



Diversity of sacred lands and meanings in Northern Europe: Challenges for the managers of protected areas

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Introduction

In this paper based on the opening statement of the third workshop of the Delos Initiative, the sacred natural sites are considered from the protected area practitioner's point of view. Why should the protected areas, national parks and protected area agencies be interested in the sacred dimension of the protected areas? How can the spiritual values be taken into account in the design, management and monitoring of the protected areas? The aim is to show that, although the conservation of the integrity of sacred natural sites may be challenging, it provides parks professionals with a lot of

opportunities and may bring in new and rewarding insights into the interpretation and communication of the diverse values of the parks.

Most of the examples and experiences presented in this paper come from Northern Europe and, especially, from Finland, a sparsely populated forested country with a small indigenous Sámi minority in the north. In Finland, most protected areas lie on the state-owned lands and are managed by a single agency, i.e. Metsähallitus Natural Heritage Services. The management is based on standardised and regularly updated principles of the management of protected areas, as well as on legis-

< Koli National Park is of great historical significance as a sacred site and has contemporary significance as a national landscape, both contributing to the Finnish identity

lation and management plans compiled using the participatory approach, which emphasises the role of local and indigenous communities. Altogether the Natural Heritage Services manages four million hectares of lands, including 37 national parks, 19 strict nature reserves, 500 other nature reserves and 12 wilderness areas, as well as three million hectares of public waters, mostly in the coastal areas of the Baltic Sea. In order to investigate and preserve cultural heritage, Natural Heritage Services works in close cooperation with the Ministries and the National Board of Antiquities.

The overlooked sacred dimension of protected areas in Northern Europe

The spiritual values of protected areas have been largely overlooked by the park managers and protected area agencies in developed countries, although the spiritual values of indigenous people in developing countries has received a reasonable amount of attention. There may not be any individual reason for that, but it is possible to find an explanation from the predominantly materialistic worldview related to the modern western culture.

In Northern Europe, many people belong to the predominant Lutheran Church just for practical or purely traditional reasons. The culture is highly secularised. Consequently, it is difficult to communicate on religious or spiritual matters, especially for natural scientists like biologists or foresters, without losing professional credibility. The

managers of protected areas are usually biologists and foresters. So it is not surprising that the natural resources and species of protected areas are often systematically investigated and their features and values are generally relatively well-known and communicated, while the cultural and landscape values are not, and the sacred dimension has been largely neglected.

The Kalevala, the national epic of Finland, is a nineteenth century work of epic poetry compiled by Elias Lönnroth from the Finnish and Karelian oral folklore and mythology. It has played an instrumental role in the development of the Finnish national identity. Even the ancient poems of the Kalevala emphasise the role of common sense, practical knowledge, skills and understanding, instead of metaphysics or religion. In spite of this, people still used to show great respect to nature, e.g. when asking politely nature for some catch for hunters and fishermen and forgiveness when killing wild animals. It was only Christianity, first the Roman Catholic and then the Lutheran Church, that started the alienation from nature and changed the relationship towards a more utilitarian one. Parallel ideological impacts were caused by the development of positivism, materialism and modern materialistic science. The alienation process was greatly enhanced by the industrialisation and associated urbanisation and 'virtualisation', which together have reduced the role of nature to be mainly a source of natural resources for people and businesses, hardly with anything sacred for the politicians and decision-makers.



A rock painting portraying an elk from Kolovesi National Park in Eastern Finland.

However, at a very personal level, the Finns as a nation seem to have an unusually pious and ardent, and at the same time very practical, connection to nature. Thus, visitors of the parks commonly experience at the personal level something spiritually valuable, unity with nature, and maybe with God present in nature. Protected areas clearly have more value for the people than the sum of their species, habitats and ecosystems.

According to an expert of the Finnish protected areas agency, during the interpretation of the values of parks, 'we proudly present our cultural and historical sites, but strictly avoid all connections to the Lutheran church or other religious matters'. In order to make it easier to communicate the sacred dimension of protected areas to visitors and the public at large in a culturally appropriate way, it may be helpful to notice the faint distinction between the concepts 'religious' and 'spiritual'. The latter can be used in context when referring to the personal perception of

nature without causing sensitive confrontations with a person's religious opinions. Tools, best practices and techniques are needed to better understand, investigate, manage and communicate the spiritual and cultural values of protected areas.

Sacred natural sites in the management planning of protected areas

Sacred natural sites are taken into account at varying degrees in Northern European protected areas. In Finland, there are three cases in which the spiritual dimension plays an important role: (1) ancient monuments and sites, (2) areas culturally or spiritually valuable for the Sámi people, and (3) special natural attractions or landscape formations which were used as sacred sites and/or have contemporary spiritual values.

The ancient monuments and sites of the Sámi and other Finns are all automati-

cally protected by the law, and the protection is complemented by social respect. Some rock paintings apparently have had a spiritual role. There are a lot of rock paintings known, for instance, from Kolovesi National Park and Hossa National Recreational Area. For example, the elk is considered to be a sacred animal and there are a lot of rock paintings portraying it. Rock paintings may have had also 'practical' objectives, such as marking the boundaries between different groups of people and improving hunting success.

Spectacular natural attractions or landscape formations often had earlier significance as sacred sites as shown by both the etymological analyses of the site names and the archaeological studies of the sites. They are also commonly considered special places by experts and the public at large because of their beauty, cultural or landscape values. It is not only the sacred site itself in the strict sense, but also the wider landscape around it which contributes to the experience of the

spiritual dimension providing placid space with silence, scenery and dark skies with stars and northern lights. The Western European national romantic idea of national landscapes is also strong in present-day Finland.

It may be noted that even though large areas in the Sámi homeland have been legally designated as wilderness areas (IUCN Category Ib or VI, depending on the interpretation of the criteria), national parks (IUCN Category II) or strict nature reserves (IUCN Category Ia), they include sites and wider landscapes which are of a great cultural or spiritual value for the Sámi people. Such values are, by no means, restricted to the IUCN Category V protected landscapes which have received much more attention (Mallarach 2008).

The names of places reveal the sacred nature of sites

Although largely forgotten and overlooked, the sacred sites are not rare in

Pyhä-Häkki National Park in Central Finland is known for its impressive old-growth forests.



the protected areas of Finland. In fact, they are amazingly common. This is clearly indicated by the names of sites and their etymology. Many sites have been sacred to our ancestors, and many of them still have some spiritual significance to contemporary people.

The meaning of the names referring to spiritual values has often changed or been forgotten during the centuries. Sometimes the conceptual changes have been linked with historical events and associated with cultural and religious changes. In many cases, there are contrasting and fascinating interpretations by various experts. The words *'pyhä'* and *'hiisi'* provide illustrative examples.

The Finnish word *'pyhä'* means 'sacred' or 'holy'. It is a Germanic loan from around 3000 years ago. In Finland, there are at least 42 lakes, 26 hills (*'mäki'*, *'vaara'*), 22 peninsulas, 18 ponds, 15 rivers, 11 bays and 9 mountains with the prefix *'pyhä'* (Lounema 2003). Examples include Pyhäntunturi Fell in Pyhä-Luosto National Park and Pyhäkero Fell in Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park, as well as Pyhä-Häkki National Park in Central Finland.

According to one interpretation (Lounema 2003), the original meaning of *'pyhä'* for the ancient Finns was a clearly visible landscape character bordering the familiar inhabited area and the external wilderness. This meaning may have been associated with or gradually changed towards dangerous or forbidden. *'Pyhä'* may also have referred to something sa-

cred, with a restricted access permitted only to a small circle of people, e.g. shamans (Y. Norokorpi, personal communication, 2010). Similarly, 'sacred' has the connotation of set aside, separated or restricted in many other languages, e.g. Greek and Latin and its derivatives. Some parts of sacred groves may have been forbidden and fenced, so that only sacrifices may have been thrown there from outside.

It is interesting to notice that in the Finnish language, the word *'pyhä'* is related to the word *'piha'*, meaning a yard, courtyard or garden. While the constitutional everyman's right of free access covers almost all public and private areas in Finland, the right excludes *'piha'* areas which are reserved only for private use. Thus, the concept *'piha'* seems to have retained some original elements of *'pyhä'*.

The Christian mission in the present Nordic countries was started in the eighth century. It took a longer time for the Christian faith to get an official position in Finland than elsewhere in the Nordic countries, which became Christian in the tenth century. In a papal letter in 1209, Finland was mentioned to have been recently converted to Christianity. However, it was a long process, and the elimination of some of the old 'pagan' beliefs was gradual, only complemented by the Lutheran Church several centuries later. During the process, the Christian faith successfully reserved the word *'pyhä'* for itself and for God. In the Christian context, the prefix *'pyhä'* means good, respected and holy (even a Saint and holidays).



Hiidenportti National Park with its deep gorges in Eastern Finland.

Thus, the concept *'pyhä'* seem to have evolved into a 'positive' direction and it has lost most of its meaning as something forbidden or dangerous.

Another example, the nowadays less common word *'hiisi'*, is similar to *'pyhä'* in many respects, but its conceptual evolution has been strikingly different. The original meaning of *'hiisi'* is an ancient sacred grove, a place of sacrifice and burial (but it has also a commonly known meaning of a spiritual being). In Finland, there are at least 50 hills, 36 peninsulas, 32 ponds, 29 mountains, 25 bays, 16 islands, 12 mires and 12 natural 'gates' or gorges with the prefix *'hiisi'* or its genitive *'hiiden'* (Lounema 2003).

In 1229, when Finland was under the protection of the Holy Seat (and not yet part of the Kingdom of Sweden), Pope Gregorius IX prescribed by a papal bull that all the 'pagan' sacred groves had to be confiscated by the Church. And, so it happened at least in the

southern part of the country, where the great majority of the very small population lived. However, the sites could still serve as graveyards, when they were consecrated for Christianity. Consequently, the concept changed into something remote and scary, rocky wilderness, and finally Devil! The saying *'Hiisi vieköön!'* means 'What the dickens!', and *'Painu hiiteen!'* means 'Go to blazes! Interestingly, the ancient meaning of the word *'hiisi'* has not recovered in the secularised Finnish society, whereas the latter negative meaning of the word is still commonly used.

Challenges in conserving the integrity of sacred sites

The aim of the management of the protected areas is to conserve the integrity of natural and cultural values of the areas. The management should be science-based. In Finland, the inventory,

management and conservation of the integrity of valuable cultural and sacred sites is an on-going process associated with the management planning of individual protected areas (Heinonen, 2007). In addition, a nationwide systematic inventory of the cultural values of forests is included in the implementation of Finland's National Forest Programme 2015. However, some spiritual management-related issues go beyond inventories and are more connected to the perception of sites by the people, and consequently, easily neglected by park managers.

In the Sámi homeland, comprehensive inventories of the values of the areas are carried out, associated with the management planning cycle of the wilderness areas, national parks and other protected areas. The management planning is a participatory process in which the sacred sites are taken into account in a way usually proposed by the Saami Parliament. Due to the privacy of the sacred sites, it is not certain that all the sites are known to the authorities. However, the management of the areas is based on management plans, and prior to all changes in the management plans, the Saami Parliament and other stakeholders are consulted so that these values are respected and not harmed. However, it remains an open question, whether some areas should be classified as sacred natural sites for the Sámi people. It might have some significance, for example, when designing the protected area network or the management activities and visitor management of individual parks. If a

natural site has a remarkable contemporary value as a sacred site, it would be reasonable to restrict its use for inappropriate purposes.

Often individual people or groups of people feel a strong belonging or spiritual interconnectedness to some natural sites or protected areas. For example, Ranger Doug Follett from the Glacier National Park, U.S.A., feels from watching visitors over the last 50 years, that 'the American people feel that their National Park System is the basis of a kind of religion. And that the national parks are the cathedrals where they come to worship. And that the people in big hats [i.e. rangers] are the high priests who have been given the responsibility to protect these sacred land trusts' (Anonymous, 2010a). The same seems to be true in Northern Europe.

How should such experienced holiness, placidity, peace of mind, beauty or other spiritual values affect the management policies and practices? The answer may have far-reaching consequences in developing interpretation and communication strategies of the protected areas and park agencies. It is essential to know why visitors come to any specific protected area, and what the key motivators of the visits are (Kajala et al., 2007). The scope of services and different functions of the area can be developed in the direction that the visitors consider important. A conscious attempt can be made to offer visitors a chance for natural, cultural and spiritual experiences that they consider important and expect from their visits, and to avoid conflicts between

and within visitor groups, e.g. by channelling spatial and temporal distribution of visitor flows.

Why are the sacred sites important?

The intangible values of nature, such as beautiful landscapes and opportunities to experience nature, are invariably the most important motives for the recreational use of protected areas, according to all visitor surveys carried out in Finland (Sulkava et al., 2004, Heinonen 2007). A doctoral thesis (Järviluoma, 2006) on the responses of visitors to four tourist centres in Lapland, three of which are closely connected to national parks, showed, consistently with the visitor surveys, that peace and quiet, beautiful landscapes, and nature in general are the most important attractions influencing visitor's choice of destination. According to the study, women emphasise the importance of nature more than men on average. For older age groups natural features were more important reasons for their choice of destination than visitors on average. On the basis of the visitor surveys, for independent hikers in protected areas, the most important recreational motives are landscapes and natural features, and the next most important ones are relaxation, breaking away from everyday life, and mental well-being (Heinonen, 2007: 105).

Consequently, the sacred dimension of protected areas provides remarkable opportunities for the managers of protected areas, although the park profes-

sionals may feel certain uneasiness when dealing with these matters. The benefits of a wider approach are evident.

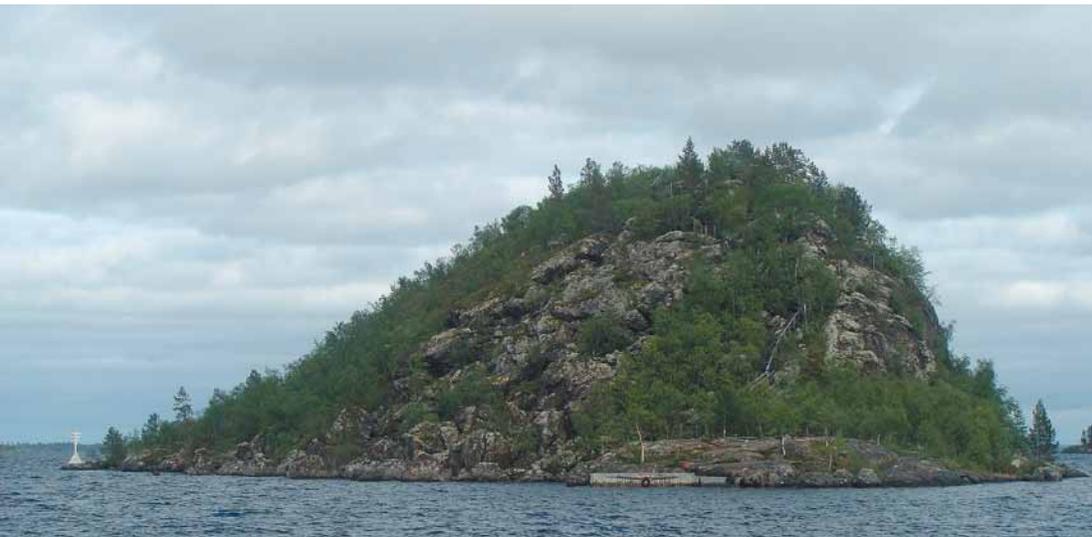
- The recognition of the spiritual and cultural values of protected areas increases and deepens the relevance of parks and nature to people. It is very narrow-minded to try to define the significance of nature in the conventional utilitarian or purely natural scientific way, when a multidimensional approach would make nature conservation sensible even to such people who don't care about the identification of species or even about the conservation of birds or beetles.
- The benefits of nature and protected areas for the physical and mental health are evident and diverse (Anonymous 2010b, Stolton and Dudley, 2010, see also the Proceedings of the Conference 'Healthy Parks, Healthy People', <http://www.healthyparkshealthypeoplecongress.org/>). There seems to be a relationship between the personal, and often quite spiritual, experiences in impressive natural environments, such as the national parks, and the mental health and general well-being.
- The integration of spiritual, cultural, social, economic and ecological values in protected area management is likely to help the park managers to avoid losses of cultural and spiritual values. Such losses may be unintentional, merely due to the lack of information. Unfortunately, many of the cultural losses may also be irreversible.
- The enhancement of the living Sámi

culture is a part of the duties of the Natural Heritage Services of Metsähallitus in Finland. According to the Finnish legislation, the use, management and conservation of natural resources in the state-owned areas in the Sámi homeland shall be integrated in a manner that favourable conditions for the living Sámi culture can be guaranteed. The sacred natural sites form an important part of the Sámi culture and identity. The Natural Heritage Services is working closely with the Saami Parliament and the reindeer herders in order to enhance the living Sámi culture.

- The recognition of the sacred natural sites and the spiritual values of protected areas may increase cooperation with 'new' customers and build up a wider constituency for conser-

vation. The sacred dimension of protected areas has a considerable potential to increase the benefits thereof for human well-being and mental and physical health. In the national parks, it is possible for visitors to stop, to slow down, to calm down, to reconnect to nature, to feel the touch of the pristine wilderness, to revitalise the personal feelings of responsible ownership and belonging somewhere. It would be desirable to develop enhanced tourism and recreation products that combine nature and culture creating integrated attraction elements and reconnecting people with nature through their culture. In a modern society, such a mental recovery is urgently needed.

Ukonsaari Island in Inari is a well-known sacred place for the Sámi people.





HAUTUUMAASARI



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< A Lake Inari island where Inari Sámi people were buried as late as early 1900s.