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‘ Areas of land having special religious significanceto local inhabitants and communities’ (Oviedo and Jeanrenaud, 2007, Upreti et al., 2017). ‘ Sacred’ has differentmeanings to different communities, at the basic level it denotes respect and’set aside’ for purposes of the religious belief. These are religiously managedcommunity forests and they often represent the relic climax vegetation of theregion. Named differently in different parts of India viz.

, Law lyngdhoh in Meghalaya(Upadhyay et al., , 2003), Kovil kaduin Kanyakumari (Ramanujam and Praveen 2003), Dev bhumi in Uttarakhand (Bishtand Ghildiyal, 2007, Singh 2011), Kavu in Kerala, Sarna and Deorai in MadhyaPradesh (Sinha, 1995), Oran in Rajasthan, Jaherthan and Garamthan in WestBengal, Deovan in Himachal, Ummanglai in Manipur, etc., these groves are mainlyfound in areas dominated by tribal’s and managed by local people for variousreasons. The existence of such undisturbed pockets is mostly due to certaintaboos, strong beliefs, supplemented by mystic folklores (Gadgil and Vartak, 1975 Singh 2011). Sacred forests are part of a broader set of cultural valuesthat different social groups, beliefs or value systems, traditions attach toplaces and which ‘ fulfil humankind’s need to understand, and connect inmeaningful ways, to the environment of its origin and to nature’ (Putney, 2005). The term ‘ sacred natural sites’ implies that these forests are in someway holy, consecrated, and so connected with belief systems.

Sacred naturalsites are just one of many domains where religions or belief systems interactwith nature. The first scholar to document sacred groves of the State was D. Brandis, the first Inspector General of Forests, who wrote about occurrence ofsacred groves in 1897 (Rao, 1996).  Thereare important elements to take into account regarding indigenous or traditionalspirituality. In 2007 the recognition of the political status of indigenouspeoples provided by UNDRIP (the United Declaration on the Rights of IndigenousPeoples) has significantly increased awareness of the deeper dimensions ofoppression and of resilience (UNDRIP, 2007). The first report on the sacredsites is the Census report of Travancore of 1891 in which Ward and Conner(1927) reported about 15, 000 sacred groves in Travancore. Historical records, legends and the folk songs, particularly certain devotional songs like” Thottampattu” sung in praise of Lord Ayyappan throw light on sacred groves ofancient Kerala. Thottampattu” believed to have been composed during 500-600 AD, names 108 major “ Ayyappan Kavus” and mention about numerous “ Ayyappan Kavus” distributed all over Kerala.

Most people believe that we have an obligation toavoid the extinction of species and races and the destruction of ecosystemscaused by our own actions (WWF, 2005). A symbiotic relationship exists betweencultural and biological diversity. This relationship is an important factor forensuring sustainable human development. Nature provides light, food, water, andair through living process of creative renewal. This awareness of life innature as a precondition for human survival led to the worship of air, light, food, and water. Different situations and histories gave rise to a largediversity of spiritualities among indigenous peoples, which is largely made upof a body of beliefs, values, and practices intimately connected to nature.

Ata landscape level, anthropologists have long recognized the sacred status thatcultures have given to nature not only in specific sacred sites (e. g. Frazer, 1890) but also in larger areas of cultural significance and entire landscapes. Many sacred natural sites have been well protected over long duration and haveseen low levels of disturbance. Sacred sites also represent ancient and profoundcultural values. After the 2003 Congress, IUCN’s Specialist Group on theCultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) that had formed in1998 continued the work on guidelines for the management of sacred sites (Wildand McLeod, 2008). CSVPA has since advanced a significant amount of work onsacred sites and species including this volume, Mallarach and Papayannis, 2007.

The urge for the protection of sacred natural sites have also been recognizedby the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Permanent Forum onIndigenous Issues. The CBD in 2004 developed the Akwe Kon voluntary guidelinesfor the conduct of environmental, cultural, and social impact assessmentsregarding proposed developments that may affect sacred forests and on lands andwaters traditionally used by indigenous and local inhabitants (Secretariat ofthe Convention on Biological Diversity, 2004). At the political level, asdescribed before, the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rightsof Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is an important benchmark.

Article 12(twelve) inparticular provides significant political advantage for developing policies forthe protection and recognition of sacred natural sites at the national level. It states: Indigenous peoples have the rightto practice, manifest, develop and teach their religious and spiritualtraditions, ceremonies and customs; the right to maintain, protect, and haveaccess in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the useand control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation oftheir human remains. (UNDRIP, 2008)TraditionalAfrican religions often viewed land and its resources as communal property thatbelonged not only to the living but also to their ancestors and to futuregenerations (Omari, 1990). In other cases, the relationship between people andthe land was a matter of spiritual concern, and such religions have been called” profoundly ecological” (Schoffeleers, 1978).

Studies of sacred forests andother sacred sites throughout Africa shows that spiritual beliefs and religiouscan sometimes be the motivation for conservation of natural resources(Schoffeleers, 1978; Omari, 1990; DormAdzobuetal., 1991; Ntiamoa-Baidu, 1995). In north eastern India about133 species of native plants are presently foundonly in sacred groves, presumably having been extirpated from unprotected areas(Khan et al., 1997). Traditionalconservation practices in the form of nature worship have played an importantrole in protection and conservation of Indian biodiversity (Bhagwat and Rutte2006). In the Kodagu district of Karnataka, local communities havetraditionally protected forests patches, which are dedicated to the localdeity. Such forest patches reserved in the name of local deity, are calledsacred groves ‘ Devakad or Devarakadus’.

Forest fragments in Kodagu that existin the form of sacred groves contain trees, epiphytes and lianas, understoryplants. The proximal surrounding matrix is dominated by relatively recentcoffee plantations, many of which have maintained native tree cover withinthem. This tree covered coffee matrix surrounding the forest fragments inKodagu have helped in maintaining tree diversity within fragments by providingconnectivity to other fragments as well as the reserve forest, thus making theeffect of fragmentation less severe (Bhagwat et al.,  2005a). They act asa reservoir for native, endemic, and endangered floral species and as animportant source of propagules and genetic diversity (Elouard 2000; Boraiah et al.,  2003; Bhagwat et al.,  2005 b).

There is awide variation in the size of sacred forests. Some of them are small fragmentsof forest less than one hectare, and others are more extensive, spanningseveral hectares (Ntiamoa-Baidu 1995; Malhotra et al.,  2007). Sacredforests have been protected around the world for a variety of reasons,