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See also: Bioregionalism; Council of All Beings; Deep Ecology; Depth Ecology; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Ecopsychology; Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing; Left Biocentrism; Magic, Animism, and the Shaman's Craft; Radical Environmentalism; Rainbow Family; Social Ecology; Snyder, Gary.

Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites

Many of the most special places on our planet enjoy the status of UNESCO-listed world heritage sites or biosphere reserves. (Established in 1946 to promote global educational and scientific cooperation, UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.) While neither international system of protected areas systematically employs the religious dimensions of these places as criteria for their designation, positive steps are being taken to recognize and protect the sacred places valued by indigenous and traditional peoples that lie within their boundaries. Unfortunately, the dominant interpretative framework assumed by the national and international agencies responsible for administering the world heritage and biosphere reserve networks neglects their more contemporary religious meanings. This suggests that a fertile field of research awaits practitioners of religious studies and the humanities with more critical and symbolic approaches to the relations between nature and religion.

We owe the biosphere reserve and world heritage systems of protected areas to the creativity with which UNESCO, and other United Nations agencies and member organizations set about the task of addressing the global ecological crisis in preparation for the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment.

UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Program, launched in 1971, early decided to make one of its major themes an international network of "biosphere reserves" that would "conserve for the present and future use the diversity and integrity of biotic communities of plants and animals within natural and semi-natural ecosystems, and to safeguard the genetic diversity of species on which their continuing evolution depends." A creative aspect of the new system was the decision not to use conventional methods of segregated landscape protection, but to pursue preservation, scientific research and education in close cooperation with local communities so that they might have a constructive role in environmental protection and in return grow in their capacity for regional sustainable development. The ideal biosphere reserve is organized by a pattern of three concentric zones: a strongly protected core area, consisting of minimally disturbed and freely evolving ecosystems characteristic of one of the world's terrestrial or coastal/marine regions; a buffer zone surrounding the core in which traditional land use, recreation and research activities can take place; and an outermost transition area where the work of the biosphere reserve can be related to the needs and resources of local communities. As of December 2001, there were 411 biosphere reserves in 94 countries. Many of the world's great national parks, such as Amboseli in Kenya, have been incorporated into biosphere reserves in order to facilitate more sustainable relationships with their surrounding human communities. The biosphere-reserve concept is dynamic and continues to evolve. Recently it has been suggested that the world's first "urban" biosphere reserve be established in Chicago with a reversal of the typical pattern of concentric zones – the highly urbanized central core would be encircled by envelopes of natural and restored environments.

The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, generally known as the World Heritage Convention, was adopted by UNESCO in 1972. It established an international system of protection for architectural and other cultural artifacts, physical and biological formations, and natural habitats of "outstanding universal value" from the point of view of history, art, science, or conservation. Thirty years later the Convention had 167 States Parties, and 730 properties (563 cultural, 144 natural, and 23 mixed) from a total of 125 countries inscribed on the World Heritage List. World Heritage sites include such outstanding historic and natural areas as the center of Florence, Italy, Ngorongoro Conservation Area in Tanzania, and Machu Picchu in the Peruvian Andes. As in the case of the Galapagos Islands, where international concern made a decisive difference in Ecuador's determination to sustainably manage the park, World Heritage listing aspires to be not only "words on paper" but also a useful instrument for action by international and local agencies to preserve threatened sites and species.

While cultural sites associated with ancient religious traditions – such as Lumbini, birthplace of Lord Buddha in Nepal, or the Vatican City in Italy – have long qualified for World Heritage status under the criterion of "places directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions" of universal significance, not until recent years has serious attention been paid by UNESCO to natural areas that are perceived as "sacred" or otherwise religiously significant to indigenous local communities. The way was opened for this development by the addition of "cultural landscapes" as a category for World Heritage status, and by the growing recognition in both systems of the beneficial effects that certain mythic and ritualistic meanings have had on the preservation of biodiversity. Examples include the Kaya sacred forests in Kenya, which have long enjoyed the protection of tribal ritual practices and as a consequence hold up to 75 percent of Kenya's endemic species, now being considered for World Heritage listing; and the Changbaishan Biosphere Reserve in China, whose forest ecosystem retained its integrity for centuries because of the legendary belief that it is the place of origin of the Korean people. Policies are now in place to encourage attention to the role of traditional religious and knowledge systems in sustaining healthy ecosystems and modeling sustainable ways of life.

This attitude is now widely shared throughout United Nations agencies with environmental missions, and it has helped advance the cultural survival of indigenous peoples. Nonetheless, the anthropological perspective that has helped facilitate the shift in policy assumes a gulf between the worldviews of "premodern" and "modern" societies. Non-Western, indigenous and traditional local communities are perceived to live by communally shared "intangible" religious, aesthetic and moral values, many of which involve practices and perceptions affirmative of nature's sacrality or cosmic importance. Westernized secular and urban cultures are judged to live by "tangible" economic, scientific and other material values and these are the prominent reasons advanced for protection of these special natural areas. Most positive evaluations of the ecological role of traditional beliefs in preserving sacred places are advanced for scientific and social purposes that are extrinsic to the beliefs themselves.

This dualistic perspective does not do justice to the humanistic and naturalistic religious qualities that have played a critical role in motivating the establishment of the biosphere reserve and world heritage systems, nor to the confessional religious beliefs – Christian, Muslim, Ba'hai, and Buddhist, among others – that have motivated some of their most ardent advocates.

There are a number of ways of thinking about the contemporary religious meanings of these areas. First, the modern wilderness movement, which has inspired the protection of many core areas of biosphere reserves and spectacular World Heritage natural areas, perceives wilderness as sublime "sacred space." Wilderness is typically associated with mountains, deserts and oceans, but with the coming of the modern ecological consciousness, there has been a growing perception of a variety of relatively undisturbed natural landscapes, from rainforests to natural preserves in close proximity to urban settlements, as "sacred" in quality. Interpretations among the world religions of wilderness as a place of contact with transcendent powers have contributed to these more contemporary meanings, as have a variety of old and new interpretations of the extraordinary spiritual qualities of wild animals.

Second, many of the UNESCO-protected areas, such as South Africa's Robben Island, set aside to commemorate the "victory of the human spirit, of freedom, of democracy, over oppression," are associated with the civil religions of the host countries. In the case of the United States, where both Yellowstone National Park and the Statue of Liberty are world heritage sites, there is an integration of natural and cultural civil religious values. Mount Kenya biosphere reserve merges indigenous tribal perceptions of a sacred mountain with twentieth-century civil religious perceptions of the mountain as a shrine of national independence.

Finally, if we interpret religious perspectives as those that symbolize comprehensive visions of creation, alienation and redemption, then it is possible to see the outlines of a global religious vision in UNESCO's effort to transmit to future generations the "universal values" of our evolutionary origins (Galapagos World Heritage site), the worst of human history (Auschwitz Concentration Camp World Heritage site) and the promise of world justice, peace, and ecological sustainability (Amistad International Peace Park in Central America). When UNESCO-MAB publishes a book entitled *Man Belongs to the Earth*, and when the signatories of the World Heritage Convention pledge themselves to "hold in trust for the rest of mankind" those parts of the world heritage that are found within their boundaries, we are being presented with an emergent global ideal very much in keeping with the spiritual vision portrayed in such twenty-first-century declarations as the Earth Charter.

In this light, UNESCO's definitions of biosphere reserves as "demonstration sites of harmonious long-lasting relationships between man and the natural environment," and World Heritage sites as "standard-setters for the conservation of the environment as a whole" suggest an interpretation of these areas as anticipatory fulfillments of a transcendent coevolutionary destiny for humankind, sacred centers to which all the world's peoples can make pilgrimage.

J. Ronald Engel

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See also: Earth Charter; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; United Nations' "Earth Summits"; World Heritage Sites and Religion in Japan.

Birch, Charles (1918–)

Dr. Charles Birch (1918–) is an Emeritus Professor of Biology, having been previously Challis Professor of Biology at University of Sydney, Australia. He has authored nine books, including his influential collaboration with John Cobb, and sixty publications on science, religion and human existence, and in 1990 he was a joint recipient of the Templeton Prize for progress in religion for 1990.

Birch has been described as "Australia's leading thinker on science and God." He describes himself as a panexperimentialist, holding a monistic doctrine claiming that the mental and the physical are two aspects of the same phenomenon. Using a Whiteheadian process interpretation of biology, he rejects a solely mechanistic model of life and biology for an ecological model. "There is an ecology of God which we can think of as God's internal relations with the creation" (Birch 1993: 62). Reality is not merely things, but relationships and these relationships involve subjectivity. If every living creature is a subject, then each has intrinsic value to itself and to God, in addition to any instrumental value. The difference between entities is one of degree. Since there is a difference in degree, there is a hierarchy of intrinsic value and a corresponding hierarchy of rights. Furthermore, "internal relations are tied up with the idea of feelings" (Birch 1990: 76). God is the supreme synthesis of these feelings, which are nature at any moment, and is no spectator. The implication of this is the extension of compassion, justice and rights to nonhumans.

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See also: Australia; Christianity(7f) – Process Theology; Cobb, John; Process Philosophy.

Bishnoi (Rajasthan, India)

The Bishnoi of Rajasthan, India, have lately come to the attention of diverse scholarly and activist communities as an example of an ecologically aware people who for generations have been practicing environmental conservation, holistic science, and what today would be termed wise resource management. The origins of this community, found largely in the region around the city of Jodhpur and neighboring districts of western Rajasthan, go back to the fifteenth century; there are smaller communities of Bishnoi in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana.

The boy who would later be known as Bhagwan Jambeshwar, the presiding deity of the Bishnois, is said to have been born around 1451–1452 to a Rajput family in the village of Pipasar in the Mawar area of Rajasthan. According to folklore, local traditions, and vernacular literatures, Jambaji (as he is popularly known) had an uncommon attachment to nature. Some say that he was disenchanted by the struggles over political power between Hindus and Muslims, and sought ways not only to reconcile them but also to put before them an example of a heightened moral sensibility; others say that a long period of drought moved him to seek protection for all animals and plants.

Over time Jambaji articulated twenty-nine principles of morality and conduct, and the sect of Bishnoi (*Bish*= twenty; *no/noi*=nine) takes its name from those principles, rather than, as some have erroneously supposed, from attachment to the god Vishnu. Jambaji stipulated that no trees were to be felled, and hunting was forbidden. His followers, some of whom may have thought of Jambaji as an incarnation of Vishnu, were also enjoined to have compassion for all living beings, give up all intoxicants, swear by the tenets of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *satya*