

IUCN Launches Spanish and Russian Versions of Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers

WILD9, the 9th World Wilderness Congress
6-13 Merida, Mexico

Merida, Mexico - Monday, November 9 2009: IUCN launches Spanish and Russian versions of its *Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers* – a landmark publication to support the protection of sacred places around the world. The Spanish version will be presented the **Tuesday the 10th at 16:00 (café session 1)** at the Ninth World Wilderness Congress (WILD9, www.wild9.org) which started last week in Merida, Mexico. The Russian version was launched at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) meeting on the protection of traditional knowledge (www.cbd.int/doc/?meeting=WG8J-06) which ended last week in Montreal, Canada.

The publications have been produced by IUCN's World Commission of Protected Areas Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA), a group of experts of the World Commission on Protected Areas. The first edition in English was prepared in collaboration with UNESCO and launched at IUCN's World Conservation Congress in 2008.

Natural areas that are held sacred by people are found all across the Earth, and many of them contain high natural values. They have been preserved by traditional communities as precious places of land and water that have particular significance to their cultures. The book helps conservation professionals and the custodians of sacred sites interested in the role of cultural and spiritual values in nature conservation to ensure the long-term survival of such valuable sites.

It is not known how many sacred natural sites exist – perhaps hundreds of thousands in the world. Some of them have been documented, but most of them remain only known to their owner communities and spiritual leaders. What is known, however, is that they are rapidly disappearing as a result of development pressures, cultural change and lack of awareness.

“Custodians of sacred sites from Colombia, Brazil and Mexico, Kyrgystan, Russia, Mongolia and other countries from Central Asia joined us at the IUCN Congress in Barcelona in 2008 and we were amazed to learn about the depths of their traditions” – says Robert Wild, Chair of CSVPA. “As they also highlighted their need for support to conserve their sacred sites, and requested the translation of the Guidelines publication launched in Barcelona would be a good step in that direction. I am very glad that the collaborative work with the Central Asian team of The Christensen Fund and Pronatura Mexico has led to these very useful products”.

In Latin America, sacred natural sites are also an important practice of many indigenous societies all across the continent. Countries where the existence of many sacred natural sites has been documented, and where IUCN and its member organizations, such as Pronatura and The Nature Conservancy, have been actively involved in their protection, are Mexico and Guatemala. “We decided to present the Spanish version of the Guidelines at WILD9 precisely because this important international conservation gathering takes place in the traditional lands of the Maya people of Yucatan, shared by Mexico and Guatemala”, said Ecuadorian Gonzalo Oviedo, IUCN Senior Adviser on Social Policy and close collaborator in this work. “This is one of the areas of Latin America with

the greatest richness in biological diversity and indigenous spiritual traditions – and one where both are at risk because of many threats. Through this publication, IUCN wants to add its contribution to the efforts for their conservation”.

The Spanish version of the Guidelines was produced in collaboration with The Christensen Fund and the Mexican organization PRONATURA, both with active programmes for sacred sites protection in Mexico. “I am proud to have been part of enabling this important work to be translated and presented at WILD9, not only as a contribution to the cause of protecting the biological and cultural values of the many sacred sites of this special land ”, CSVPA co-Chair Bas Verschuuren said, “but also as a tribute to the Maya and many other indigenous peoples. “Most of all this work has been a testimony of the engagement of all the collaborating institutions and their willingness to work closely with indigenous communities and other sacred sites custodians for implementing the Guidelines”.

At the opening of Wild9 the sacredness of wild nature was affirmed by the previous Wilderness Conservation Conference’s co-chair, Indigenous Tlingit (Alaskan) delegate Byron Mallott whom handed over a ceremonial statue of a frog to the Yukatec Mayan priests that had just blessed the conference being convened on their ancestral lands. Further calls for preserving sacred earth, wind fire and air were made by the Bishop of Yukatan and most of the other key-note speakers thus setting course for full inclusion of sacred sites and spiritual values in the conservation of nature.

The Guidelines will be launched at WILD9 on **Tuesday the 10th at Café Session 1.**

The publications are accessible for download from www.iucn.org, www.csvpa.org and

Contacts for further information:

Mr Bas Verschuuren, Co-Chair of CSVPA -currently at WILD9 in Merida, Mexico can be contacted at through the Pronatura stand. Email: bas@earthcollective.net.

Mr Robert Wild, Chair of CSVPA. Email: robgwild@googlemail.com