

Indigenous Peoples and communities have had long-standing relationships with nature, based on knowledge systems and practices that acknowledge and respect the spiritual environment in which they live (Verschuuren et al., 2012). They have assigned special significance to specific natural areas like mountains, rivers, lakes and forests in accordance with their spiritual beliefs (Wild & McLeod, 2008, p.7; Liljeblad & Verschuuren, 2019). The “areas of land or water having profound spiritual importance to peoples and societies” are defined as sacred natural sites by the IUCN (Wild & McLeod, 2008, p.7). Sacred natural sites, and the rights and responsibilities of Indigenous Peoples towards these places, are recognized both internationally (e.g., Art. 11(1) and Art. 12(1) of the Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007); The Akwé:Kon Guidelines (CBD 2004)) and within Canada’s legal framework.

For 9 years, members of UAPASHKUSS - an Indigenous apolitical group composed of spiritual guides, elders, and culture-specific resources of the Innu First Nation - all guardians of sacred natural sites, have identified, documented and mapped eight sacred natural sites, five of which are located in the province of Quebec and three in Labrador, in eastern Canada. This series of sacred natural sites form part of the Innu Trail (*Chemin des Innus*) that led our people back to their hunting grounds via rivers, portages, mountains and lakes. The ultimate purpose of this lengthy voyage, which followed the seasons, was to meet the caribou in order to ensure our nomadic people’s existence.

Travelling from the shore up North to our ancestral lands required passing many *Pakatakan* - the Innu word for portages. Portages are deep routes carved out by our Innu ancestors on foot, canoe, snowshoe or toboggan. We consider the portages and the sites and places that they connect as sacred. They reflect our culture and identity, are testimonies of our history and cultural heritage; they have been walked by our ancestors. The stories, memories, ceremonies and knowledge linked to these sites, and the portages that interconnects them, are passed on to our youth (Vollant, 2011) and confirm that the Innu ways of knowing and living are alive today.

The eight sacred natural sites identified by UAPASHKUSS are located in the boreal forest and arctic tundra, two of the world’s last environmentally intact habitats, and are the result of the Innu First Nations’ millennia-long traditional management practices of these lands. With the Moisie and George River basins - two of Quebec’s largest protected aquatic

environments - the sacred sites are also part of an uninterrupted biological corridor.

These sacred natural sites deserve to be recognized and safeguarded in order to ensure the perpetuity of our bio-cultural and spiritual heritage associated with the relationship to the Earth, the caribou, and the Innu circular way of life, and for strengthening our identity. For this, UAPASHKUSS started a close collaboration with Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) - Quebec Chapter (SNAP-Quebec), an NGO that works for the conservation of nature and the values associated to it. Together they created the Pakatakan project in 2019, aiming towards the recognition and protection of the eight Innu sacred natural sites identified by UAPASHKUSS, including the portage paths connecting these sites.

Since 2019, UAPASHKUSS and SNAP Québec organized a series of consultation meeting and activities to develop relationships with representatives of Indigenous organizations, government bodies and with local, regional, national and international actors, to raise awareness at local and national level about the project and the importance of protection of the Innu sacred natural sites.

In 2020, the special consultations on Bill # 46 started in Quebec: *Modification of the law on the conservation of natural heritage presented by SNAP to the Transport and Environment Commission (CTE)*. The Quebec government's review of the Natural Heritage Conservation Act represented a unique opportunity to include a protected area status that would recognize the uniqueness of Indigenous-led initiatives. We considered that such a status would allow the recognition of indigenous sacred natural sites as protected areas. SNAP and UAPASHKUSS therefore worked together to submit a brief and mobilize other organizations around this issue. In its brief UAPASHKUSS recommended a new category of an Indigenous protected area targeting sacred natural sites (SNAP-Québec, 2020; ITUM, 2020). An Aboriginal-Led Protected Area (ALPA) status was included in the revised Québec Natural Heritage Conservation Act in early 2021 (MLECC, 2021). We wish that this new protection tool recognizes the specificities of Indigenous-led conservation, including the protection of natural sacred sites.

In December 2020, the government also announced the designation of almost 30,000 km² in Nunavik as a *reserve of territory for the purposes of protected area* (RTFAP)(MELCC, 2020;

Shield A., 2020). The designated territory includes a sacred site identified by UAPASHKUSS. Three of the five sacred sites located in Québec were now legally protected, following the government announcements made in 2020.

In October 2022, SNAP Québec and UAPASHKUSS enhanced their partnership with the Innu Takuaikan Uashat mak Mani-utenam (ITUM), and the three organisations formed a working committee called Uashkaikan to coordinate their efforts towards the Innu protected area in the territory.

The next step will be to apply for ALPA designation in order to protect the remaining sacred sites, including the portage routes. Furthermore, additional measures are required for all eight sacred sites, including those that are currently protected, in order for them to be legally recognized as such. To reach this aim, four future joint actions will be focussed on (see also UAPASHKUSS & SNAP-Québec, 2021, p.7):

1. Document and draft protected area proposals for identified Innu sacred natural sites and submit the project for the Indigenous-led protected areas designation to the Government of Quebec, so that the sites can obtain legal status in Quebec;
2. Implement the actions proposed during consultations held with members and local Indigenous leaders and other local and regional governments;
3. Continue awareness campaigns for the sacred natural sites identified by UAPASHKUSS;
4. Visit the sacred sites to collect data on their biocultural characteristics.

The work by UAPASHKUSS, in collaboration with its partners, highlights the importance of Indigenous-led governance and conservation systems, including the preservation of natural sacred sites. UAPASHKUSS continues with its partners, such as SNAP-Québec, the joint efforts to create Indigenous protected areas for the recognition of Innu sacred natural sites as identified by them. It is essential to advance together in protecting the biocultural diversity of our land and waters for current and future generations.

Tshinashkumitanan! Akua Tutuatau Tshikauinnu Assi!

Thank you and Take Care of Our Mother Earth!

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