

Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas

Since time immemorial there have been places that held a special meaning, be this as a special place for hunting, where water was available year round, endowed with special healing powers or of special spiritual or cultural significance. Many of these places were considered of such importance that they became protected places. A protected place does not necessarily mean that there is fenced but that the protection relates to a significance given to a single place or to a whole area. Specific to this then special rules and regulations were created.

Today there are over 100'000 protected areas and these include World Heritage Sites, Biosphere Reserves and conservation areas, with the smallest one being just 10 square kilometers and the biggest are being 970'000 square kilometers.

However, after the success of the protection of natural areas, a need arose to extend protection to historical sites that were in danger. In 1955 UNESCO⁽¹⁾ launched a campaign in order to safeguard treasures of ancient Egypt that were in danger of disappearing forever, due to the building of the Aswan High Dam. In 1965 the USA proposed the idea of combining cultural conservation with nature conservation and called for the creation of a World Heritage Trust in order to preserve "the world's superb natural and scenic areas and historic sites for the present and the future of the entire world citizenry." IUCN developed a similar proposal in 1986 and these proposals were presented to the UN Conference on Human Environment in 1972 where a single text was agreed on as the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage⁽²⁾ and adopted that same year. Today 186 state parties have ratified this.

Twenty years later the concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH)⁽³⁾ emerged as a counterpart to the World Heritage⁽⁴⁾ that focuses mainly on tangible aspects of culture. The Intangible Heritage Convention⁽⁵⁾ was adopted in 2003 and became in a short time a fully operational legal instrument that 147 countries have now ratified.

While natural criteria are relatively easy to define, the definition of (non-physical) cultural criteria are much more 'intangible' due to the great variety of cultures upon this earth, but also due to historic consideration, as some cultural traditions have their source in civilizations that have long since disappeared, but whose traditions are still alive and with us today, as they have been passed on, either orally or in writing. They are also more difficult to define depending on who is *defining* these. It is therefore of the utmost importance for such work to be multi-tasked, to have different approaches and to include a variety of peoples, especially including those whose traditions are being considered.

UNESCO, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) have all played an important role in bringing together and disseminating methodologies for the identification and quantification of the economic values of protected areas and in providing guidelines for managing protected natural areas and world heritage sites. But much work still remains to be done, e.g. to identify, define, and provide guidelines for managing the Cultural and Spiritual dimensions of protected areas. This work is accomplished through a Specialist Group under the umbrella of WCPA.

⁽¹⁾ UNESCO – UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization <http://portal.unesco.org/en>

⁽²⁾ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Heritage_Convention)

⁽³⁾ intangible cultural heritage (ICH) - (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00002>)

⁽⁴⁾ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Heritage

⁽⁵⁾ The Intangible Heritage Convention - <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00006>

Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas: The Eremi of Roccasecca

The Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas “Eremi di Roccasecca” is a project that the Foundation for Gaia initiated and discussed with a number of NGOs and their related agencies. The purpose was to bring to the attention of IUCN, WCPA, CSVPA and the Delos Initiative the cultural and spiritual values of the 2 Eremi at Roccasecca and to make the town council aware of the importance of these two cultural & spiritual sites of which one is on a locally protected AIW Wilderness Area and to help with the identifying and managing the cultural and spiritual attributes and values of this protected area as a means of maximizing their contribution to society.



Equally distanced from Rome and Naples and situated between two extremely well-known Benedictine Monasteries: the Abbey of Monte Cassino and the Monasteries in Subiaco, Roccasecca is famous for being Tommaso d'Aquino's birthplace.



Situated on the slopes above the Melfa river, the hermitage *Eremo dello Spirito Santo*, also called the *Eremo della Santissima Trinità*, dates back to the 8-9th century and has been in use till the 1950's. Located in an area that was already inhabited in prehistoric times, with Neolithic burial sites, some roman temples and Bronze Age utensils found in nearby grottos, this cenobite hermitage comprises a number of hermit cells, a very sophisticated and organised water system with cistern, an oven and a garden where a derelict tree still manages to grow pears of a very rare and ancient species.

The sanctuary church has been renovated and once a year people from many regions come here on pilgrimage as well as it being used regularly by the local community.



Not yet under local protection, there is a further hermitage that can be traced back to the arrival in 580 of the Longobards in Aquino and Monte Cassino and their cult of Saint Michael. It was subsequently transformed into a rupestrian church and houses some beautiful affrescos, amongst them an 11th century Cristo Pantocrator rock affresco by the Byzantine-Benedictine school. An older 9th century affresco has been transferred in order to protect it from the ravages of exposure to the open air and the humidity of the rocks. It represents a particularly rare Crucifixion scene as the Christ is dressed in a Longobardian tunic and the soldier Longino who pierced the side of Christ, but later converted to Christianity, is here seen with a rope instead of a lance and wears a pair of “cioce”, the typical footwear of the inhabitants of Ciociaria. Following the visit by our Executive Trustee Vita de Waal, the Council of Roccasecca is currently discussing with AIW to put also another part of territory under local protection as a Wilderness Area. This part would also comprise the Castle that belonged to the family of Thomas d’Aquino and where he was born. The project is ongoing and expanding.