



## **DECLARATION FOR THE PROTECTION OF SACRED NATURAL SITES**

*We call for the 'ecocentric' protection of all Sacred Natural Sites based on an Earth-centred approach that places the sacredness, integrity, and regeneration of these sites at the heart of all decisions affecting them, regardless of their perceived usefulness, material value, or importance to humans. Sacred Natural Sites hold intrinsic value for the continuity of all life on Earth and cannot be monetized. They must therefore remain outside of the commercial value chain and receive protection.*

*- Alliance for the Sacred Sites of Earth Gaia, August 2019*

In response to the current planetary crisis, we unite as a group of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary experts, activists, indigenous leaders and Spiritual Guardians to protect Earth's Sacred Natural Sites. The ASSEGAIA Declaration represents an essential shift in consciousness from the egocentric (anthropocentric) management of our planet to an ecocentric model, placing the regeneration of living Earth ('Gaia') at the centre of all decisions. Integrating core indigenous knowledge systems with modern science is critical to this shift. This ensures a respectful interrelationship with Nature where humans engage in reciprocity with the natural world as a living entity, offering their gifts in service to the regeneration of Earth's biodiverse ecosystems and committing to the protection of its most sacred places.

Ecologically and spiritually, Sacred Natural Sites are powerful pieces in the web of life that fulfill a critical role on Earth. They are biodiversity hotspots as well as individual elements such as source waters, wetlands, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, estuaries, oceans, reefs, bays, trees and forests, caves, mountains, soil systems and open plains. They carry the original templates for the continuity of life, the source codes for a healthy planet. Like organs in a living body, these sites are interconnected and support the health of the whole organism of Earth (Gaia), including the global ecosystem. Protecting one Sacred Natural Site helps protect them all; whereas damaging one damages all.

It is the sacred purpose of Spiritual Guardians to serve and protect these sites. These Spiritual Guardians may be sacred, prophetic, and totemic species (often apex predators) directly associated with the site and/or endemic to the region. They may also be human wisdom keepers of ancient spiritual knowledge. Not all those who have legal, traditional, or positional titles are *bona fide* Spiritual Guardians. Therefore, ASSEGAIA recognizes these guardians by their actions of service and protection of the site with the understanding that the site always has sovereignty over the Spiritual Guardian, not the other way around.

Sacred Natural Sites also support indigenous and traditional peoples' spirituality and ways of life by keeping heritage, cultural identity, ethnolinguistic diversity, livelihoods, and traditional ecological knowledge alive. In addition, indigenous cultures hold that when these sites are in full vitality, they help Earth fulfil her role in the universe in relation to the sun, moon, stars,

planets, and other celestial bodies. The sacredness of these places is therefore infused in biocultural, astronomical, and energetic dimensions, all interlinked.

There is a fundamental understanding by indigenous communities and a growing consensus among western scientists that Earth is a dynamic living system which is in crisis as a result of pervasive damage to its interconnected system. The increasing frequency and intensity of climatic events (e.g. severe heat waves, storms, droughts, wildfires) alongside the deterioration of Earth's life-support systems (e.g. habitat destruction, widespread pollution, biodiversity extinctions, soil degradation) are indicators of systemic collapse.

Essential to the web of life, Sacred Natural Sites are at great risk of being further desecrated due to commercialization; popularization or trivialisation; extraction, exploitation or pollution; disruption of their life-sustaining functions; exposure to unauthorised use, rituals and ceremonies; as well as fencing in and/or denying access to the indigenous communities and Spiritual Guardians—both people and species—who are meant to protect them.

**Life on Earth is at a critical juncture.** *We, as ASSEGAIA, therefore declare and proclaim:*

**ARTICLE 1: Sacred Natural Sites—and their Spiritual Guardians—require urgent protection in order to ensure the wellbeing of the entire planet.** The vital role of Sacred Natural Sites, together with their human and totemic guardians, in sustaining life means their protection is crucial to the survival and flourishing of Earth. Furthermore, the form of protection should be guided by an ecocentric perspective that places Nature at the centre of decisions affecting Earth's Sacred Natural Sites.

**ARTICLE 2: Sacred Natural Sites require the highest form of legal protection through the recognition of rights of Nature, drawing on international legal precedents wherever possible.** Nature has been recognized as possessing the right to exist; to restoration; to evolve; to the regeneration of its natural cycles; and to the protection of its ecological structure and functions. Because all Sacred Natural Sites play a critical role in the protection of Earth as a whole, legal precedents recognizing Nature's rights *anywhere* should be extended to Sacred Natural Sites *everywhere*.

**ARTICLE 3: Ecocentric law takes precedence over egocentric law.** Legal frameworks for protecting Sacred Natural Sites must go beyond human interests alone, such that Nature's laws of origin and continuity are upheld. Nature's inherent laws (*Logos*) must be honoured over and above man-made law (*Lex*).

**ARTICLE 4: Ecological sustainability is dependent on protecting and preserving Sacred Natural Sites.** Humankind can only maintain a healthy relationship with Earth if it is ecologically sustainable. 'Ecologically sustainable' means conserving and enhancing the ecological processes of soil, waters, and biota upon which all life depends in order to improve the quality of human and non-human life now and into the future. Fundamentally, ecological sustainability respects all of Nature and the relationships and connections between its living parts, including people, wildlife, and Sacred Natural Sites holding the key to planetary regeneration. Where indigenous communities have been living within these sacred ecosystems in right-relationship—protecting, conserving, maintaining, and restoring the site—their biocultural rights should be upheld and supported.

The prevailing dominion and extraction model of governance and current exploitative economic system are unsustainable. This egocentric approach has led us to the point of mass destruction and disrespect for both Nature and indigenous peoples. Conservation

models that value Sacred Natural Sites solely based on their commercial viability are damaging and illogical. Nature must remain and flourish with our protection to ensure a sustainable future for all.

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ASSEGAIA calls on governments, the United Nations and other international bodies, regional institutions, academics, private sector companies, local communities, and civil society organisations, to:

- **Provide financial support from governments, private funders, and international bodies for the preservation and protection of Sacred Natural Sites.** Because Sacred Natural Sites are irreplaceable and invaluable, they have the right to exist and to be protected without requiring a “business case” that assigns monetary value to their worth. No form of commercialisation or commodification of Sacred Natural Sites is acceptable.
- **Hold governments, institutions, organisations, and private sector companies accountable for decisions that directly or indirectly impact Sacred Natural Sites.** This includes activities such as: mining; agriculture; housing; tourism; conservation; and infrastructure development. Full, free and prior informed consent from the Spiritual Guardians is a fundamental requirement as well as the informed consent of indigenous communities in regions where Sacred Natural Sites exist.
- **Implement the ecocentric concept of right-relationship with Nature in education at all levels.** This new-paradigm education model must integrate indigenous knowledge with responsible innovation.
- **Protect the rights of Sacred Natural Sites.** Local, national, and international laws and legal frameworks must provide the highest level of legal protection for Sacred Natural Sites based on ecocentric law and the rights of Nature. This includes indigenous and local people who protect these sites.
- **Establish ‘no-go’ zones at the heart of Sacred Natural Sites,** used only for sacred ceremony under the auspices of the Spiritual Guardian. The areas of Sacred Natural Sites cannot be specifically demarcated because they extend both vertically and horizontally. Although the whole area is worthy of protection, the heart must be established as a ‘no-go’ zone to ensure protection of the greater area.
- **Create designated buffer zones near Sacred Natural Sites for public access, providing respectful, ecologically sustainable activities that support a meaningful human interrelationship with these sites.** These activities should be sensitized to the site and must be carried out on the outskirts to provide a maximum area of protection for the ‘no-go’ zone. This ensures that there is no impact to the heart of the Sacred Natural Site while simultaneously protecting its vulnerable surroundings. These activities include: heritage interpretative and information centres; transformational travel; regenerative agriculture; as well as meaningful and connective experiences with Nature. A significant percentage of funds raised in the buffer zones should be directed to supporting the site’s protection, integrity, and wellbeing.

While the ASSEGAIA Alliance recognizes the numerous historic and ongoing efforts towards the protection of Sacred Natural Sites, it calls for a systemic shift at this time toward an ecocentric approach that is fundamental to ensuring sustainable outcomes.