamental pre-conditions which led to the conservation and protection of these areas. In many countries, sacred natural sites have been shown to have a major effect on conservation, ecology and environment due to the special precautions and restrictions associated with them.

In the Asian setting, nature and culture have been woven together naturally like a single tapestry which embodies the concept of cultural landscape. Essentially it endogenously features an eternal relationship between the natural environment, humans and their culture. More often than not, Asian traditions and beliefs have been shaped by the merging of indigenous animism with mainstream religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity which are evident in Thailand, India, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Through time, the natural amalgam of sacred natural sites and their richness in species and biodiversity have secured these areas to be protected by local custodians such as indigenous peoples and ethnic communities. Ever since the 3rd. Worlds Parks Congress in Bali in 1987, a more inclusive approach towards protected area management has evolved, which has included approaches such as co-management and community conserved areas (now Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas – ICCAs). Custodians of sacred natural sites have essentially been recognised by various international agencies and organisations in terms of their intrinsic rights for productive interaction with biodiversity. This iconoclastic approach is divorced from the previous 'old paradigm' or non-human interventionist policy .

Sacred Natural Sites

In traditional societies, oral stories and myths, especially in relation to their surrounding natural environment, are handed down from generation to generation, which created the awareness and recognition of the presence of sacred natural sites. These sacred natural sites are supposed to contain 'numina' or spirits, deities or holy presence, which are highly respected and protected by the community even though they do not have legal jurisdiction over them.

In the physical form, sacred natural sites may include forests, water bodies, caves, and vegetation within and its proximities. In addition, sacred natural sites have spiritual attributes according to a particular religion or belief system, or set aside for spiritual purposes which were arguably established by indigenous people, ethnic folk religions and spiritualities or mainstream religion co-optation. In essence, sacred natural places and spiritual landscapes have been created through traditional beliefs and taboos, and traditional societies in Asia

believed that bad things would happen to them if such places are violated. Therefore, making the ecological richness of sacred areas worth conserving and protecting.

Utilization of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in protected area management

Asia's traditional approaches or Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) are now considered as being compatible with contemporary (and scientific) approaches to resource management such as Adaptive Management. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is 'local knowledge' that is based on the endemic traditions, cultures or beliefs of a particular local community or residents. Traditional Ecological Knowledge is often seen as being local and holistic which integrates both the physical and spiritual worldviews with emphasis on the practical application of skills and knowledge.

Essentially, Asia's traditional approaches such as Satoyama (Japan), Tagal (Sabah, Malaysia), Subak (Bali, Indonesia) and Kattudel (Sri Lanka) resonate well with progress in other parts of the world in relation to complementing mainstream approaches with traditional ecological knowledge to marvel at the "extraordinary similarity of basic designs shared by different cultures in comparable ecosystems worldwide, coupled with remarkable diversity in practice even in adjacent areas".

Protected areas management and the livelihood of local people

We can observe both of sacred natural sites and TEK regardless of the legal status of the land. It means that these two are topic oriented sub themes. Each country, however, has legally-designated protected areas such as national park. Then we should consider legal status oriented sub themes: management of inside and outside the protected areas.

The designation of protected areas affect various stakeholders, especially the local inhabitants who depend on the natural resources and land for their livelihood. Depending on the planning process adopted by a particular country (top down or bottom up/participatory), the local community may or may not be involved in the process of determining the geographical boundary of PAs or the scope as well as the extent of the protection measures.

In the case of a top down approach, there is always a lack of integration with traditional land uses and activities within and surrounding PAs, which could lead to conflicts in terms of management effectiveness. As demonstrated in many cases of PAs in Asia, the encroachment by local communities into legally established PAs is a common occurrence, which is often due to necessity forced upon by poverty. Various stakeholders are involved in areas designated as protected areas. In particular, their livelihood of local inhabitants who hunt and carry out various forms of agriculture has come into conflict with protected areas management. Besides this, various stakeholders such as people involved in illegal logging, development enterprises, and government agencies have often caused conflicts.

Customary management of satoyama-satoumi (Socio-Ecological Production Landscape and Seascape)

Areas that are not designated as protected areas also include natural environments that are used and managed customarily by local communities. Rural communities have used and managed the natural resources in a sustainable manner, based on certain rules such as customary law. As a result, a rich natural environment equivalent to that in protected areas has often been maintained.

Satoyama is an ancient Japanese concept of traditional land management methods and practices for effective use and maintenance of resource landscapes dating back to the 17th century. Satoyama was used to support traditional agricultural practices as a source of fodder, leaves, and other biological component as fertilizer that supported traditional sustainable agriculture in the rural areas in Japan. Human interaction with Satoyama has enhanced its productivity for food, compost, and wood and fuel wood. In woodlands areas, selected trees were cut periodically for wood or charcoal but retaining the roots and stumps to re-grow as secondary forests.. Outside of Japan, the concept of Satoyama has been gaining popularity given that it is synonymous with nature and biodiversity conservation.

The Satoyama Initiative for the revitalisation of Satoyama ecosystems has employed a three-pronged approach for rebuilding and maintaining these landscapes through “an international platform for sharing knowledge and experiences in terms of biodiversity conservation, sustainable community, environmental and landscape management issues”.. The Satoyama Initiative can be best described as a community-based model of sustainable and efficient use of natural resources which promotes the sustainable use of biodiversity as models of sustainable natural resource management based on the benefits of living in harmony with nature.

Therefore, PARTICIPANTS in the Working Group on Cultures/Traditions and Protected Areas at the 1st Asia Parks Congress, in Sendai, Japan (14- 17 November, 2013) commend to those international organizations, governments, NGOs, CBOs, businesses and donors who influence directly and indirectly the future of protected areas the following set of best practice protected area policy and management principles:

- To recognise the contribution of Asia’s traditional ecological knowledge in complementing mainstream approaches in biodiversity conservation towards achieving the Aichi Targets
- To adopt a more participatory approach by having an institutional and governance framework with clear channels of communication that include local and indigenous people in the decision making process
- To enhance the capacity of the local and indigenous communities to be effective joint custodians of protected areas
- To educate the youths in Asia to be aware, appreciate and rediscover the region’s ancient wisdom and traditional ecological knowledge as having the potential of complementing Western approaches in tackling contemporary environmental issues such as global warming, climate change and natural disasters etc.
- To intensify and integrate research related to the wealth of traditional ecological knowledge in Asia to be stored in an online repository for common reference
- To harness traditional ecological knowledge with the use of technology by leveraging on Asia’s growing technological prowess

Conclusion

In Asia, there are various models of protected area management that it may not be possible

to declare that there is a Pan Asian model of protected areas management.

Policy makers in Asia should rediscover and celebrate Asia's ancient wisdom and traditional knowledge by realigning the governance, strategies and mechanisms for PA management in their own countries to be more inclusive and effective. In this respect, the Protected Areas Management Effectiveness Review revealed that conservation is more effective if it is integrated with local norms, values and community rights. This could be achieved by formal recognition of sacred natural sites which will assist in empowering the local and indigenous communities as joint-custodians of protected areas. Subsequently this approach could be scaled up once governments and policy makers in Asia fully embrace ICCAs as an effective approach towards co-management.

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