

What is *sacred* in Sacred Natural Sites? Lessons from nature conservation based on beliefs of sacredness to foster sustainability transitions

Sustainability transitions research has privileged socio-technical and regime-wide approaches. Despite the institutional turn of the field and the growing attention to the agency of actors and the role of values and beliefs in transitions (Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014, Köhler et al., 2019), spirituality has been largely absent from the conversation (Koehrsen, 2018; Lestar and Böhm, 2020).

However, religion and spirituality matter when it comes to nature conservation (Berkes 2018) and sustainability (Bompani 2019; Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Gardner 2006). Spiritual values and religious practices have been acknowledged as an influential factor in both pro-environmental (Garfield et al., 2014) and pro-social behaviours (Saroglou, 2013). Moreover, spiritual values are key drivers in nature conservation and ecosystems management, since they play a fundamental role in shaping our worldviews and our position in relation to nature (Verschuuren and Brown, 2019).

Against this background, we focus on Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) as biological and cultural repositories where spiritual beliefs and religious practices have supported conservation (Dudley et al. 2009), thus opening a potential productive space for inquiry into the role of spirituality in transition processes (Jenkins 2020). Given the diverse conceptualizations of sacredness (Paden, 2017), we specifically explore how a growing body of research on SNS interprets “the sacred” and the role of sacredness in preserving cultures, places, landscapes, and ecosystems.

Our aim is, thus, to advance knowledge on the spiritual dimensions of nature conservation, providing a research agenda for sustainability transitions. For that purpose, we undertake a systematic review of the literature on SNS. The results of the qualitative analysis of the notion of sacredness across these studies point at behavioural, emotional, symbolic, and functional dimensions of SNS (and those settings currently undergoing sacralisation). It also shows that the experienced sacredness in these sites builds respect (for nature and community), defends them from violation, confers prestige, and favours conservation behaviour.

In sum, this research offers a more holistic lens to approach nature conservation, enables multistakeholder involvement, and sheds light on sustainability transitions management. Inasmuch as the sacred is concerned with “how the ‘higher things’ of human culture can be understood as generated and contextualized by social forces” (Paden, 2017: 705), bringing the growing body of knowledge on SNS to the debate on sustainability transitions may help understand and manage transitions.

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