

Conservation news

Sacred sites and conservation of the Rwenzori Mountains in Uganda

The Culture, Values and Conservation Project, implemented by Fauna & Flora International (<http://www.fauna-flora.org/>) and the Uganda Wildlife Authority (<http://www.ugandawildlife.org/>), with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (<http://www.macfound.org/>), has released a report on the sacred sites of the Rwenzori Mountains. The report analyses 14 sacred sites of the Bakonzo and Baamba peoples, known together as the mountain people, and identifies challenges of dwindling knowledge and interest, lack of legal access and contested ownership of the sites. Ownership signifies the obligation of individuals and families, inherited from generation to generation, to manage the sites for the performance of ceremonies and rituals. The report describes the functions of the sites in the cosmology and culture of the mountain people. Finally, the report discusses the relevance of the sites to the conservation of the mountain landscape and its biodiversity.

The research was commissioned to understand the linkages between indigenous knowledge and practices and how they can be integrated into the day-to-day management of Rwenzori Mountains National Park to support conservation objectives. To achieve this it is essential to recognize the mountain people's cultural connections to the mountains and reflect this in how the Park is presented. This entails broadening the meaning of national parks amongst Park staff and helping them reach agreement with local communities about the contributions of cultural values to the Park.

The report explains the impacts of recent history on the sites, including the creation of the National Park and periods of insecurity in the area, and on their uses and roles in contemporary society. It elaborates how people are closely linked to natural resources through their clan lineage, taboos and the observance of rituals, and how each of these can motivate practices consistent with conservation. The report then proposes mechanisms for agreeing to rights of access and how the sites should be managed within a strict conservation area.

There is a growing literature on sacred sites and conservation. This report reminds us, however, that we must be careful to avoid focusing too closely on the sites themselves. The sites and the institutions associated with them are windows into different world views and indicators of often profound connections between people and place. The sacred sites of the Rwenzori Mountains support conservation by casting light on the relationships between

the mountain people, their environment and the institutions that govern these relationships.

Each ridge that descends from the peaks to the plains is 'controlled' by a sacred site. In effect, the entire mountain range is a sacred landscape whose meanings and uses are directed by the flow of spiritual power. This power originates with Kithasamba, the god who inhabits the snow of the mountains. The power flows from Kithasamba to the Omusinga, the king, who is ultimately responsible for the ceremonies, rituals and institutions that channel the effects of the mountain's power. The power passes from the king to the chiefs and finally to the Mukulu wa Bulhambo, the ridge leaders. Historically, ridge leaders had supernatural powers close to magic and could even control nature. These powers gave them political authority too, and they closely controlled access to the mountains' resources, acting as mediators between people and their gods.

Knowledge of Bakonzo and Baamba cosmology is not new to conservationists, and the report references pieces written by Park managers and others. Given the strength of the cultural links between the mountain people and the landscape it is surprising this knowledge had no apparent influence on conservation initiatives until the current project began in 2005. The National Park's first management plans made no reference to the sacredness of the mountain landscape or the role of ridge leaders in controlling sacred sites and access to resources. The nomination and inscription of the Park as a World Heritage Site likewise made no such references.

Thirteen of the 14 sites described in the report lie on or close to the Park boundary. As this follows the 1933 Forest Reserve boundary, a number of interesting questions arise. Did the colonial authorities, more in tune with cultural values than today's managers, design the Reserve to allow access to the sacred sites? Were the sites moved to the boundary, indicating cultural resilience and adaptation to change? Did the sites give cultural authority to the boundary, integrating colonial forest management with local values? Answering these questions may help the Uganda Wildlife Authority integrate local culture and connections to nature further into their conservation actions in the Rwenzori Mountains and elsewhere.

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