

# Culture for Nature

## *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas*

Taktshang in Bhutan. Photocredit: <http://spynet.ru/blog/pics/10263.html>

## Editorial - Radhika Borde

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It's a new year and one that will allow CSVPA to look back at many past achievements, and forward to the many exciting initiatives it is planning - as outlined in the updates from the Co-Chairs, and in the article from Josep-Maria Mallarach.

A significant milestone for CSVPA last year was its involvement in the World Parks Congress in Sydney, Australia. The Congress has inspired our first piece, by Manisha Seth Gutman, on the sanctity of sacred natural sites. We also have a reflective piece by Vita De Waal on indigeneity and sacred natural sites, one of a series of several she is planning.

The interface of nature and culture is the focus of pieces by Thymio Papayannis, while Alfonso Alem Rojo presents the international Cusco

Declaration. Jason Brown has joined the CSVPA newsletter editorial team, and shares a glimpse of his work into the convergence of spiritual ecologies and new cosmologies. He has also encouraged a fascinating contribution by Acharya S.P. Dwivedi, on Spirituality and the Environment from a Hindu perspective.

It has been a delight to put this newsletter together. The diversity of ideas reflects your choices, your contributions. We hope you will enjoy, and keep contributing with new, fresh pieces for information or reflection.

Most importantly, we hope that the opportunity to exchange ideas, provided by this newsletter and the CSVPA website, will help contribute to the momentum of the work each of you is doing.



Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas

[www.csvpa.org](http://www.csvpa.org)  
Specialist Group of IUCN WCPA

## Report on CSVPA at the World Parks Congress

11-19 November, 2014,  
in Sydney, Australia



In November, after months of preparation, seven members of the CSVPA – Edwin Bernbaum, Radhika Borde, Jim Gale, Josep-Maria Mallarach, Andrew Taber, Miriam Torres, and Bas Verschuuren – went to the World Parks Congress in Sydney, Australia, to promote the aims of the CSVPA. They participated in and co-organized several sessions on sacred natural sites and conducted two specific workshops on [promoting the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the management and governance of protected areas](#).

Seeking to be as inclusive as possible and to reach the widest possible audience, the workshops brought protected area managers together with representatives of indigenous traditions and local communities, mainstream religions, and organizations representing the general public.

The first workshop, a side event, delivered good ideas for going into the first stage of developing the Best Practice Guidelines on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the management and governance of protected areas, a project for which the CSVPA has received approval and initial funding from the WCPA.

The WCPA also prepared a poster to help CSVPA in promoting these guidelines, and an e-poster was developed and presented by CSVPA. To view the e-poster, follow this link - <http://tinyurl.com/omwl784> - and type the search words “cultural and spiritual” into the box.

The second workshop had participants break out into small groups to share experiences and work on the first step of developing ideas for a training module. The module links in with the Best Practice Guidelines and proposes concrete measures to work on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in protected area management and governance. Eighty to one hundred people participated and there was a lot of interest in developing a network to continue work and provide mutual support on the training module and other follow-up activities as part of a long-term project.

The next steps will be to create a network and website, and to work on developing the BPG and the training module. Over the next few months we hope to test and refine the module in training programs for protected area managers.

We are very interested in involving members of the CSVPA and others concerned with protected areas and would welcome ideas and suggestions for additional activities. If you are interested in participating, please contact the co-chairs of the CSVPA, Edwin Bernbaum and Bas Verschuuren at [ebernbaum@mountain.org](mailto:ebernbaum@mountain.org) and [basverschuuren@gmail.com](mailto:basverschuuren@gmail.com).

CSVPA members were also involved in giving presentations and furthering discussions in many other sessions. CSVPA, at the request of the organizers of the Healthy Parks Healthy People stream of the World Parks Congress, organized and conducted a session focused on the links between human well-being in sacred natural sites and protected areas, and World Heritage sites. Topics included a mix of general issues and specific case studies, ranging from Guatemala and the United States, to India and the Russian Altai.



CSVPA members at WPC, Sydney. PhotoCredits: Edwin Bernbaum

CSVPA workshops at WPC, Sydney. PhotoCredits: Edwin Bernbaum and Radhika Borde

The session was opened by the Director of the IUCN World Heritage Programme Tim Badman, and provided space for reflection on the cultural and spiritual significance of natural world heritage sites. It also provided a space to point out the many intangible dimensions of community well-being that are involved in conservation through sacred natural sites.

The session was complementary to two other sessions on sacred natural sites. The first was a whole

morning of [sacred natural sites custodians working together on custodian driven conservation initiatives and developing a No-Go policy for mining in Sacred Natural Sites, Protected Areas and World Heritage sites](#). The second session, which CSVPA co-organized, was about sacred natural sites and their role as bearers of philosophy and practice with relevance to conservation and protected areas in Asia. In this session seven contributors to a forthcoming book with a similar title, presented their work and exchanged views on how

sacred natural sites could help shift the conservation paradigm in protected areas to be culturally guided and sensitive to spirituality.

CSVPA members also provided inputs to the recommendations of stream 7 on Indigenous peoples and stream 6 on Governance, as well as to the crosscutting theme of World Heritage. The [general outcomes of the congress are captured in the “Promise of Sydney”](#).



Temple under a tree in Pune, India. Photocredits: Manisha Sheth Gutman.

# Reflections on the sanctity of natural sites

– Manisha Sheth Gutman

At one of the sessions on Sacred Natural Sites in the World Parks Congress held in Sydney, a participant asked the question “Is it possible to destroy a sacred natural site?”

This question is one of the many that is calling us to inquire into the nature of sanctity and what it is that makes a natural site sacred? Is it an energy, an experience, a relationship? And can this ever be destroyed?

The concept of sanctity is a construct of the human mind, but before this definition, comes an experience. The experience of Nature is what connects humanity to Nature.

The perception of beauty, the sense of connectedness or an experience of the vastness of the Universe; this experience may take many shapes and forms. It is then interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the culture and conditioning of the perceiver.

The speaker in the session at Sydney answered the question

by comparing a sacred natural site to an acupuncture point on the body – according to him these sites are gateways to access the inner energy of the planet, and must be preserved.

Driving to work every day in the busy urban milieu of the Indian city I live in, I observed that while passing by a certain stretch of my route, I would have a flash of insight quite regularly. Some shift in understanding would occur just in these few moments and it happened so regularly that I started to wonder what was special about the place. The area I drove through had several old growth trees, one of which was the sacred Banyan ficus and sure enough, when I looked closer, I found a small temple at the base of the tree.

It is a common sight in both rural and urban India to see trees that have temples under them. I see how those who are sensitive to this experience wanted to mark these trees and these sites as sacred.

Sanctity is based in experience. But is the experience of sanctity universal? I tend to think that the physiological responses

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*what it is that makes a natural site sacred?*

*Is it an energy, an experience, a relationship? And can this ever be destroyed?...*

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to these sites are universal, even though their intellectual interpretations may vary. The experience itself also depends on the sensitivity of the perceiver and the attention given to the most subtle of experiences.

Another speaker sharing the concept of sanctity in Bhutan, shared how their world-view started with the concept that the entire Universe was sacred. Nested within this, was the planet Earth which was sacred, and then the sacred country of Bhutan, which further hosted specific sacred sites. Effectively, there is nothing that is ‘not sacred’ even though there may be levels of sanctity.

How could you possibly destroy the sanctity of the entire Universe?

Reflecting on the question of whether a sacred site could be destroyed, I realised then, that to a heart that was sufficiently sensitive, the experience of sanctity could arise even in a single beam of sunlight passing through the most devastated tree. However, certain sites on the planet, seem to radiate a specific energy that is powerful enough to touch and open the most hardened heart. If these sites were destroyed, we would have to work that much harder to experience the energies that continue to flow deeper in the planet.

Sacred Natural Sites need to be protected for the experience they generate in humanity, for the energies they channel to us. And we have to receive these energies. Both need protection.

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*certain sites on the planet, seem to radiate a specific energy that is powerful enough to touch and open the most hardened heart....*

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The Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*), a tree which is now sacred to the Buddhist community. If he may have had a similar shift of understanding under another tree species, perhaps that one would have been accorded a sacred status. Was it that particular tree that he sat under, that was sacred, was it the entire species that was sacred, or could any tree he sat under, have been sacred?

The question of sanctity is one of relationship and all relationships change. Understanding sanctity in the context of Nature conservation implies watching the changing relationship

between humanity and the natural environment it draws sustenance and meaning from.

In India, these days it is also common to see a temple that began as a small shrine under a tree, grow to the extent that the tree dies out and only the temple remains.

Will the man-made shrine provide the same bio-physiological experience that the tree offered initially?



Grove and temple in which I experienced a clear state of awareness. Photocredits: Manisha Sheth Guttman

# Why Sacred Sites Matter

## Part I: We are living in very critical times

– Vita de Waal



We are living in very critical times. Humans have forgotten their loyalty and respect to what has sustained them for millennia. They have ruined biological habitats and eco-systems, and have interfered with natural law, cycles and earth energetics to such an extent so as to bring many plant and animal species to extinction; we have forgotten that we are part of a complex interrelated living system.

Indigenous Elders warn us that we are reaching a breaking point in the next few years... There's no time left to bring in changes as biological changes take...time.

The links in the vital systemic chain have weakened so much now that regeneration is not possible. Rocks give this earth solidity and impart it a lifespan of millions of years, while minerals sustain the magnetic and gravity machinery of an earth hurling around the sun at 67,000 miles per hour, or around the centre of the galaxy at 490,000 miles per hour. Plants create the right mix of oxygen to carbon-dioxide ratio and give cover, shelter and serve as food and medicines.

The role of animals is often overlooked as their societies and communities existed long before humanity appeared. Human groups started to develop and get organised by observing animals and learning from them. Animals also provide tools, food, cover and labour, and keep a balance in nature. Insects pollinate and are the most abundant species in the food chain.

While biological regeneration takes time, working from an inner level allows for a restructuring of reality from different dimensions. Since time immemorial, there have been locations on this planet that were considered sacred because they held special powers e.g. healing, balancing energies or were portals to higher dimensional realities. Since ancient times, protector spirits and guardians related to these sites were invoked, and custodians knew how to work with such beings.

If we take today's quantum physics concept that many worlds can co-exist, then the crucial and important work of such custodians becomes clear. There are different and specific peoples that are mandated to work as custodians with sacred and ancient sites related to a locality, lake, mountain, nation, region, whole parts of the earth, or...with tectonic plates.

Indigenous Peoples have always claimed a link to their land, and mitochondrial DNA research has now confirmed this. This

DNA link adds a crucial element when considered in relation to the custodians of sacred sites, especially when some forces operating there recognize as custodians those with whom they have a "connection". This is especially true for sites with extremely powerful and ancient forces and those linked to a previous round of existence, to a "previous" earth.

The Mamas/Mamos from the SNSM consider themselves to come from such times, calling themselves the Older Brother while we are a Younger Brother, whereas the Aboriginal Peoples come from the Dreamtime. Their creation stories recount their existence, but not as created manifested forms and, depict them as emerging from the ocean.

However, the passing on of such knowledge to new generations has not always been a smooth process and today many have lost some or all knowledge of how to work with such sites. It takes sustained training, discipline, expertise and the passing on of existing living traditions, and a connection, to be able to work with extraordinarily powerful or very ancient forces and sacred sites. Unfortunately, only few guardians with such expertise exist today.

In response, a call has gone out for Spiritual Elders to unite and to activate the spiritual sites on this planet. This is happening at this very moment.



First Lady and Minister of Culture of Peru, with FAO representatives and Myrna Cunningham, representative of indigenous peoples, in the invocation ceremony of the Seminar in Qorycancha, the Temple of Sun in Cusco. PhotoCredits: Alfonso Alem Rojo.

# Cusco Declaration in Relation to Culture and Nature

– Alfonso Alem Rojo

In compliance with a recommendation of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, FAO organised an International Seminar on Cultural Diversity, Food Systems and Traditional Livelihoods from 4th to 6th November, 2014, in Cusco, Peru. The Seminar brought together a hundred representatives of indigenous organisations, including farmers, hunters, gatherers, fisher-peoples, pastoralists and representatives of other traditional and local communities from all over the world.

The event approved the Cusco Declaration which establishes an important set of recommendations to Governments, UN agencies, and other interested parties, as well as to indigenous peoples' organisations themselves. The Declaration asks for the recognition of the contribution of indigenous and traditional food systems, their cultivation skills and technologies, care of seeds and pastoralist and breeding systems, within a holistic approach that embraces also their traditional knowledge related to agro-biodiversity management and natural heritage conservation, such as the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems, GIAHS. In this regard, the Cusco Declaration requests the adoption of public policies at national, regional and global levels, to protect, enhance, and promote the diverse means through which indigenous peoples have domesticated and conserved most of the natural food products that nowadays are part of the gastronomic culture of humanity.

Finally, the Seminar asked governments to adopt harmonic and balanced binding instruments to protect the rights of indigenous peoples to their lands, territories and resources, including their traditional knowledge and ability to continue to manage their own food systems in their territories, as defined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Seminar also decided to keep the existing indigenous food sovereignty networks, and share their struggles, progress and achievements against the prevailing development model and vindicated the philosophy of Living Well in the interests of humanity. It is hoped that sharing information about this Seminar will contribute to the work of CSVPA, particularly with regard to one of its foci on stressing the importance of indigenous cultures in relation to contemporary paradigms.

Complete information is available at <http://www.fao.org/americas/eventos/ver/en/c/243308/>





# Spirituality and the Environment from a Hindu Perspective

– Acharya S.P. Dwivedi

It is believed in the Hindu tradition that the spark of ultimate reality (Brahman or, God) dwells inside human beings as the soul/spirit/atman. Thus every individual is spiritual and divine. It also subscribes, on the other hand, to our interconnections.

Spirituality is all about cleaning our sub-consciousness; the removal of karma through spiritual practice. Pure consciousness gives us the power to think and act in the right way with equanimity, equality and selflessness. To see God in everything is to become spiritual, exemplified by these simple words, 'love for all and hatred for none is spirituality'. This belief leads us to understand that external differences of race, religion, color, culture, nationality etc. are irrelevant as far as humanity is concerned.

A spiritual person does not only think about his or her prosperity and growth, but the wellbeing and happiness of all living beings - as expressed in the mantra *Loka samasta sukhino bhavantu* (Let the entire world be happy). Selfish attitudes are transformed by spirituality into a global outlook, resulting in the cultivation of peace, love and harmony. All our actions are

interrelated and are connected to what happens on earth.

Problems related to the environment are the results of our collective karmas (actions) and it requires a collective approach to solve them. The Hindu aspect of Eco-theology is based upon the belief that all are created by the Supreme-being (Brahman-God) – Sarvamavritya tishthati (Gita 13.13).

Therefore, there is no dividing line between the sacred and secular, as divinity is present everywhere – Saotahprotaschvibhoh prajasu (Yajurveda 32.8).

The Hindu belief in the reincarnation-cycle of birth and rebirth, which allows a person to be reborn as an animal or a bird, gives these species reverence. Another important concept is incarnation (Avatar). The Supreme Being is believed to have been incarnated in different forms – fish, tortoise, boar, half man, half lion and human. Therefore, Hindus are duty-bound to respect all the forms these incarnations took (Srimad Bhagvat, Book1, Dis.III:5).

All known forms of life are supported by the planet Earth, and the entire universe is created by the Supreme Being who is present in all. Hindus view the earth as a mother and as a mother she nourishes her children

and provides energy for the sustenance of all species without any discrimination. The Hindu scripture Atharva Veda, written before 1500 BCE, is unique in the spiritual traditions of the world, in that it describes the Earth as the abode of a large extended family of all beings (Kutumbkam). It endorses the concept of a global family (Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam) and also emphasizes the significance of sustenance from the environment.

It is not surprising that Hindus respect all elements of creation as stated in scripture (Srimad Bhagvat Mahapurana, 11,2.41). Human beings are created as trustees of the environment and not masters of it. Thus it is our responsibility to protect it and use it wisely for the greater good of humanity (Mahabharata, Van parva, 25,16). It is announced in the Atharvaveda – *“Those who defend and protect the environment are showered with blessings by God”* (prithvi Sook, 7).

The environmental ethics and moral guidance provided by Hindu Dharma towards environmental conservation and preservation actually strengthens respect towards nature; and if it is widely adopted may cultivate a new universal consciousness for the global care of the environment. There are enormous challenges in front of Hindus now, to act on the given guidance of the Hindu scriptures.





# A Turning Point for Med-INA

– Thymio Papayannis

Med-INA, the Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos, was established in Athens in September 2003, as a non-profit scientific organisation working on the interface of nature and culture. During its first decade, Med-INA focused on three priority areas.

Firstly, it has worked on the cultural aspects of Mediterranean wetlands, promoting an integrated approach and publishing two major books: *Action for culture in Mediterranean wetlands* (Papayannis, 2008) and *Culture and wetlands in the Mediterranean – An evolving story* (Papayannis and Pritchard, 2011). In addition, since 2006, Med-INA has delivered technical and administrative support to the Culture Working Group of the Ramsar Convention.

Secondly, it has been working on landscape policy and research. Med-INA has provided support to the Greek authorities, in ratifying in 2010, the European Landscape Convention, and in starting its implementation. In parallel, it developed various activities on

landscape management in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean, such as the eco-museum of the Aoos / Vjosa River, a study of transhumance in the Mediterranean and its impact on landscape conservation, participation in the MedScapes project and the publication of a book on *Reclaiming the Greek Landscape* (Papayannis and Howard, 2012).

Thirdly, it has been actively involved in the conservation and management of sacred natural sites, developing jointly with Silene (Catalonia), the Delos Initiative in the framework of the IUCN/WCPA Specialist Group on CSVPA. It is also playing a significant role in promoting the integrated management of the Mt. Athos World Heritage site.

For its second decade, Med-INA is undergoing a radical reorientation. With the generous support of the MAVA Foundation for Nature for the period 2014-2017, it is integrating its diverse activities into one major programme: developing an approach to sensitive sites that covers both their natural and cultural heritage and is based mainly on the endogenous human resources of these sites.

This approach, which will make good use of the past experience of Med-INA, but also of other organisations in the Mediterranean, will be developed initially at a

theoretical level, and will then be applied to a selected site, rich both in culture and in nature, so that the approach can be tested and reviewed as needed. Further application of the approach toolkit will be conducted in three other Mediterranean sites, thereby further developing its replicability and pertinence on the regional scale.

A number of other activities are also planned in order to contribute to the main theme. They include:

- Establishment of a knowledge-based platform to serve the new programme.
- Development of a Mediterranean Landscape Charter.
- Organisation with Silene of a fourth Delos Workshop focusing on Islamic spiritual sites, to be held in Jordan in late 2015.
- Continued encouragement of cultural activities contributing to the restoration of Larnaka Salt Lake in Cyprus, Tunis Bay, in Tunisia and Karla Lake in Greece.

In addition, Med-INA is actively participating in the activities of the Mediterranean Consortium on Nature and Culture, established by the MAVA Foundation. Furthermore, it is discussing closer collaboration with the MedWet Initiative and with the Tour du Valat Research Centre in the Camargue, France.



## Testing a training module on the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the Sierra del Rincón Biosphere Reserve, Spain

– Josep-Maria Mallarach

In 2012, the Spanish Fundación Fernando Gonzalez Bernáldez, published *Intangible Heritage: Cultural and Spiritual Values. Manual for its introduction into Protected Areas (Patrimonio inmaterial: valores culturales y espirituales. Manual para su incorporación en las áreas protegidas)*. It was the first manual to be released on the question of intangible heritage in protected natural areas.

The manual presents a background to the concept of intangible heritage at international and European levels, and also sets out the criteria and methodologies needed for addressing the study and diagnosis of intangible heritage, in relation to natural heritage and its values.

More importantly, the manual provides 45 recommendations, all of them accompanied by real examples, for incorporating these values into all stages of the management of protected natural areas. In addition, it includes ten case studies, references, a glossary and a list of over one hundred initiatives and experiences regarding intangible heritage, that have been developed in Spain.

It can be freely downloaded from the web pages of Silene and Europarc-Spain.

- [http://www.silene.es/documentos/Manual\\_EUROPARC\\_10.pdf](http://www.silene.es/documentos/Manual_EUROPARC_10.pdf)
- <http://www.redeuroparc.org/img/publicaciones/manual10.pdf>

The manual was the result of an 18 month long participatory project, in which around 40 protected area practitioners from 12 Spanish regions, the central Spanish government and various NGOs, were actively involved.

The project was backed by the Silene Association and the Europarc-Spain Office, and sponsored by the CatalunyaCaixa Foundation and the Cabildo of the Island of Tenerife.

Now in the context of the CSVPA project of developing short training modules for protected area managers and other stakeholders in conservation, that can be included in larger events, we hope to revitalize the Spanish working group. All the members will be invited to test a new training module, during a three hour participatory exercise.

This exercise will be included in a two-day workshop, organised by the Office of Europarc-Spain, on expanding the cultural heritage dimension of the protected areas of Spain. It has been scheduled for 24-25 March 2015, in the little known Biosphere Reserve of Sierra del Rincón, an interesting cultural landscape not far from the capital of the country, Madrid.



The Earth Literacies Project's Cosmic Walking Meditation.  
Photocredits: Jason Minton Brown.

## Spiritual Ecologies and New Cosmologies Convergence

– Jason Brown

A year ago, I decided that I wanted to organise a conference.

I had just started my PhD program at UBC and finished a course on the history of environmental thought. Being new in the Pacific Northwest, I wanted to bring people together, to see what was out there, what was being done, and how we might form a stronger community of “spiritual ecologists” in the region. I wanted to discuss religion, spirituality, ecology and cosmology in the same space, and I wanted to gather strength for the fight for our future.

From September 22nd-24th and 29th, along with other students at the University of British Columbia, I organised this space, which included artists, scholars, activists and people of faith. The Convergence included a 15 artist exhibition and over 20 speakers, storytellers and panelists.

The Convergence was organised by day-themes: Day

1 was called “Beginnings”; Day 2 was “Cosmologies”; Day 3 was “Ecologies” and Day 4 was “Convergences”. Each day explored the theme through a variety of spiritual practices and speakers.

For the “Beginnings” day, we heard from a panel of people from different spiritual and scientific backgrounds, including Musqueam First Nation, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Latter-day Saint and Science, all telling stories of origin or creation.

For the “Cosmologies” day we watched the film *Journey of the Universe* with a special Skype introduction by producers John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker. Then the Victoria-based Earth Literacies Project directed a walking meditation of the *Journey of the Universe* laid out in ropes and candles on the ground.

On the third day, “Ecologies” we had over 10 speakers from different topical and expertise areas, speaking about the

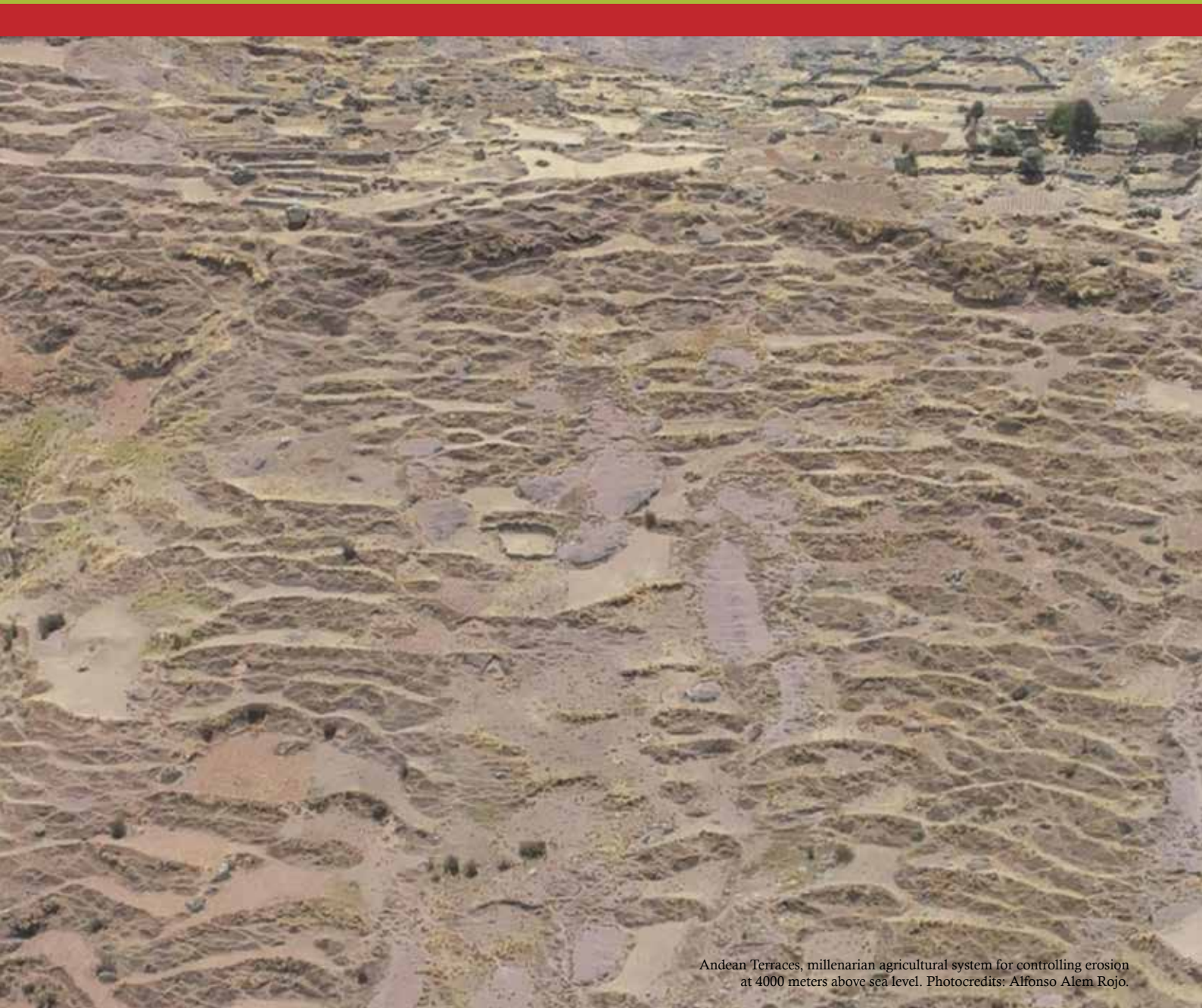
importance of our spiritual connection to the Earth. We took a break for *Rash Hashanah* and reconvened on September 29th to discuss connections, themes and future projects.

What emerged was a small, but dedicated group, which has the Salish Sea Spiritual Ecology Alliance (SSSEA)

[www.spiritualecologyalliance.org](http://www.spiritualecologyalliance.org).

This group will seek to be a forum for discussion, a resource for spiritual activism, a source of refuge for those on the front lines, and a research hub.

Through this group we hope to contribute to substantive actions to combat climate change and ecological collapse, and to deepen the human connection to the land through spiritual practice.



Andean Terraces, millenarian agricultural system for controlling erosion at 4000 meters above sea level. Photocredits: Alfonso Alem Rojo.

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