

Sacred sites are many and varied throughout the world (Verschuuren et al., 2012). They are repositories of knowledge and wisdom, and are predominantly aligned with local, present-day and historical cultures of peoples on whose lands or former lands they are located (Wild and McLeod, 2009). Sacred natural sites are sanctuaries for biocultural diversity (Metcalf et al., 2009; Verschuuren et al., 2012). Sacred sites are closely tied to identity, and are crucial for the transmission of cultural memory and language, and maintenance of health and well-being (Maffi and Woodley, 2010; Quijada, 2019; Poelina, 2020). Remarkably, they are often the focus of cultural memory and, thus, linked with earlier ancestors and their lifeways as well as local spirits and powers of nature that are considered manifest, e.g., within forests (sacred groves), mountains, rivers, lakes, tundra, sun, moon and weather phenomena such as the aurora borealis (Verschuuren et al., 2012; Zannini et al., 2021). There are also sacred areas where churches, monasteries, mosques and various sorts of temples are situated that are man-made structures, which are cultural heritage sites that have value for pilgrims and adherents to certain faiths and religions (Blain and Wallis, 2004).

According to Samakov and Berkes (2017): “The sacredness of a particular site, related to local worldviews and beliefs, may be manifested in the form of tribute to ancestors, access to supernatural dimensions, and respect for spiritual entities that reside in the area” (p.425). Both historically and in the contemporary world, many sacred sites bear evidence of worship and reverence, and, among those naturally formed in the wilderness, there are locations where offerings have been given that are connected to knowledge and practices that are also secret and guarded (Helander-Renvall, 2010; Samakov and Berkes, 2017). Equally, and presently in some locations, evidence of new types of offerings is emerging (Joy, 2020) whereby at certain sites used, e.g., by reindeer and caribou herders, fishermen and hunters, these gestures reflect reciprocal relationships with the natural world and, playing a central function in practices connected with livelihoods (Helander-Renvall, 2010; Spangen and Äikäs, 2020). Such customs can illustrate how and why Indigenous peoples were persecuted for adhering to their traditional ways, but also provide evidence of new types of offerings and interactions at sacred sites that can be understood as examples of some of the ways in which the same peoples are now reclaiming their beliefs and practices, and *a fortiori* the freedom which was earlier restricted because spiritual principles of this ilk were forbidden (Kraft, 2020).

Certain in-dwelling powers at sacred sites are considered to protect ancestral lands and families (Helander-Renvall, 2010). Without exception, Indigenous and local communities have developed regulations, rules and norms to govern and protect sacred sites (Wild and McLeod, 2009; Heinämäki and Xanthaki, 2017). Oral traditions are inextricably related to practices associated with sacred sites (Kim, 2021). Indigenous ways of managing sacred sites are often shaped by customary laws, taboos, guardian spirits and access restrictions or supernatural powers that reside, e.g., over sacred land and waters (Oviedo et al., 2005). Wild and McLeod (2009) highlights that: “in many societies, traditional sacred natural sites fulfill similar functions as legal protected areas. Due to the spiritual values attributed to these sites, restrictions on access and use often apply, and many such sites remain in a natural or near-natural condition. Here, human disturbance has been reduced or prevented, or careful management has taken place, often for long periods of time, with resulting high levels of biodiversity.” (p.5). In some places there exist community-instituted sacred-site guardians, i.e., people who volunteer to care after a site (Liljeblad and Verschuuren, 2019). When this is given further consideration, it is possible to comprehend how misuse and destruction of sacred sites threatens the very existence and fabric of the spiritual cultures and traditions of many Indigenous peoples.

Military conflicts (e.g., in the middle-east and now Ukraine), as well as the destruction and threats to local waters and lands resulting from extractive industries (e.g., oil and gas production, forestry and mining), and the development of an increasingly globalized world where tourism is one of the main forces shaping travel, sacred sites have been and continue to be destroyed, desecrated and eroded. Henceforth, one of the main research paradigms where concerns about the safety of sacred sites is clearly illustrated, due to multiple types of threats emerging from within sectors such as the tourism industry (Olsen, 2020). For example, tourism companies advertise sacred places as tourism destinations and locations for leisure activities, such as rock climbing and camping, and material objects of spiritual significance are commercialized as souvenirs (Joy 2019; Mathisen 2020).

Similarly, socio- environmental changes are affecting Indigenous Peoples’ local economies, which, for example, are linked with reindeer herding as well as hunting and fishing, and result in land use having to be reorganized and renegotiated. The principal reasons for these trends are: (1) in certain places inadequate laws are poorly implemented; and (2), in some cases, binding regulations are non-existent because commercial interests reign

supreme in terms of business development.

In addition to the aforementioned, the creation of hydro-dams, deforestation and extractive industries such as mining, where sacred mountains have been blown-up for their mineral wealth, are all activities that have likewise contributed to the devastation of sacred sites and reduction of their value and uniqueness (Aulet and Duda, 2020). Furthermore, global warming has been causing fires, storms and flooding that can be added to the destructive factors of sacred sites and areas (Allison, 2015), some of which still remain vulnerable and under threat due to poor protection or missing recognition of their sacred status. Similar challenges are also experienced in areas beyond the Arctic regions and the Nordic countries.

One of the most visible consequences of what has been stated above may be observed locally in changes in the ways of life, implying, among other things, that the ways of knowledge transmission are also under danger. This, in turn, means a disruption in adherence to local beliefs and practices, as well as to the transmission of cultural heritage across generations, especially if adaptation to and/or mitigation of the ongoing changes is not possible (Drew, 2012).

In addition, because of persecution of Indigenous peoples in the context of originally colonial laws and policies, which were aimed at the eradication of their spiritual practices, beliefs and worldviews, these peoples have been excluded from decision-making processes by the governments of the Nation States under whose aegis they are situated, including development projects on the lands and waters where their sacred sites are located. According to the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) Indigenous peoples hold the right to “maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites” (UNDRIP, 2007: Art. 12(1)). Heinämäki and Hermann (2013) analyze the formal legal and policy recognition of sacred sites. Samakov and Berkes (2017) discuss sacred sites as ‘commons’. Despite progress in some areas, evidence suggests that there is still a long way to go in attaining adequate involvement of Indigenous peoples within decision-making processes (Liljeblad and Verschuuren, 2019).

As a way of taking steps to bring into focus and highlight different issues concerning sacred sites in connection with ongoing threats and vulnerabilities, nearly 80 sacred-site guardians

of indigenous communities, Indigenous peoples' organizations, scientists and policymakers gathered in Rovaniemi and Pyhätunturi (Finland) in 2013 for the international conference on Arctic sacred sites. The conference issued a statement on the safeguarding and recognition of northern and Arctic sacred sites (2013)^[1] and the conference "succeeded to create the first Arctic platform to develop innovative political ideas and sent a very clear signal to establish a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to effectively tackle the multiple issues of sacred sites in the North." (Heinämäki and Herrmann, 2013, p.23). In the following year, the Indigenous rights-holder workshop on *Experiencing and Protecting Arctic Sacred Sites and Culturally Important Landscapes - Creating Partnerships with Mutual Respect* was co-organized by the Sámi Educational Institute and the Saami museum SIIDA in June 2014 in Inari/Aanaar, Finland (Heinämäki, Herrmann and Raslich, 2015).

What have we achieved since the first gathering in Rovaniemi in 2013? Where do we stand today? And looking ahead: what are the critical steps to be taken in the next years? To answer these questions, and to critically assess the current state and develop future actions, Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, IPOs, and practitioners involved in the protection of sacred natural sites initiatives between 2013 and 2015, have reconvened as of May 2021. Other scholars, whose research is connected with this topic, joined the consortium as well. Despite progress was made regarding the protection and management of sacred sites (Liljeblad & Verschuuren, 2019), legal recognition and some levels of adequate protection are still missing in many areas, and raising awareness about the threats of sacred sites in many parts of the North is still needed, while important ethical questions remain ambiguous and unanswered. Hence, we joined forces in order to create a further research project on the protection and recognition of sacred sites. A first step will be the organization of an two-day international workshop at the Conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society, in Rovaniemi, March 21-23, 2023.

The twelve extended abstracts presented here have been submitted by the participants of the upcoming workshop. They provide insights into the wide range of concerns, initiatives and works carried out by Indigenous and non-indigenous rights holder and researchers across the circumpolar North and further afield. These abstracts are hereby published in the Icelandic scholarly e-journal *Nordicum Mediterraneum*, whose editor-in-chief, Giorgio Barrichello, is a member of the project.

We also want to pay tribute to Leena Heinämäki and Thora Herrmann, who were the co-organizers of the 2013 international conference in Pyhäntunturi, Rovaniemi, and the 2014 rights-holder workshop, and to Inari/Aanaar, whose tireless work has created a solid foundation for this new project and made continuity possible. Dolorés André, Dawid Bunikowski, Patrick Dillon, Thora Herrmann, Francis Joy, Stefan Kirchner, Roza Laptander, Florian Stammler, and Anna Stammler-Gossmann were all involved in the earlier initiatives.

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Endnotes

[1] The program from this extensive international event can be found here:

<https://www.arcticcentre.org/loader.aspx?id=68f90aab-5bab-4cc3-b6c9-403a0b363d9e>.

Likewise, the conference statement regarding recommendations for sacred natural sites can be found here:

<https://sacrednaturalsites.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Pyh%C3%A4tunturi-Statement-2013-Recognizing-Sacred-Sites-of-Indigenous-Peoples-in-Northern-Regions1.pdf>