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ENVIRONMENT
and
ECONOMIC, SOCIAL and CULTURAL RIGHTS

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Palais des Nations, Switzerland

Panellists

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GEF Project on Biodiversity Rich Sacred Natural Sites

Mrs. Beatriz Schulthess

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Co-President, World Conference of Religions for Peace

Mr. Alex Walker

Director, The Findhorn Foundation
Chair, Development Trusts Association Scotland

Mr. Franco Zunino

General Secretary, Associazione Italiana Wilderness (AIW)
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Moderator

Ms. Vita de Waal

Planetary Association for Clean Energy. Foundation for GAIA,
Chair, NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns

The world's biological diversity is in peril. The *Biological 17* are 17 nations that contain more than 2/3 of the Earth's biological resources. They are also the areas of highest biological diversity and are the traditional territories of most of the world's indigenous peoples. The objective of this event is to make visible the links between sustainable development, resource management and the need for economic, social and cultural environmental rights. A new holistic approach to the environment is urgently required.

Mr. Gonzalo Oviedo

Social Policy Advisor, IUCN Secretariat
GEF Project on Biodiversity Rich Sacred Natural Sites



Further information

www.iucn.org

Recapitulation on Major Points of Presentation:

IUCN Goal and Objectives on SNS

•Achieve improved understanding, recognition, and conservation of sacred natural sites (SNS) worldwide

- Gain knowledge and promote awareness about SNS in the world
- Promote and support development of legal and policy frameworks at the global level
- Mobilize legal, political, financial, and technical support for the long-term protection and effective management of SNS at the national level
- Help build the capacity of those involved in management of SNS
- Offer technical tools

Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples

- As a general rule, all traditional cultures have established sacred sites where human activities are restricted. Maybe this started with burial grounds.
- Sacred natural sites are natural places recognized by indigenous and traditional peoples as having spiritual or religious significance.
- (They can be also natural sites established by institutionalised religions or faiths as places for worship and remembrance - but we are not dealing with these here).
- They can be mountains, rivers, lakes, caves, forest groves, coastal waters and entire islands.
- The reasons for their sacredness are diverse. They may be perceived as abodes of deities and ancestral spirits; as sources of healing water and plants; places of contact with the spiritual, or communication with the 'beyond-human' reality; and sites of revelation and transformation.

Background

- Sacred natural sites (SNS) are natural areas of special spiritual significance to peoples and communities. They include: (i) natural areas recognized as sacred by indigenous and traditional peoples, as well as (ii) natural areas recognized by institutionalized religions or faiths as places for worship and remembrance.
- There are basically two types of problems regarding SNS of indigenous and traditional peoples: (i) many face threats from outside and lack protection and support, including because of lack of security of community livelihoods and cultures; (ii) some are protected as they fall within official protected areas, but communities have lost rights on them
- The problems related to security of rights clearly distinguish the situation of SNS of indigenous and traditional peoples from those of religious institutions
- As a result, in policy discussions there is a clear sentiment that SNS of indigenous and traditional peoples are in a more difficult situation than those of religious

institutions, because they are doubly affected: by insecurity of rights, and by external threats

•This has led to more attention given in policy discussions to SNS of indigenous and traditional peoples – without necessarily good results so far.

Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples

•As a result of access restrictions, many sacred places have served as important reservoirs of biological diversity. Sacred natural sites such as forest groves, mountains and rivers, are often visible in the landscape as vegetation-rich ecosystems, contrasting dramatically from adjoining, non-sacred, degraded environments.

•Sacred natural sites vary in size, biodiversity value and tenurial status. They can be very small areas within private lands. But whole landscapes can be also viewed as sacred.

•Taken alone, the significance of smaller sites may be quite limited for biodiversity conservation, but taken together they can represent sizeable protected areas. For example, it is estimated that there are between 100,000 and 150,000 sacred groves throughout India.

•Despite their obvious contributions to biodiversity conservation, many sacred natural sites have not received legal protection and are threatened. Others have been taken over from their traditional owners and incorporated in formal protected areas, with mostly negative consequences.

Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples

- Sense of sacredness associated with place
- Identifiable religious authority in charge
- Limited access and restricted use
- Contributions to livelihoods
- Undisturbed or little disturbed nature
- Variable size
- Variable tenure
- High degree of acceptance and respect from communities
- Threatened status
- Need for appropriate legal protection

A Vision for Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples

•The sacred natural sites of indigenous and traditional peoples of the world will be recognized as an integral part of conservation networks, contributing to their expansion and effective management.

•Such recognition will be supported by international and national policy frameworks, based on the acknowledgement of the conservation value of sacred natural sites, and based on the free and informed consent and interest of their traditional custodians.

•Such integration will be also based on the recognition of the rights of indigenous and traditional peoples as the legitimate owners and primary managers of those sites.

IUCN Goal and Objectives on SNS

•**Achieve improved understanding, recognition, and conservation of sacred natural sites (SNS) worldwide**

–Gain knowledge and promote awareness about SNS in the world

–Promote and support development of legal and policy frameworks at the global level

–Mobilize legal, political, financial, and technical support for the long-term protection and effective management of SNS at the national level

–Help build the capacity of those involved in management of SNS

–Offer technical tools



Mr. Alex Walker

Director, The Findhorn Foundation
Chair, Development Trusts Association Scotland

Further information

www.ecovillagefindhorn.com/

www.findhorn.org/

<http://www.ekopia-findhorn.org/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Findhorn_Ecovillage

<http://gen.ecovillage.org/>

The Findhorn Community is more than 45 years old now, having been founded in 1962 in the unlikely location of a caravan park, which remains the main campus. Located in remote rural area of northern Scotland, there are now more than 500 residents and a wide variety of different community organisations and business. The community is part of the Global Ecovillage Network, whose main principles are economic, environmental and cultural sustainability. It is important to add in the context of statements made by the earlier speakers that the community has an international profile and a non-denominational spiritual background. The local area includes both settled locations and wilderness, and the community is seen by many of its residents as evoking a modern “sacred landscape”.

In order to create a low-impact community, a significant collective aim since the early 1980s, four main activities have been to the fore. These are building construction techniques, the production of renewable energy, low impact infrastructure and consideration of the local economy.

A wide variety of building experiments have been undertaken, many of which are now entering mainstream architecture. The main method of creating renewable energy has been through wind power (the main campus is a net exporter of electricity from renewable sources). There are also biomass boilers, solar hot water panels and a wide variety of other techniques both in use and under consideration.

Infrastructure completed includes a living machine (TM) waste water treatment plant, a private electricity grid and attempts to emphasise bicycle and pedestrian circulation rather than motor vehicles. The main thrust of economic activity has been to emphasise wherever possible localisation e.g. through growing and consuming organic foods produced in the area and encouraging local crafts etc. - we even have our own local currency - the Eko.

The significance of the accumulated impact of this work is of note. Little of what occurs at Findhorn Ecovillage is unique but the combination of so many different technologies and activities together has created a genuinely low impact lifestyle.

The UK’s average ‘ecological footprint’ is 5.4 global hectares per head (gha). The ecovillage’s is only 2.78 gha, which as far as we know is the lowest every measured in the industrialised world – quite an achievement for a small rural community. We can therefore say that if one of the more important questions facing the western world at present is – can a western lifestyle be had from within the capacity of the planet to sustain it indefinitely? – the answer would appear to be “yes” if sufficient care and planning is undertaken.

Mr. Franco Zunino

General Secretary, Associazione Italiana Wilderness
(AIW)
Senior Adviser, Listening Point Foundation

Further information
www.wilderness.it



Wilderness

The concept of Wilderness has its philosophical foundations in the thoughts of men like Thoreau and Emerson who were the first ones that transformed into a philosophical concept the need of individuals to search in nature satisfactions that were not only material but also spiritual, also if it was through the practicalities on the material level that they felt the need to explore the spiritual dimensions. But these foundations were born out of their experience and knowledge of a world they inhabited, America, still being in a pristine state and where the clash of civilisations had only begun.

The spirituality that Thoreau went in search of when he experienced his *Walden* moment (of complete at-one-ment with nature) and which he then describes in the book that made him famous, was probably not dissimilar from that of the native Americans, different was only the cultural substrata.

The most famous example of Wilderness philosophy transmitted into the Western culture therefore became that of the Red Indians who the white colonisers discovered being intrinsically linked to this natural pristine and wild world in which they lived and which they as white people discovered for the first time, a wild-ness which they defined as Wilderness, a word that for those who in this natural wild-ness lived did not make much sense because what the white man described as wilderness was *their* world, *their* daily reality and maybe for them the 'wild ones' were in fact those invaders who did not respect the natural world and which those colonisers wanted to owe materially, as they unfortunately managed to do.

Charles A. Eastman (Ohiyesa 'Oh hee' yay suh'), from the Sioux Santee Dakota nation, was one of those. Years later he wrote in his *Memories of an Indian Boyhood* of his daily life in this natural wild-ness and that these white colonisers called wilderness, but with a complete negative connotation, meaning a desolate, empty and lonely space, a concept they only later discovered to be wrong and conditioned by their culture and their so-called civilised world.

I would like to cite some passages of this book from which the intimate relationship transpires that the native people have with their surroundings and that for its expressive strength evokes the real spirit of the wild spaces, of *real* Wilderness, more than the writings of famous philosophers and/or thinkers: of the individual as part of the circle of life in a primal and authentic scenery of which happiness was a natural outcome. Its importance lies in the fact that while it was first published in 1902, today it seems to be written by a philosopher who wants to emphasise the ancient link of the native people with the natural world. In reality, the dept of that which is expressed is born out of its authenticity and *not* out of historical memories. Ohiyesa talks about his

emotions and sensations he experienced till he was 15 years old and when he was forced to leave his native land for life with the pale-faces. Among the many other things he wrote:

As our cone-shaped teepees rose in clusters along the outskirts of the heavy forest that clothes the sloping side of the mountain, the scene below was gratifying to a savage eye. The rolling yellow plains were checkered with herds of buffaloes. Deer, too, were plenty, and the brooks were alive with trout. In the interior of the forest there were lakes with many islands, where moose, elk, bears were abundant. The waterfowl were wont to gather here in great numbers. To me, as a boy, this wilderness was a paradise. It was a land of plenty. To be sure, we did not have any of the luxuries of civilization, but we had every convenience and opportunity and luxury of Nature. We had also the gift of enjoying our good fortune, whatever dangers might lurk about us; and the truth is that we lived in blessed ignorance of any life that was better than our own. As a rule, the hunters started before sunrise, and the brave who was announced throughout the camp as the first one to return with a deer on his back, was a man to be envied. At last, toward the close of the afternoon, all the hunters had returned, and happiness and contentment reigned absolute, in a fashion which I have never observed among the white people, even in the best of circumstances.

The white people discovered the spiritual value of pristine wild nature, of wilderness, only much later; when some started realizing that they might be losing these spaces forever, and with them the big resources of biodiversity that wilderness contains.

“Wilderness is both a condition of physical geography and a state of mind which varies from one individual to the next. It is part of the eternal search for truth that involves man’s desire to know himself and his Creator”.

This is the most beautiful definition of the wilderness philosophy, a definition that is common to all religions and peoples of this world. It has been coined by an anonymous functionary of the US Forest Service when presenting a publication that illustrated that what they define the *wilderness resource*; the totality of areas that in that country are and continue to be preserved for their intrinsic value. This publication is entitled “Looking for Solitude”, a need that modern society often abhors, but that the individual needs to rebalance the spirit, drunk from the cities full of chaos, pollution and stress.

During the 1st World Wilderness Congress that was held in 1977 in South Africa, the then Elder of the Zulu nation, Mangosuthu Buthelezi and today president of the state of Kwa Zulu, said to Congress *“I believe the wilderness experience is necessary in the development of all people. In the wilderness barriers fall away and we can all see each other for what we are worth. If more leaders of the world could meet in the tranquility of the wilderness, I believe a better understanding would grow”.*

Today we speak of wilderness mainly as areas that need to be kept wild in order to preserve the world’s biodiversity; this is a wise and just decision, also because many protected areas that exist cater to interests that are not environmental at all and are more like enterprises that cater to jobs, tourism and business and where nature conservation, which was supposed to be their priority, has been placed at the very end.

This is sadly true in my country Italy, but also in many other parts of Europe.

In 1964 the USA, as the first country that defended wilderness, approved the historical Wilderness Act that protected not only areas of unprotected wilderness but also areas of wilderness inside National Parks and other protected areas guaranteed by the managers of these and also by governments. And so, with the preservation of the land we are preserving the spiritual need of man as well. Because to preserve areas as

they were and as we remember them is also the only way to stop time. Nothing is worse and more depressing than to return to a well known and much loved place only to find it ruined, if not destroyed, by society. The only way that each generation can leave a real heritage for those that come after, so as to remind them of our roots, those wilderness roots that one of the fathers of the wilderness conservation movement, Aldo Leopold, defined *the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization*. It was Leopold who in *Earth Ethics* laid down the fundamental rules of conservation. The wilderness concept that has its roots in his philosophy is as follows: a halt to the human imposed by the human, not as a penalty but so that there can be spiritual growth, to preserve with the natural values also the spiritual values, intangible nourishment that he needs for his physical well-being. Today Wilderness means also *forever wild*, spaces to leave untouched forever, spaces where natural life can continue without interference by men, without modifying or be used to satisfy men's material lust; spaces where priority is given to *Nature*, a nature with all its prerogatives and characteristics, which is ultimately, biodiversity.

A wise society does not only need to establish how much and where to develop, but also when and where to stop this development, this expansion. Wilderness spaces are such areas where such a limitation is required. *Something is just when it preserves the integrity, the stability and the beauty of the biological community. It is wrong when the reverse happens. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.* said Aldo Leopold.

In my country, but maybe even in Europe, I have been the first one to try to spread this philosophy that is indeed anthropocentric, but whose practical result without man has no reason to exist, fascinated as he is by the concept that the wilderness philosophy contains of the *forever wild*, and which guarantees that some spaces are left intact in perpetuity and which no other legal document in the world has been able to do as the American *Wilderness Act*.

It was the ideas of what I call the practical philosophers of conservationism that made this possible. Aldo Leopold said that *wilderness is a resource that can diminish but never augment. The destruction can be blocked or limited in such a way as to still allow the area to be viable for plant and animal life or for recreation or for science, but the creation of real new wilderness is impossible* and Robert Marshall: *there is only one hope to push back this tyrannical ambition of modern society to conquer each and every space on this earth. This hope lies in the coming together of those who have a spiritual sensitivity to fight for the freedom of nature to continue*. While these two men inspired me to create the Associazione Wilderness in my country Italy, so that it would dedicate itself to designate what today are the first real Wilderness areas on the old continent, it was through the thoughts of the best known writer on wild spaces. Sigurd Olson, that at last I recognised myself, my ideas, my vision of the natural world, a world of which I was in need and which I will need spiritually also the day that I shall not be able to experience it, to live it. And this demonstrates to me that at the end of our lives the real values are only those spiritual ones that were the ones with which we started out on this journey. Sigurd Olson wrote: *“What has kept me in the woods all of these years is the love of beauty. If I was watching a beaver it was not the beaver and its habits as much as it was the light on the pool, the dark mystery of the forest around the pool, the symmetry of the dam. If I was trailing a deer, it was not so much the habits of the deer as it was the vistas I gained along the ridges and through the trees. If it was ducks, it was more than anything else the view of a flock against the sunset or dawn in the rice rather than the birds themselves. In other words it was the scene as a whole which drew me and that I mistook for a keen interest in natural history for lack of a better explanation”*.

This is Wilderness. This is the sense of its philosophy that should not be confused with the concept of conservation. Because *forever wild* is the only real principle of conservation that makes this philosophy so great.



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Presentation Coming Soon