

Kenya is home to many Sacred Natural Sites, including forests, mountains and rivers. Indigenous communities have upheld their role and responsibilities, passed down over centuries by their ancestors as custodians of these places. A new report, “Recognising Sacred Natural Sites and Territories in Kenya” , published by the Institute for Culture and Ecology, African Biodiversity Network and the Gaia Foundation, reveals however that many of Africa’s Sacred Natural Sites and communities are under threat from mining, tourism and other developments.

Adam Hussein Adam, author of the report explains, “Laws and policies urgently need to recognise and support the rights of communities to their traditional and customary land tenure and governance systems.”

The report, commissioned in 2011 following the enactment of Kenya’s new Constitution in 2010, examines how the Constitution, national and international laws can support the recognition of Sacred Natural Sites and their community governance systems.

It makes a number of key recommendations for communities, civil society and Government to strengthen the recognition of, and support for, local Custodians of Sacred Natural Sites and their customary governance systems which protect these areas. It also explores some of the issues which need to be addressed in the pending Community Land Act.

Gathuru Mburu, Coordinator of the African Biodiversity Network based in Kenya, comments, “This report is an important contribution to understanding the role and implications of the Constitution of Kenya and other national laws, in strengthening the recognition and support for community protection of Sacred Natural Sites according to their customary governance systems. It shows the progressive development of Kenya's legal system towards recognising Sacred Natural Sites as places of critical ecological, cultural and spiritual significance.”

The report also explores grassroots initiatives in other countries which are establishing precedents to protect sacred lands. Recently community Custodians of Sacred Natural Sites

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from across Africa came together and shared their voices in a film – Sacred Voices - made by the African Biodiversity Network & The Gaia Foundation. Custodian Vhomakhadzi Joyce from Venda, South Africa explains,

“Inside our Sacred spaces, the soil is very important. Beneath the soil, and below – it is sacred too. As Custodians we believe this should be left untouched.”

Affirming this,

M'rimberia Mwongo

from Meru, Kenya states,

“We ask that people respect our rituals and prayers as they would religion, and respect our Sacred Sites as they would a Church. We ask for a system of mutual respect.”

Liz Hosken, Director of the Gaia Foundation in the UK, comments, “This Report urges us all to recognise and support the calls of communities to respect their Sacred Natural Sites as No-Go areas for development, and to recognise indigenous and local communities as the Custodians who protect these sacred places, through their ecological governance systems, for present and future generations.”

The report serves as a timely training and advocacy tool for all those seeking to preserve these sanctuaries of bio-cultural diversity from growing threats, and to secure recognition of communities' rights and responsibilities to govern and protect Sacred Natural Sites and Territories.