



Basic principles for the management of sacred natural World Heritage properties: application to the Holy Mountain

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature welcomes the celebration of this Multidisciplinary Workshop on the Strategic Framework for the Conservation and Management of the Mt Athos Cultural and Natural Heritage, and congratulates the World Heritage Committee, the Greek Authorities, the Athonite Communities and the various Institutions involved for having organized this event.

IUCN's Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas, a network of experts of the World Commission on Protected Areas, and its Delos Initiative, in particular, provide a particular focus for our work on these important issues. They actively work to promote and support the engagement of religious and spiritual organizations, belonging to all faiths of the world, in conserving the natural and cultural diversity of the planet for current and future generations.

The resolutions adopted by the IUCN General Assemblies of 2008 and 2012, including, among others: concerning sacred natural sites (Res. 4.038-2008); supporting custodian protocols and customary laws of sacred natural sites (Res. 147-2012); encouraging collaboration with faith organisations (Res. 009-2012), respecting, recognizing and supporting community conserved areas (Res. 094-2012); establishing integrated management systems for UNESCO protected areas (Res. 052-2012), provide solid and consistent mandates for IUCN deep and continue commitment in supporting the conservation of the entire heritage of the Holy Mountain.

The basic principles for the management of sacred natural sites were laid out in the "Guidelines for Managers of Protected Areas on Sacred Natural Sites" carried out between IUCN and UNESCO in 2008. They are fully applicable to the World Heritage Sites that include sacred sites.

- 1) *Recognition of sacred natural sites already located in protected areas.* This adds depth to the values that the site embodies.
- 2) *Integration of sacred natural sites located in protected areas into planning processes and management programmes.* This integration must respect confidentiality, and be included in planning, zoning, restoration programmes, in ecosystem and landscape approaches and in governance.

- 3) *Promotion of stakeholder consent, participation, inclusion and collaboration*, with special consideration to prior consent, voluntary participation, inclusiveness and legitimacy as well as conflict management mechanisms.
- 4) *Encouragement of improved knowledge and understanding of sacred natural sites*, with emphasis on public awareness, intercultural dialogue, inventory-making and a multidisciplinary, integrated approach to research and networking.
- 5) *Protection of sacred natural sites while providing appropriate management access and use*. The concept of “access and use” includes visitor pressures, and the protection and decision-making control to contrast it. It also encompasses cultural use and issues related to financing and development pressures.
- 6) *Respecting the rights of sacred natural site custodians within an appropriate framework of national policy*, with the use of institutional and legal protection as well as a rights-based approach. The confirmation of tenure and custodians’ rights are also a main point included within this principle.

During the last years, the Delos Initiative of the World Commission on protected Areas has organized three international workshops where the case of the Holy Mountain, as well as other World Heritage Sites managed by religious communities, have been discussed. In particular, the Delos workshop organized in Ouranoupolis in 2007 included seven presentations about the management of Athos. The last Delos workshop, held in 2010, allowed the opportunity to discuss a first version of the objectives, structure and principles of the integrated management study we will discuss again in this workshop, and the applicability of the 2008 IUCN-UNESCO guidelines on Sacred Natural sites related to mainstream religions. The conclusion of all these workshops reinforce IUCN's own experience on policies and actions integrating cultural and spiritual values in nature conservation, such as the protection of sacred natural sites, showing the effectiveness of integrated and inclusive approaches that empowers the religious communities who are custodians of those valuable places.

Sadly numerous protected areas of Southern Europe are facing major challenges because of the cuts on governmental funding, the resilient models of community conserved areas appear, in many cases, to provide valid alternatives, as was acknowledged since the Vth World Congress on Protected Areas in 2003. In this respect, one has to recall that The Holy Mountain, one of the most relevant sacred natural sites of the Christian world, remains, as it has been for centuries, one of the most effective examples of a community conserved area of outstanding universal value.

However, despite its privileged status, and the protection mechanisms that are in place, Athos is not free of threats and pressures that create new challenges that need to be addressed, be they from wider area context; due to the application of modern technologies, natural or human induced risks, or related to climate change. Therefore, IUCN supports the urgent need of completing an integrated strategic plan for the

conservation and management of the cultural and natural heritage of Mount Athos, which should aim to ensure the maintenance of its living religious and spiritual heritage, which are of primary importance to the Holy Community and the Orthodox faith in general, and the resilient governance system in place, to efficiently conserve its outstanding universal natural and cultural heritage.

To this aim, we believe that one of the priorities is strengthening the coordination and cooperation between the Athonite authorities and the Greek government agencies, whilst developing positive synergies to complete the proposed integrated management plan in time, implementing it, and establishing effective monitoring mechanisms for a realistic adaptive management of this outstanding sacred landscape. Such an integrated approach to management necessitates close and equitable collaboration of all concerned –religious communities and their organizations, state authorities and services, as well as the international community through the World Heritage Convention, and its governing and advisory bodies.

Finally, we recommend the World Heritage Committee to develop further processes and tools to strengthen the role of the spiritual, religious and cultural traditions in the management of this unique World Heritage Site, to move forward this integrated strategic plan, and we commit to be active partners to this end.