

## CHAPTER 4

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# Sacred Mountains

## *Sources of Indigenous Revival and Sustenance*

Edwin Bernbaum

Sacred mountains have a key role to play in helping to renew and sustain indigenous communities and cultures around the world. They are among the largest and most prominent of all sacred sites, giving them a special status and importance in many religious and cultural traditions. As the highest such sites, they form natural links between heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane. On a practical as well as a spiritual level, they are major sources of water on which billions of people depend for their existence. Failure to preserve their environments can lead to the demise of local communities and the traditions they uphold. The resulting flooding, pollution, and loss of water resources can also wreak havoc on the lives of those who live in larger population centers downstream from sacred mountains.

If people live on a sacred mountain, we can clearly see direct connections between the sacredness of the mountain and the health and integrity of the local communities and traditions. The Kogi, for example, draw strength and inspiration from beliefs and practices that have come from centuries of experience living on the Nevado de Santa Marta in northern Colombia. These beliefs and practices, based on the sanctity of the mountain, have inspired their priests to take on the role of elder brothers entrusted with the task of warning the rest of the world about the perils of global climate change (Ereira 1992). The Ayllu, or interconnected communities who live on Mount Kaata in Bolivia, owe their resilience to traditions that view the sacred mountain as a human body that holds them together (Bastien 1978).

Even if people do not live on a sacred mountain, it can still play a significant role in their communal lives, though a direct connection with the mountain may not be as immediately apparent. The Hopi of northern Arizona, for example, live on mesas more than one hundred kilometers from

the San Francisco Peaks; however, what happens on the distant sacred mountain can influence the *katsinas*, ancestral deities on whom the Hopi depend to bring the rain-bearing clouds that enable them to grow crops in a harsh desert environment devoid of other sources of water.

Ski runs on the forested slopes of the San Francisco Peaks have defaced the mountain and interfered with the ability of the Hopi to perform ceremonies that, in their eyes, give them the title to their lands—something the American system of landownership and law has great difficulty understanding (Bernbaum 1997). Noting that his people derive a sense of spiritual well-being from prayers and songs in which they visualize their sacred mountain in a state of perfection, a Hopi spokesman has remarked, “If I am not able to achieve this kind of spiritual satisfaction because of that [the scarring of the San Francisco Peaks], I have been hurt, I have been damaged” (Dunklee n.d.: 75).

This chapter focuses on the distinctive ways in which sacred mountains have sustained indigenous cultures and the ways that they can promote indigenous revival. It examines, in particular, examples of how sacred mountains have held indigenous societies together in the past and what they suggest for the future. As the Hopi example illustrates, it is important to document how damaging the environment and downplaying or ignoring the sanctity of sacred mountains has undermined the vitality of indigenous communities and the integrity of their traditions. From such research, we can derive valuable lessons on what not to do in promoting indigenous revival and, conversely, what needs to be done to sustain and revitalize existing communities and traditions.

Mountains are sacred for a variety of reasons, depending on the various ways people view them. In my research on sacred mountains around the world, I have found ten views or themes particularly widespread: mountain as high place, deity or abode of a deity, place of power, center, symbol of identity, ancestor or abode of the dead, garden or paradise, temple or place of worship, source of water and other blessings, and place of revelation, transformation, or inspiration (Bernbaum 2006). Among these themes, those that pertain more to communal concerns—rather than focusing on individual aspirations—would seem to have the greatest potential for sustaining indigenous communities and promoting indigenous revival. They include the following: deity or abode of deity, power, center, identity, ancestor or abode of ancestors, and source. A survey of a few examples around the world will illustrate the roles these views or themes have played in the past and suggest how they might guide efforts to conserve the environment and help renew traditional cultures in the future.

A prime example of the key role of the theme of identity is the relationship of the interconnected communities of the Ayllu of Mount Kaata to the

sacred mountain on which they live. They view Mount Kaata as a human body whose features they identify with the various features of their landscape, such as lakes, pastures, fields, and villages. They feed the mountain with animal sacrifices so that it will remain healthy and provide them with crops and livestock. As a villager explained to the anthropologist Joseph Bastien:

The mountain is like us, and we're like it. The mountain has a head where alpaca hair and bunchgrass grow. The highland herders of Apacheta [the upper region] offer llama fetuses into the lakes, which are its eyes, and into a cave, which is its mouth, to feed the head. There you can see Tit Hill on the trunk of the body. Kaata [the main village, in the middle] is the heart and guts, where potatoes and oca grow beneath the earth. The great ritualists live there. They offer blood and fat to this body. If we don't feed the mountain, it won't feed us. Corn grows on the lower slopes of Niñokorin [the lower settlement], the legs of Mount Kaata (Bastien 1978: xix).

The identification with the mountain has been so strong that it has held the communities of Mount Kaata together despite efforts over the centuries by Spanish rulers and the succeeding Bolivian governments to break up the unity of their land and society and force them to abandon their rituals of feeding the mountain (Bastien 1978).

The Kogi of northern Colombia view the Nevado de Santa Marta as the heart of the world, the central place from which the human race originated. Living there at the very center, the *mamas*, their priests, feel they have the authority and responsibility to warn their younger brothers elsewhere about the dangers of what they are doing to the environment and the climate around the world. The view of the mountain where they live as the heart of the world has given the Kogi the strength to maintain their traditional way of life and preserve their community in the face of outside forces seeking to destroy it. It has also become a source of indigenous revival and growth, attracting attention and serving as a source of inspiration and a model of environmental and cultural conservation for people in the modern world (Ereira 1992; Mansourian 2005; Rodriguez-Navarro 2009).

For centuries the Quechua people who live around the base of Cotacachi in northern Ecuador have derived their sustenance and livelihoods from the sacred mountain's glaciers and snow cover, which feed the springs and streams that provide life-giving water. With the advent of global warming, the glaciers have disappeared and snow cover has become sporadic, leading to worries about the future of their water supply. Many of the older, more traditional people blame these alarming developments on bad human behavior, especially deforestation on the lower slopes of the mountain, which has angered Mama Cotacachi, their name

for the sacred peak and the deity it embodies. The change in color of the summit, from white to black, makes them fear that Cotacachi is losing its sanctity and withdrawing its blessings.

The traditional healers who derive much of their power from the sacred mountain feel that its striking change of appearance has impaired their ability to heal. The view of Cotacachi as a sacred source of water and healing that has played a key role in sustaining local Quechua communities is threatened, leaving the people concerned and apprehensive about their future (Rhoades, Zapata, and Aragundy 2008).

The views of mountains as ancestors, symbols of identity, and places of power play particularly important roles in the tribal lives of the Maori people of New Zealand. Each Maori tribe, and even subtribe, has its sacred mountain, which it views as one of the legendary ancestors who came to New Zealand in canoes that shipwrecked on the coast. These ancestors wandered inland and froze into place as mountains that give the particular tribes descended from them their present identity. This is so important that when Maori from different places gather, they introduce themselves with a formula that starts with “My mountain is such and such” and goes on to list in order their river or lake and then their chief (Yoon 1986).

In 1887, colonists were coming into New Zealand and threatening to buy up land for grazing sheep on the lower slopes of Tongariro, the divine ancestor of the Ngati Tuwharetoa tribe. The paramount chief, Horonuku Te Heuheu Tukino IV, feared that if the sacred mountain of his tribe were cut up into pieces, it would lose its integrity and the mana, or power he and his people derived from it, would be lost. An advisor suggested that in order to keep Tongariro whole, he should donate it to the British crown to make into a national park.

He did so, and Tongariro became the first national park in New Zealand and the fourth national park in the world, established only twelve years after Yellowstone National Park in the United States (Lucas 1993; Tumu Te Heuheu 2006). The Maori were involved in its management from the beginning, and their role was further strengthened in 1993, when United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed Tongariro National Park as the first World Heritage Site in the new category of associative cultural landscapes (Rössler 2005; Tumu Te Heuheu 2006).<sup>1</sup> Today the Ngati Tuwharetoa are among the most prosperous and vital Maori tribes in New Zealand, and the current paramount chief, Tumu Te Heuheu, has played a major international role as chairman of the World Heritage Committee.

At this point I would like to focus in more detail on examples of sacred mountains as sources of indigenous revival that I have had the privilege of working on in projects with national parks and indigenous communi-

ties in the United States. Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park lies on Kilauea and Mauna Loa, two mountains sacred to Native Hawaiians as the abode and body of the volcano goddess Pele and her relatives. Recognizing the cultural importance of the area, the superintendent invited a committee of *kupuna*, or Native Hawaiian elders, to advise the park on matters of concern to Native Hawaiians. The Kupuna Committee expressed strong interest in replacing a painting of Pele by an Anglo in the main visitor center with a more traditional depiction of the goddess. Among other things, the existing work of art lacked any reference to Hawaiian traditions and made her look European with her blond hair on fire.

I was directing the Sacred Mountains Program of the Mountain Institute at the time, and when Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park managers asked us to work with them, we made it possible for the park to put out a call for submitting traditional paintings of Pele. A competition was held in which the Kupuna Committee would select the winning entry to replace the painting in the visitor center. The two main newspapers in Honolulu published articles about the project on their front pages (Wilson 2003), and in no time art stores on the Big Island of Hawai'i were sold out of supplies. The park was overwhelmed by what they described as "a tsunami of art." They had been expecting a dozen or so paintings and received more than 140 submissions, forcing park staff to work twelve-hour days processing them, a task many of the employees, a number of them Native Hawaiian, found the most meaningful work they had done in their Park Service careers.

The Kupuna Committee chose a painting by a local artist depicting Pele according to tradition as a Polynesian woman with a calm, compassionate expression, holding an egg symbolizing her creative, rather than merely destructive, powers, and stirring lava around her with a ceremonial staff imbued with mythic references. The Volcano Art Center next to the visitor center had planned to display the remaining paintings but had room for only fourteen, so the main hotel and the geology museum joined the art center in hosting a month-long exhibit of sixty-seven of the submissions titled "Visions of Pele." The competition and exhibit generated a great deal of excitement and energized the Native Hawaiian community living in the vicinity of the park, infusing them with pride in their traditions (Spoon 2007).

The Sacred Mountains Program raised funds for the second and more expensive part of the project, the commissioning of a large outdoor sculpture that would portray the Hawaiian concept of *wahi kapu*, or sacred place, as it relates to the volcanoes Mauna Loa and Kilauea. Eighteen sculptors submitted proposals with models and diagrams, but the Kupuna Committee felt that none of them met their criteria and turned them

all down. This turned out to have positive consequences for indigenous revival since the park superintendent backed the elders in their decision, thereby enhancing their standing and authority in the Native Hawaiian community.

The Kupuna Committee and the park put out a second call for proposals that included the following description of a dream one of the elders had had of how she envisioned the sculpture:

Lava is flowing from Mauna Loa like a river. The upper part of a woman's body is visible in the lava flow—it's Pele riding down the flow, her eyes staring in anticipation, looking in the direction she's going to go. The body of Pele is not the whole body or like we think of a body. It's the upper torso only. Her hair is filling in behind her, also riding the flow, and she's looking out at the ocean. The lava flow, the image of the woman, is the volcano goddess who has come to show us, the people, her power. (NPS 2007)

The call asked sculptors to take the dream into consideration, showing the vitality of Native Hawaiian tradition as a living, evolving part of contemporary life.

This time the Kupuna Committee selected a winning proposal, and after two years of work, the sculpture was unveiled in a ceremony attended by a large crowd that heard representatives of the park, along with the sculptor, speak about the importance of instilling a sense of awe, reverence, and respect for the mountains and other natural features of the park. The seven-ton sculpture of volcanic rock carved in the shape of a mountain shows the face of Pele delicately etched on one side and a trickle of red representing lava flowing down the other side. Four panels of native koa wood around the base illustrate stories from the life of the goddess, past and future. The Kupuna Committee blessed the work with the name *Ulamau Pohaku Pele*, "Forever Growing Rock of Pele," and the park placed a wayside sign next to it explaining the importance of the concept of *wahi kapu* for Native Hawaiians (Wilson 2007).

The elders wanted to let visitors to the park know that they were entering a special place sacred to Native Hawaiians so that they would not treat it disrespectfully, as a mere recreation area. At a meeting of interpretive staff trying to figure out how to convey this message through signs outside the entrance, I suggested that they add a prelude about the special importance of Hawai'i volcanoes to the existing radio program that almost everyone driving into the park listened to for information on what to do and where to go. The interpreter in charge of the radio program was Native Hawaiian, and he composed in his own words the following introduction—preceded by the music of a traditional Hawaiian nose flute—which blends together in a particularly sensitive way the spiritual and physical characteristics of the park:

Aloha and welcome to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. You may notice a change in the plant and animal life, climate, or maybe the way you feel as you enter the park. Don't be surprised; this is a common occurrence. For centuries people have felt the power and uniqueness of this place. Hawaiians call it a *wahi kapu* or sacred area. You are in the domain of Pele, the volcano goddess. She is embodied in everything volcanic that you see here. This is also home to a forest full of species that are found nowhere else on earth and two of the world's most active volcanoes. Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park is now a World Heritage Site, a modern term for a *wahi kapu*, recognizing its importance to all of us.

The introduction to the radio program provides a striking model of a way parks and protected areas can strengthen indigenous traditions and promote support for conservation of sacred sites at a cost of almost nothing.

An even more widely applicable model comes out of a collaboration that the Sacred Mountains Program initiated between Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee (see Chapter 8). An easy 2.4-kilometer trail runs along the Oconaluftee River from a popular visitor center in the park to the Qualla Boundary, the ancestral lands of the Eastern Band, on the outskirts of the town of Cherokee in North Carolina. In addition to park visitors, many Cherokees walk this trail for exercise with their children. Coming out of a meeting in 2001 hosted by the Cherokee-operated Museum of the Cherokee Indian, the collaborative project led to the design and production of a series of wayside interpretive signs. These signs link features of nature along the Oconaluftee River Trail to Cherokee stories and concepts central to traditional Cherokee culture. Each sign is written in both English and Cherokee and is illustrated with a painting by a contemporary Cherokee artist. The stories and concepts are told in the words of Cherokee storytellers and elders in order to convey a sense of authenticity and immediacy.

Representatives of the Eastern Band chose the subjects and stories of the waysides in order to present what the Cherokees wanted park visitors to know about their traditions. An introductory panel at the start of the trail near the Oconaluftee Visitor Center explains the purpose of the signs and situates them in the context of the importance of sacred mountains in cultures around the world:

As you walk the trail, you will encounter exhibits that contain Cherokee artwork, traditions, and quotations about the Cherokees' spiritual relationship with this place. These ancient mountains have long been home to the Cherokees, who honor the mountaintops as places to seek visions and receive direction from the Creator.

People worldwide hold mountains to be sacred. Like the Cherokees, they connect their cultures' highest and most central beliefs to these dramatic landscape features.

*Keep your spirits on the mountaintops.*

Cherokee Shaman instruction

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.*

Psalm 121:1, *The Bible*, King James Version

*As the dew is dried up by the morning sun, so are the sins of humankind by the sight of the Himalayas.*

Hindu proverb

The succeeding waysides link natural features that are visible from each spot with corresponding Cherokee stories and quotations. For example, just beyond the visitor center one usually sees buzzards circling in the sky. The wayside points out the birds and tells the creation story of how, when the earth was soft and muddy, Buzzard flew out to dry it with his wings; where the wingtips went down he created valleys, and where they went up he made mountains. A sign on the banks of the Oconaluftee River with a Cherokee painting showing a face in the water includes the following text:

Gunahita Yvwi—that means a long man. The river is the Long Man, with its head in the mountains and its feet in the sea. And its body grows as it goes along.

The river was highly respected because it saves all life. Because if we didn't have water, everything would die—plants, animals, people, all things would be gone.

And the Long Man was called upon for strength, for cleansing, for washing away sadness, for ailments. The water was used in so many ways. They had a lot of formulas and a lot of prayers that went over it. (Jerry Wolfe, Cherokee Elder)

Other waysides highlight the spiritual importance of water, trees, and a particular mountain for the Cherokee people. The introductory panel for those entering the other end of the trail near the town of Cherokee has the same explanation of purpose but adds a quote pointing out Cherokee reasons for protecting their mountains as sacred places:

The Great Smoky Mountains are a sanctuary for the Cherokee people. We have always believed the mountains and streams provide all that we need for survival. We hold these mountains sacred, believing that the Cherokee were chosen to take care of the mountains as the mountains take care of us. (Jerry Wolfe, Cherokee Elder)

The signs were installed and inaugurated in 2006 with a ceremony that included traditional dances by Cherokee warriors and speeches by the chief of the Eastern Band, the superintendent of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and other dignitaries (*Daily Times* 2006).



Since they walk the trail regularly with their children, the Cherokees see the waysides as a highly visible way of passing on their traditions to the younger generation and reinforcing the revival of the Cherokee language in their schools. The project also addresses a key concern of the Eastern Band: the need to promote exercise as a way of dealing with diabetes and other health problems arising from an epidemic of obesity. The Cherokees take pride in having developed a model that other tribes and indigenous communities can easily adapt to link their own stories and ideas to features of the natural environment that they hold sacred and that are integral to efforts to sustain their lives and revitalize their traditions (Bernbaum 2006).

The projects at the Hawai'i Volcanoes and Great Smoky Mountains national parks illustrate the key role that artwork and stories can play in sustaining traditional communities and promoting indigenous revival. This role brings up a basic point about values and knowledge that should be considered by organizations like the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) that are working to highlight the importance of sacred natural sites and the need to take spiritual and cultural views into consideration in programs of environmental conservation. The following discussion of this point is meant to be exploratory rather than definitive.

Art and story, especially those of traditional cultures, do more than express values and evoke emotional responses to nature. They can change the way people see the world and reveal important aspects of reality that science misses, as science operates primarily through objective observations, repeatable experiments, theoretical concepts, and simplified models. In particular, works of art and stories can get below the superficial and give us a fuller, richer, and deeper experience of what is actually there in their concrete uniqueness and immediacy; we become acutely aware of features of nature and our relationship to them that we have overlooked or taken for granted. This deeper experience of reality provides the basis for knowledge of the natural world and lies at the heart of what connects people to nature, arouses emotions, creates and affirms values, and motivates conservation.

If organizations such as the CSVPA limit themselves to focusing primarily on the values of sacred sites and protected areas, they run the risk of inadvertently undermining their efforts to be taken seriously by scientists and protected area managers, on the one hand, and by the leaders of traditional communities and traditions, on the other. An exclusive focus on values plays into the tendency of scientists and managers to dismiss such approaches to environmental conservation as folkloristic icing on the cake, having to do primarily with how people feel about nature, rather

than having anything to do with what is actually there. Science places great value on knowledge that is objective and free of values. If traditional views of nature are all about values, then they are merely subjective and have little use as valid sources of knowledge about the world and what needs to be done to protect the environment. They can be easily relegated to entertaining stories, picturesque ceremonies, and edifying works of art that provide a colorful backdrop to the real work of environmental conservation.

A focus on values can also inadvertently undermine efforts to gain the support of elders and other traditional leaders. Failing to acknowledge the reality that their views of nature and sacred sites have for them and their people can alienate them by making them feel they are not being properly respected. These views are not just a matter of values reflecting how they feel about things, but rather valid sources of knowledge and experience about the world with profound implications for the ways they live and treat the environment. At the very least, their traditions include practical knowledge about medicinal plants, climate patterns, animal life, and other matters that modern science finds extremely useful. At a deeper level, as the previous discussion of art and story suggests, indigenous views open us to direct knowledge and an experience of nature from which science tends to keep us removed, due to its emphasis on acquiring objective knowledge by separating the subject or observer from the object of observation.

The distinction is comparable to two kinds of knowing distinguished in the two verbs “to know” in Spanish: *saber* and *conocer* (the same distinction holds in French with *savoir* and *connaître*). The first kind, exemplified in *saber* and corresponding to scientific knowledge, is knowing about something or someone through description and explanation. The second kind, exemplified in *conocer* and corresponding to artistic and indigenous knowledge, is knowing something or someone experientially, as in the biblical sense of a man knowing a woman in sexual union. We can talk about knowing things about a person versus knowing that person personally: *Yo sé que él es Norte Americano, pero no lo conozco*, “I know that he is North American, but I don’t know him personally.” The same holds true of knowing a place, such as a sacred site, versus knowing about it. Each kind of knowing has its uses. For the fullest and richest possible knowledge of nature, we need both kinds of knowing—scientific on the one hand and traditional or artistic on the other.

The second kind of knowledge, expressed in the verb *conocer*, is important for conservation since it establishes an intimate connection with nature that motivates people to care for and protect the environment. Works of art and traditional views of natural sacred sites such as mountains help

to overcome the subject–object dichotomy that separates us from nature and rationalizes environmental destruction and desecration in today’s predominantly economic world. This is not a matter of being merely subjective, but rather one of evoking subjective experiences of an objective reality that reveals aspects of what is actually there that are not accessible to a purely objective approach to knowledge. We can see hints of the approach in physics as well with the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, which says that the observer has to be taken into account in observations at the quantum level.

As the examples in this chapter have shown, many traditional views of nature, especially of sacred sites such as mountains, imbue natural features with human personality, seeing in them the presence and work of spirits, deities, and ancestors. Anthropomorphic views of this sort help people to connect with nature in a particularly intimate way since people relate most easily to other people. This way of seeing the world can also help make people aware that they are part of nature, not just disembodied minds observing it from the outside.

At the very least, it highlights the ability of the environment to respond to what we do to it, just as another person might. Scientists tend to dismiss anthropomorphism as a primitive and erroneous view of the natural world that modern society has outgrown. This creates a resistance to acknowledging the validity of traditional sources of knowledge that needs to be overcome. But science itself is anthropomorphic in the sense that its experiments and theories are based on models created by and comprehensible to human beings. As Wendy Doniger, a leading scholar of comparative religion, put it in a class I sat in on as a graduate student, science projects onto the universe the model of a human legal system, seeing it as governed by laws in a way similar to the way societies are governed.

A fundamental key to success in efforts to promote indigenous revival and sacred sites conservation is the need to respect and take seriously traditional views of nature and the world. Toward this end, in addition to talking about values, I would suggest that organizations engaged in this work explore ways of elucidating and communicating the cultural and spiritual dimensions of experience and expression. They could also show how they can be valid and necessary sources of knowledge that complement scientific approaches to the protection of the environment in places that have special significance for indigenous peoples. Elders and other traditional leaders should play a leading role in these efforts and in developing and implementing programs that come out of them, particularly those that affect their sacred sites and traditions. To assist them in their work and to help communicate its importance to the wider public, the knowledge and skills of poets, artists, musicians, and scholars of the

humanities would be invaluable in complementing the expertise of social and natural scientists.

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## Notes

1. Associative cultural landscapes are singled out for the cultural importance of their natural features, in this case a sacred mountain.

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