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## Introduction

In June 2022, with the generous support of the Alfred Toepfer Stiftung, I spent two weeks in Iceland travelling the famous Ring Road and researching Sacred Natural Sites. I chose to visit Iceland because sacred nature is such a contemporary issue there: the fastest growing religion in Iceland is Ásatrú, a Norse pagan belief system which stresses the interconnection of all things and the need to venerate and protect the natural environment.

Iceland contains more than 120 protected areas covering 25% of the country; this figure includes national parks, country parks, nature reserves, habitat protection areas and national monuments. All conversation sites in Iceland are governed by three public institutions which are overseen by the Ministry for the Environment: Þingvellir National Park, Vatnajökull National Park and the Environment Agency of Iceland which governs Snæfellsjökull National Park and other nature conservation areas. Both Þingvellir, and Vatnajökull are also UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

### Sacred Natural Sites

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines Sacred Natural Sites (SNSs) as areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to people and communities. SNS status has been applied to a diverse range of natural features such as mountains, volcanoes, rivers, lakes, springs, caves, forest groves, ponds, coastal waters and islands. They may feature in a range of sacred practices as burial grounds, pilgrimage sites, settings for temples, shrines or churches or be associated with key stages in the lives of spiritual leaders or saints.

The reasons for their sacredness are equally diverse and SNSs might be perceived as:

- the homes of deities or ancestral spirits;
- sources of healing waters and medicinal plants;
- places where sacred animals thrive;
- places of transcendence beyond our lived reality; or
- sites of revelation or transformation.

Individuals or groups of people who have the responsibility to take care of a specific sacred natural site or sites are called custodians. Custodians may reside either close to or at considerable distance from the sacred natural sites to which they are linked through history, culture, self identification and spiritual practice.

Crucially, SNSs are not static entities. Their sacred significance may wax and wane and new SNSs can be created, as this report will explore.

### The study of religion and the environment

The study of SNSs sits within the broader academic field of religion and the environment. This emerged in the 1970s and 1980s when scholars of Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) started to explore the emerging field of environmental ethics which presented a challenge to the idea that humans were somehow exceptional and existed independently of the rest of nature. This standpoint asserted that that non-human nature had intrinsic value regardless of its usefulness to humans.

At the same time psychoanalyst Erich Fromm and biologist Edward O. Wilson were conducting studies into the biophilia hypothesis: the idea that humans possess an innate, biological tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. In 1996 Stephen Kellert identified nine values of biophilia (see page 5) all of which are relevant to the study to nature as a sacred entity.

A distinct area of study looks at interplay of religion and the environment in protected areas, drawing particularly on studies into spiritual tourism.

### Why should sacred nature matter to protected area managers?

- More than three quarters of the world's population consider themselves to hold some sort of religious belief. When people of faith visit protected areas they bring their belief systems with them, and this can impact how they perceive, experience and act towards the natural world. By building their religious literacy, protected area managers can engage better with people of faith and build towards better outcomes for nature.
- Protected area managers have the power to influence people's beliefs about the value of the natural world. Regardless of whether or not a visitor to a protected area considers him/herself to be religious or spiritual, they have the ability to perceive nature as sacred: something which is too important to be changed. People who perceive their natural surroundings as sacred are more likely to take care of them.

I hope that this report will be of use to protected area managers whatever their personal beliefs. The theologian Karen Armstrong expresses this wish brilliantly in her book *Sacred Nature*:

*'It is not a question of believing religious doctrines; it is about incorporating into our lives insights and practices which will not only help us to meet today's serious challenges but change our hearts and minds'.*



The Values of Biophilia

**Aesthetic value**

The physical attraction and beauty of nature.



**Dominionistic value**

The inclination to master and control the natural world.



**Humanistic value**

Strong affection for and emotional attachment to the natural world.



**Moralistic value**

Reflects a spiritual and moral affinity for the natural world.



**Naturalistic value**

An interest in close and direct contact with the natural world.



**Negativistic value**

Tendency to fear, avoid and disdain aspects of nature.



**Scientific value**

The knowledge and understanding people derive from the empirical study of nature.



**Symbolic value**

Nature's role in shaping and facilitating human communication & thought.



**Utilitarian value**

Material and commodity benefits derived from nature.

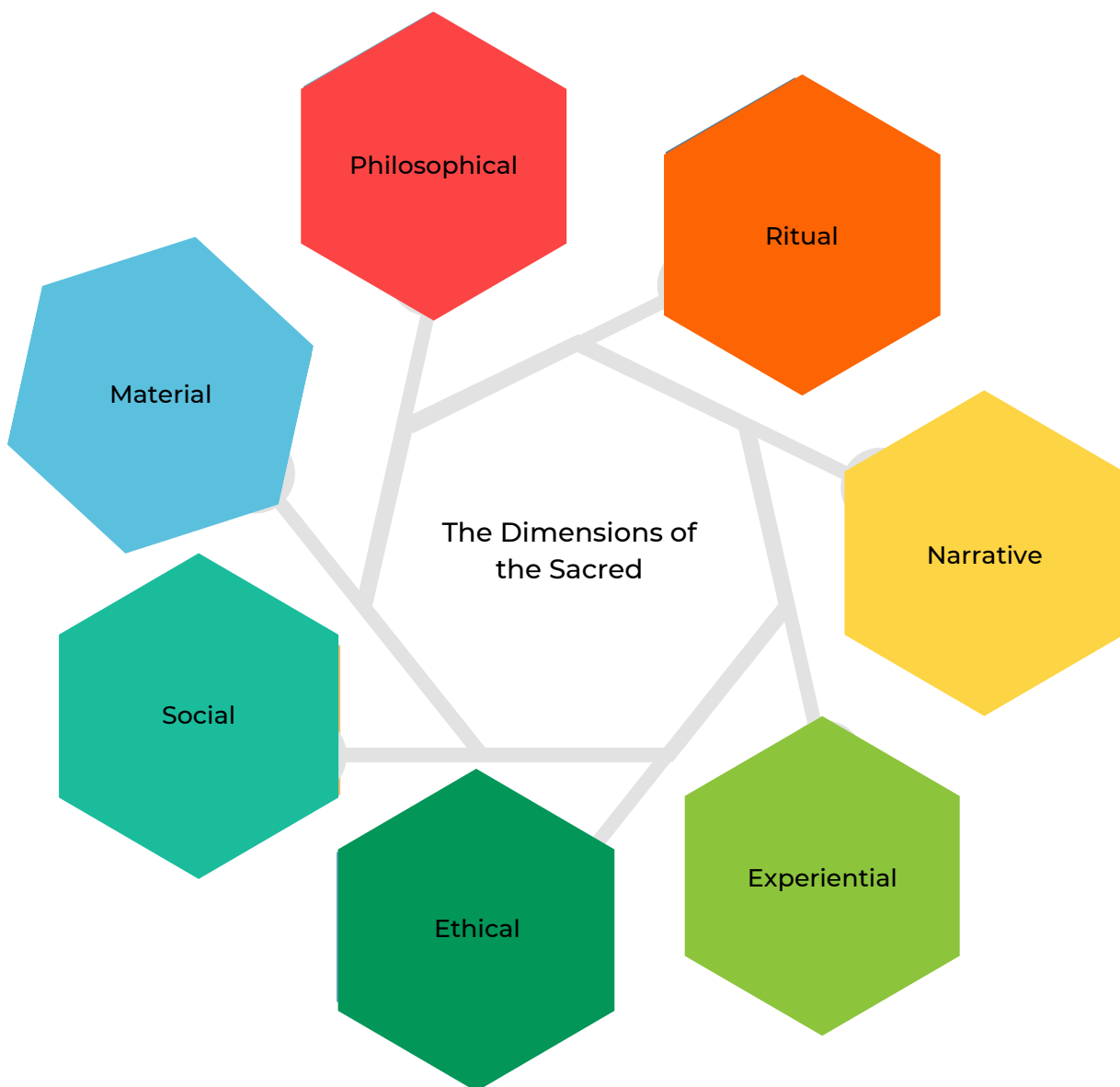


### The structure of this report

This is a report about ideas. It provides an introduction to the many ways in which a spiritual reading of the landscape and its non-human inhabitants can aid protected area management and enrich the visitor experience.

It is divided into seven sections, reflecting the 'dimensions of the sacred', a framework employed by theologian Ninian Smart to capture the broad and encompassing nature of religion.

In each section I describe how these dimensions can be seen at play in protected areas and present an Icelandic case study to illustrate my ideas. The report ends with a manifesto of ten ways in which seeing nature as sacred can enrich protected areas.





Dimension	In religion	In sacred nature
Philosophical	The ways in which religions make sense of the world for their followers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The philosophy behind the creation of protected areas</li> <li>• The spiritual value of protected areas</li> <li>• The psychology of climate change</li> </ul>
Ritual	All aspects of performed religion, including formal ritual and everyday practices which have a religious meaning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outdoor activities as ritual experiences</li> <li>• Pilgrimage</li> <li>• Cairn building</li> </ul>
Narrative	Stories which help to explain why the world exists and what it means to be human. Such stories are passed down through history either orally or through scripture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stories in the landscape</li> <li>• New mythologies, new visitor attractions</li> </ul>
Experiential	The strong emotional reactions related to religious experience. This could be the experience of entering a place of worship, going on a pilgrimage or encountering deities, spirits or demons.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcendence in nature</li> <li>• Ecotherapy</li> <li>• A peaceful ascent</li> </ul>
Ethical	A universal system of right and wrong which provides guidance on how to live one's life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Green Rule</li> <li>• Religiously motivated conservation</li> <li>• Codes of conduct</li> <li>• Personifying nature</li> </ul>
Social	The ways in which a religious community behaves as a collective. Central to this are decision-making activities which may be top-down or distributed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A protected area priesthood</li> <li>• Diverse spiritual needs</li> <li>• Celebrating environmental activism</li> </ul>
Material	Specific places and artifacts that are of particular importance to a religion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biomimicry in places of worship</li> <li>• Labyrinths and digital nature experiences</li> <li>• Taboos and sabbaths</li> <li>• New spaces of connection</li> <li>• Souvenirs</li> </ul>

## Philosophical dimension

Every religion has a series of doctrines or teachings that explain what members of a religion are expected to believe. These could be beliefs about a divine being or beings, beliefs about the world or beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life.

The existence of National Parks is based on the philosophy that:

*'Everyone needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.'*

John Muir ('the father of national parks') *The Yosemite*, 1912.

Muir's deeply held belief in the vitalness of providing humans with access to nature is encapsulated in the second statutory purpose for national parks in England and Wales:

*'To promote opportunities for the public understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the Parks'.*

Combined together, the two purposes (the first is 'To conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Parks') underlay every policy and decision made in national parks in England and Wales.

### The spiritual value of protected areas

Throughout their history, activists and commentators have highlighted the spiritual value of protected areas. In 1938 Professor G.M. Trevelyan wrote in the foreword to the John Gordon Dower's pamphlet *The Case for National Parks*:

*'... it is no less essential for any national health scheme to preserve for the nation walking grounds and regions where young and old can enjoy the sight of unspoiled nature. And it is not a question of physical exercise only it is also a question of spiritual exercise and enjoyment. It is a question of spiritual values. Without sight of the beauty of nature the spiritual power of the British people will be atrophied!' [my emphasis].*

In 2019, Julian Glover wrote in the *Landscapes Review*:

*'We want our nation's most cherished landscapes to fulfil their original mission for people, providing unrivalled opportunities for enjoyment, spiritual refreshment and in turn supporting the nation's health and wellbeing' [my emphasis].*

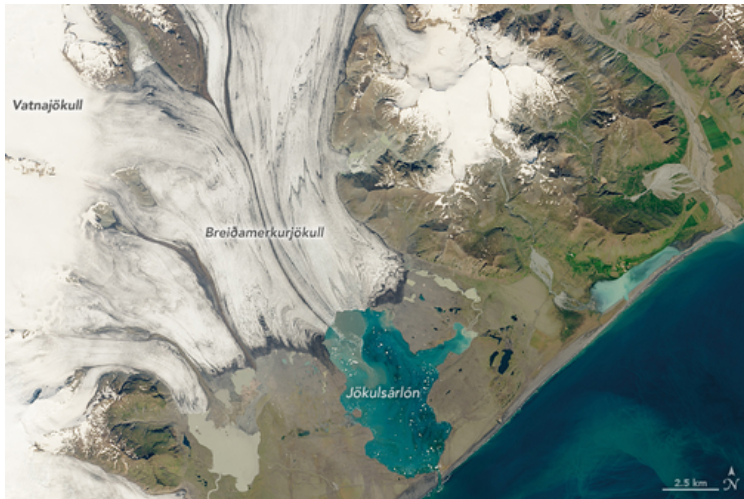
By thinking about protected area supporters as believers and protected areas themselves as sacred, we can begin to express just how important providing access to natural spaces is. Under the Human Rights Act everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. I would argue that when nature becomes sacred, access to it becomes a human right.



### Case study: Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon

Eschatology is the part of theology concerned with death, judgement, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind. Depictions of heaven and hell are filled with natural phenomena such as clouds, rainbows, green fields, volcanoes, lightning and deserts. Some tourist destinations have capitalised on these visual associations: the Austrian town of Zell am Zee started receiving 70,000 tourists per year from the Gulf States after its tourist board began targeted promotions to Muslim travellers. In the Quran, jannah (heaven) is sometimes depicted as a lake surrounded by mountains, a description which fits Zell am Zee perfectly. In Iceland, a number of narratives have emerged around 'hellish' natural phenomena: the lava field at Dimmuborgir is supposedly where Lucifer landed when he fell from heaven and Mount Hekla, Iceland's third most active volcano, is known as the gateway to hell.

But 'apocalyptic' landscapes can be more subtle and contain profoundly important messages for human society.



Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon became part of the Vatnajökull National Park in 2017. Its icebergs calve from Breiðamerjökull which is an outlet glacier of the Vatnajökull ice cap. They then spend up to five years floating on the 250m deep lagoon before moving out to the Atlantic via the Jökulsár river. Some wash up on the black sand shore bordering the lagoon, which has become known as 'Diamond Beach'.

Spellbindingly beautiful and a haven for Arctic Tern, Skua and seals, the lagoon also offers a disturbing reminder that we live on a warming planet. Jökulsárlón originally formed around 1935 when rapidly rising temperatures meant that Breiðamerjökull started to retreat and the melting ice formed the lagoon. Melting glaciers release massive amounts of carbon, contributing to climate change and affecting marine ecosystems.

Environmental psychologists recognise that there is a significant disconnect between meteorological predictions and how humans choose to live their lives. While people experience the effects of climate change first hand- such as flooding or extreme heat- there can be a tendency to see these as localised incidents and not the result of a climate emergency. This is not necessarily a case of not caring, but of possessing an inability to process the difficult emotions which surround climate anxiety - shame, guilt, fear, anger, despair - meaning that we become numb and do not respond with the immediacy the situation requires. This has been described as 'climate change fatigue'. However, by facing up to the reality of climate change, even when this is challenging and painful, we can become enlivened and energised. Travelling to Iceland and bearing witness to the sheer scale and eerie, unearthly beauty of Jökulsárlón cannot leave a person unmoved.







## Ritual dimension

A ritual is a series of acts regularly repeated in a set manner. Religious rituals include worship, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental rites and healing. From palaeolithic societies to the present day rituals shared by members of a community have used rituals to cement social groups and provide a deep sense of collective identity.

In *The Power of Ritual*, author Casper ter Kuile explains that the world is currently experiencing a paradigm shift in how we experience spirituality. He believes that our technological society has left many of us feeling isolated and bereft of purpose, particularly as many people are choosing to disengage from the structures of community and meaning found in organised religion. However ter Kuile believes that we can instead find belonging and meaning in secular practices, such as tech sabbaths, shared reading or gratitude journals and by investing everything we do with value. He also advises seeking out communities with their own shared rituals; global fitness companies like CrossFit and SoulCycle have created gym-based and online communities with a sense of belonging rooted in accountability (i.e. turning up to do your workout) and mutual support.

I would argue that communities of outdoor activity enthusiasts offer a similar sense of belonging and have their own shared rituals designed to teach new members how to behave in nature. The discipline and repetition of these rituals is crucial because not following guidelines can lead to serious injury or death. Spending time outdoors is inherently ritualistic: we don our trusty walking boots, tell a loved one what time we plan to return and often mark reaching our destination with a celebratory snack or photograph.

There is currently a renewed interest in the ancient sacred practice of pilgrimage. In many ways pilgrims are the ideal protected area visitor: they are generally pedestrian, their sense of discipline means they stay on marked paths and, because as they walk they are seeking a spiritual connection with themselves, their surrounding and (sometimes) a higher power, they are likely to be peaceful, tranquil and respectful towards the natural environment. Of course this is a highly optimistic view: in reality millions of pilgrims traverse the world's most popular routes and bring a specific set of challenges but I would argue that it is still an inherently green and positive form of tourism. The British Pilgrimage Trust works on popularising pilgrimage to people of all faiths and none and ensuring that Britain's spiritual landscape is open to all. Any trip can become a pilgrimage with the right mindset: the Icelandic Ring Road can be seen as a pilgrimage, and viewing it as such could make drivers and cyclists engage with their journey more mindfully.



### Case Study: Cairn building

Cairn building is an ancient ritualistic activity, a way for humans to mark their short lifespans in geological time. Cairns are simultaneously practical - as waymarkers and early lighthouses, spiritual - marking graves, acting as talismans or placed at the feet of statues - and aesthetic. They might even be all three: pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain mark their journey by adding to the rock piles.

In Iceland one sculptor has taken cairn building to extremes: outside the western Icelandic village of Arnarstapi, Ragnar Kjartansson has created a house-sized statue of Bárður Snæfellsás, the half-man, half-troll whose saga spans the south side of the Snæfellsás peninsula.



Cairn building also has some serious disadvantages: if misplaced they can lead hikers off trail, they threaten fragile ecosystems and promote erosion as stones are often pried loose from the earth to add to the stacks.

One option for protected area managers faced with this issue is to identify areas suitable for cairn building and actively encourage it, so that cairn building gradually becomes an activity which is heavily associated with some areas and not others. Laufskálavarða is a lava ridge located on the east side of Mýrdalssandur black-lava sand flats in South Iceland where cairn building is associated with bringing travellers luck on their onward journey. The ridge is covered with hundreds of small cairns.





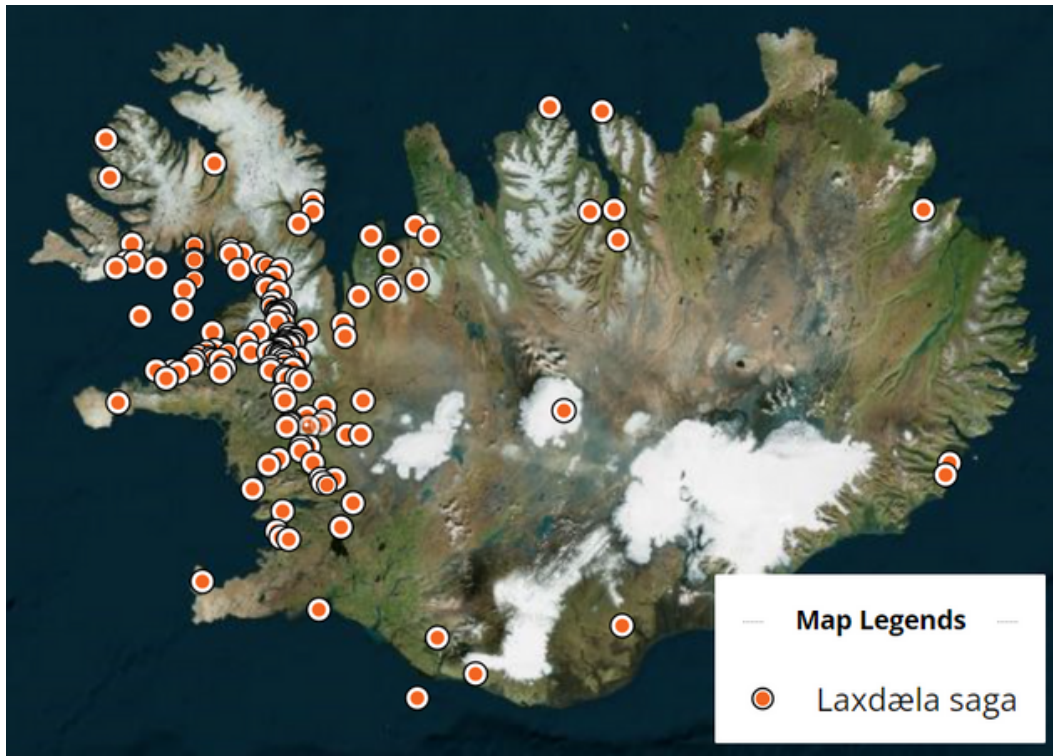


## Narrative dimension

'...we need good myths that help us to narrate the earth as sacred once again, because unless there is a spiritual revolution that challenges the destruction of our technological genius, we will not save our planet'.

Karen Armstrong, *Sacred Nature*.

Mythology is a powerful force behind how we understand and experience landscape. In Iceland, places associated with the sagas are scattered throughout the country and have been mapped by a team at the University of Iceland Centre for Medieval Studies. This ensures that these ancient stories are not forgotten and can be shared with each upcoming generation of residents and visitors.



Unlike film locations, the settings of sagas that have already survived for centuries are not as susceptible to changing tastes and the rapid turnover of cultural output. This is not the case for sites such as Sycamore Gap in the Northumberland National Park or Aysgarth Falls in the Yorkshire Dales National Park which are both associated with the 1990s film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*; undeniably a classic, but not the visitor draw it was on its release.





### Case Study: Heimskautsgerðið/ Arctic Henge

Standing on a hill above the remote village of Raufarhofn on Iceland's northern coast, Heimskautsgerðið or The Arctic Henge is a fascinating merging of Icelandic mythology, sculpture and landscape. Based on an idea by hotelier Erlingur Thoroddsen and developed by visual artist Haukur Halldórsson and author Jónas Friðrik, the stone edifice has been designed to interact with the unique natural light that occurs on the fringes of the Arctic Circle. It currently consists of one 10m high column surrounded by four 6m tall gates which function as a sundial. A complex interpretation of mythology has inspired the design, focusing on the dwarves which are named in the Völuspá (The Prophecy of the Seeress), a 10th Century poem which describes the creation, destruction and rebirth of the world. In essence, the final design is an almanac wherein individual dwarves with individual personalities represent different parts of the year. This allows people to align with an individual dwarf based on their birthday and it is easy to see how this could be applied to merchandising. Still under construction, further additions will include a polar star pointer, the 'throne of the sun' and an altar where ceremonies can be performed.



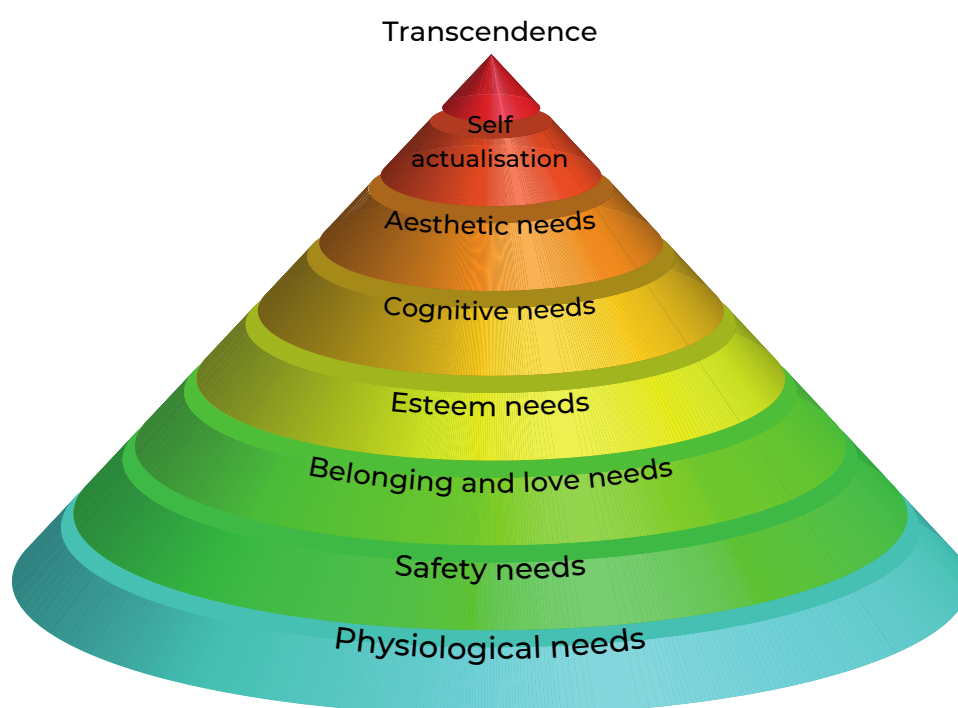
In this author's opinion, the new narrative created to legitimise the stones' presence, though an interesting act of scholarship, is unnecessary. Every visitor to Arctic Henge will bring their own story to the sculpture and it is enough to simply experience the atmosphere and natural elements at play. Over-interpretation rarely re-enchants the landscape for visitors because it does not feel authentic, and authenticity is an essential ingredient for successful interactions with nature.





Much of what draws visitors to protected areas is the experience of being there. This undefinable feeling is referenced repeatedly in protected area management plans in the UK, but in secular society there is a limited vocabulary to fully describe what visitors are experiencing when they spend time in nature. One way to describe this experience is as a form of transcendence, the feeling of going beyond the limits of ordinary experience. In his 1943 paper '*A Theory of Human Motivation*', psychologist Abraham Maslow identified transcendence as humans' most advanced need. He called it:

*'...the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.'*



For protected area managers, the relation between humans and other species is vital. A transcendent experience in nature in which we feel part of something greater than ourselves can give visitors' greater meaning and purpose, and in some cases, a reason to stay alive.

According to Thomas S. Bremer, author of the essay *The Religious and Spiritual Appeal of National Parks*, some of the earliest visitors to national parks in the United States went seeking pain relief and cures for debilitating illnesses. This was a natural progression from pilgrims seeking out the holy wells or caves where saints had been said to perform miracles. Today the term ecotherapy encapsulates therapeutic activities taking place in nature which are designed to reduce stress and anxiety, improve mood, raise self-esteem and boost psychological well-being. The therapeutic value of Icelandic nature is now being recognised in the scientific community: researchers analysing the experiences of participants visiting forests, seashores and a park near Ísafjörður found that the wild and open nature in North West Iceland had the characteristics of a restorative environment and could be utilised for health promotion.







The vast majority of religions pay significant regard to the environment and faith can be a key motivator to action. The charitable network, Faith & the Common Good, have encapsulated this in their Green Rule poster which I have adapted (see page 21). Religiously-motivated conservation is a vital subsection of the environmental movement, practised by organisations such as EcoSynagogue and Caring for God's Acre. *Beyond Belief: Linking faiths and protected areas to support biodiversity conservation* is a fantastic resource published by the World Wide Fund for Nature which details the conservation work done by religious groups all around the world.



The ethics of spending time in protected areas are complex and can be very confusing for newcomers. Religious rules that have persisted for centuries tend to be clearly and concisely written, like the Ten Commandments of Judaism and Christianity, or the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism. It also helps if they are displayed in an aesthetically pleasing way like the outdoor etiquette guidelines produced by Metsähallitus, Finland's protected area body. In the UK the organisation Muslim Hikers has gone even further by partnering with Natural England to communicate the Countryside Code and explore how it interacts with Islamic teaching.





### Native American Spirituality

We are as much alive as we keep the Earth alive.  
*Chief Dan George*

### Shintoism

Return to its original place that which was given to humans as a gift of nature.  
*Ancient Japanese saying*

### Hinduism

The Earth said, "It behoves you, O hero, to regard me as your daughter."  
*7 Mahabharata 69:3*

### Bahá'í

Be the embodiments of justice and fairness amid all creation.  
*Kitáb-i-Aqdas 187*

### Classical Philosophy

We should return the equivalent of what we have received.  
*Aristotle 8:13*

### Confucianism

All things are nourished together without their injuring one another.  
*Doctrine of the Mean 30:3*

### Jainism

Nonviolence is the supreme religion. One who looks on the creatures of the Earth, big and small, as one's own self, comprehends this immense world.  
*Lord Mahavira*

### Tenrikyo

The earth and heaven of this world is your real Parent.  
*Ofudesaki 10:54.*

### Sikhism

Air is the Guru, Water is the Father, and Earth is the Great Mother of all.  
*Guru Granth Sahib pg 146*

### Wiccan

Live an' let live - Fairly take an' fairly give.  
*Rede of The Wicca 2*

### Shintoism

Return to its original place that which was given to humans as a gift of nature.  
*Ancient Japanese saying*

### Taoism

Do not let man destroy Nature. Do not let cleverness destroy the natural order.  
*Chuang Tzu 17:7*

### Islam

The world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you his stewards over it.  
*Sahih Muslim Hadith 6606*

### Buddhism

Cut down the forest of desire, not the forest of trees.  
*Dhammapada 283*

### Unitarianism

We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.  
*Seventh Unitarian Principle*

### Christianity

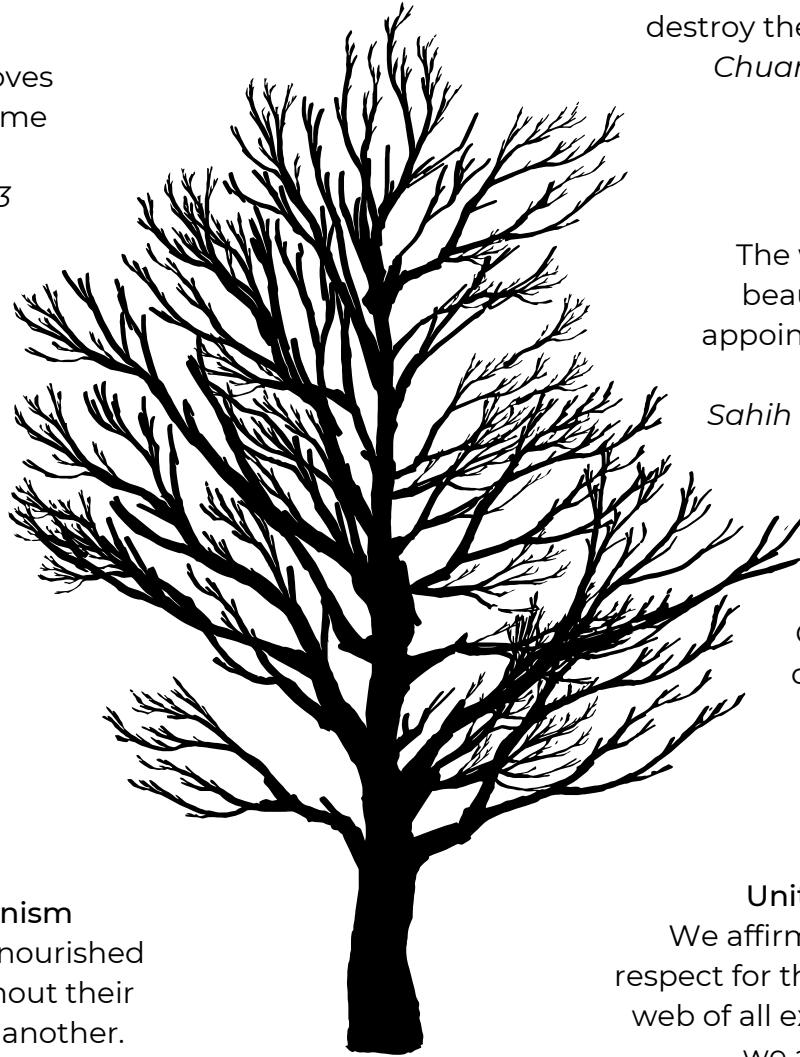
Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees.  
*Revelations 7:3*

### Zoroastrianism

Undertake to nourish, to rule, and to watch over my world.  
*Fargard 2:4*

### Judaism

When God created the first human beings, God led them around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said: 'See my works how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Think of this, and do not corrupt or destroy My world'.  
*Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7*



## The Green Rule

The symbolism of giants, trolls, elves and wyrms is central to the understanding of the Icelandic landscape where the personification of natural features serves to create a human connection between people and natural features. Caves, canyons, mountains and even a whole peninsula (Tröllaskagi) have been designated as the churches and dwelling places of mythical creatures, while storytellers have transformed sea stacks and rock pillars into petrified giants and trolls.

The influence of elves or huldufólk (the hidden people) on the built environment is well documented in the international press, with numerous stories of elf rocks disrupting the building of roads, houses and dams. Belief in the supernatural aside, Icelandic elves act as a metaphor for the natural world and can have a significant influence on residents' and visitors' behaviour when they visit sacred elf sites.

This phenomenon is visible in all of Iceland's álagablettir (enchanted spots) which are essentially synonymous with SNSs. The folklore expert Terry Gunnell explains:

*'The stories people tell change things. They have effects not only on the way people see the storyteller, but also on the way in which they understand and experience both the surroundings of the performance and the world around them in general. Legends directly connected to these surroundings function alongside place names to give landscape depth, history, personality and mysticism. However, for listeners, they also provide a kind of map of how one should behave in this landscape: what is right, what is wrong, when they are right and wrong, and how punishment is likely to descend on you if you transgress the largely unwritten moral rules imposed by society.'*









## Social dimension

For Thomas S. Bremer national parks serve as sacred sites of nationalist civil religion, with the national park staff acting as the custodians and official interpreters of these places of national significance. It might be useful to consider all protected areas stakeholders as making up a congregation, with the staff as a priesthood or gatekeepers. The comparison feels appropriate: in animist religions which believe that all natural phenomena possess a soul or spirit, Shamans act as intermediaries between a community and its natural environment and ensure a fruitful exchange between them. And just like priests in the UK who have to serve multiple parishes, protected area staff cannot be everywhere all at once so in the Þingvellir National Park Visitor Centre digital staff are on hand to answer visitors' questions.



Iceland is gratifyingly prepared to honour its protected area staff: it feels only right that at Þingvellir the office of the park warden sits alongside the summer residence of the Icelandic Prime Minister. This Summer the Reykjavik Photography Museum hosted an exhibition called Landvörður, which translates as both 'rangers' and 'cairns'. These portraits, landscape photographs and videos by the artist Jessica Auer show protected area staff in their working environment and are described as 'a meditation on the collective responsibility of Icelanders and visitors to preserve this unique nature'. For this author, these portraits have a feeling of religious iconography, displaying a new generation of saints connecting people with transcendent places.

In a multicultural, multifaith global society, it is increasingly important that protected areas cater for diverse spiritual needs. For example, plans for the expansion of Bolton Abbey, a visitor attraction located partially in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, include a prayer room to cater towards Muslim visitors. In 2019 Natural England estimated that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds account for only around 1% of visitors to national parks in the UK despite making up about 14% of the general population. It is a fact that in the UK people from BAME backgrounds are more likely to identify with a religion than the white population, therefore protected areas may benefit from working with partners to create more spiritual experiences, including volunteering activities aimed at particular faiths.

Case Study: Gullfoss



Gullfoss (Golden Falls) is a natural monument to environmental activism. Visitors to Gullfoss hear a simple, memorable and dramatic version of the story: in the 1920s a group of English investors planned to dam the Hvítá river to create hydroelectric energy. When the landowner, Tómas Tómasson, refused to sell the investors obtained permission directly from the government, promoting Tómasson's daughter Sigríður to walk to Reykjavik barefoot in protest where she threatened to throw herself into the waterfall if the project went ahead.

The reality is more bureaucratic and the court case dragged on for years and eventually failed. However, the project ultimately did not go ahead when the investors' contract lapsed, and in 1979 Gullfoss was designated as a nature reserve. Sigríður Tómasson has remained a pioneering figurehead in the history of environmental activism in Iceland, her efforts marked by a statue above Gullfoss. Her story still inspires activists: Rúna Hauksdóttir, mother of the musical artist Björk, went on hunger strike to protest an aluminium smelter and hydroelectric plant in the Icelandic highlands.

Gullfoss forms part of the highly popular Golden Circle visitor route. Its proximity to Reykjavik and Keflavík International Airport, as well as its strong accessibility credentials (it boasts a specially designated viewing platform for visitors with disabilities) means that it receives around two million visitors a year. This means that even visitors with limited time and resources to spend on their Icelandic adventure are exposed to a powerful story of environmental activism, and could, if they are fully engaged in their experience, come away with a desire to fight their own battles for nature.









## Material dimension

Religious people imbue physical places and objects they perceive to be sacred with rich spiritual meaning. For millennia communities all over the world have built, paid for and maintained places of worship which act as meeting points for humans and the divine and gathering points for communities. I believe that SNSs share this function and that accessing them should be as straightforward as visiting the mosque, church or synagogue on the high street.

Nature feels very present in Iceland's churches.

Hóladómkirkja in the North has a font carved from a piece of soapstone which washed in from Greenland on an ice flow and Stykkisholmskirkja in the Snaefellsnes peninsula is designed to resemble a whale's backbone. National Park planners could certainly take note and update design guides to actively encourage biomimicry in the design of sacred and secular buildings within protected areas.



Labyrinths are used as a way to access sacred places when one can't be there in person: a famous example is the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral in France where pilgrims perambulate the circular stone-carved path as symbolic pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In Iceland, visitors can experience the wonders of nature without even leaving the capital. At Aurora Reykjavik visitors watch footage of the phenomenon in the Northern Lights Theatre, learn about the science and are schooled in night sky photography, while at FlyOver Iceland visitors can see 'all of Iceland' in a theme park ride/4D cinema experience. While not a replacement for the real thing, these immersive experiences in digitised versions of nature are engaging and exciting, providing an entry point for the less confident traveler and an alternative experience where weather conditions or cost may make a real life interaction impossible.



## Material dimension

Sometimes the material culture of a religion or a protected area is not supposed to be accessible, and is declared to be 'taboo'. Surtsey Nature Reserve lies off the South West coast of Iceland and is closed to all public traffic. In 2008 it became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The volcanic island between 1963-67 and is named after the Norse fire god who will burn the world to ashes at Ragnarök (the end of the world). Other protected areas may impose 'sabbaths', periods of sacred time in which certain behaviours are restricted, such as during a thaw when climbers' access needs to be restricted to prevent damage to cliff faces.



SNSs function as places of worship embedded in nature. But they are only part of a growing ecosystem: climate change hubs are becoming new centres where people can gather to express their concerns about the climate emergency and to seek solutions. ZERO, a centre managed by Zero Climate Guildford, aims to educate, to reach people who are not yet taking action on climate, offer practical, local solutions to help the community cope with fragile supply chains and to build wellbeing and mental health support networks. Located in urbanised areas, climate change hubs could offer an excellent opportunity for partnership with protected areas, by offering mutual opportunities for engagement and new networks to promote access to nature.



### Case study: Souvenirs and votives

The leaving and taking of objects is an unavoidable aspect of tourism. Pilgrims have always left votives or offerings in sacred places and this tradition persists when tourists throw coins into bodies of water. In Iceland this becomes a major problem when coins are thrown into active geysers. The challenge for protected area managers is to capitalise on this human need to leave an element of themselves in places which have affected them emotionally- perhaps by installing unobtrusive electronic donation points at these sites.



As Iceland's booming industry continues to grow it is essential that protected areas take the lead in only selling souvenirs which are produced locally, ethically and which carry meaning for the purchaser, and in the case of gifts, for the receiver. An excellent example of this are lopapeysa, knitted jumpers made of Icelandic wool that reflect the colours of the landscape. The ethos of religious souvenirs is useful here: pilgrim's often buy objects which are intended to heal, protect or empower a particular person back home so that the pilgrim's experience is shared with their loved ones. The best protective areas souvenirs are incredibly evocative of the landscape they came from: I still regret not buying a beautiful raven's foot necklace from the Fjalladýrð lodge in the northern highlands! However, the small tokens and photographs I did take away with me provide a tangible link back to my experience and a permanent reminder that I can and will go back.



1. Make the retail offer sustainable and meaningful. Every souvenir purchased from a protected area should become a treasured possession that encourages repeat visits and in depth engagement.

2. Organise and promote activities that cater for visitors of different faiths.

3. Accept that engaging spiritually is one of many different ways for visitors to experience a protected area. The more diverse the experiences that are available, the better the visitor offer.

4. Make your code of conduct clear, attractive and connected to people's spiritual value systems.

5. Recognise that people are more likely to donate their time, energy and money to causes that resonate with them on a spiritual level.

6. Provide places for people to experience complex emotions during challenging life stages.

7. Acknowledge and promote the fact that protected areas are some of our greatest pieces of cultural heritage and markers of nationhood.

8. View all protected area stakeholders as part of a congregation of owners, users and facilitators.

9. Create opportunities for people of all faiths and none to celebrate important life events in inspirational surroundings.

10. Under the Human Rights Act everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. When nature becomes sacred, access to it becomes a human right.



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*All photos are the property of the author unless otherwise stated.*



We would like to say an enormous thank you to the people of Iceland, and especially the Protected Area staff, for their wonderful hospitality during our visit to their enchanting country.



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Alongside her work in planning policy and economic development she researches the interconnections between religion and the environment. Between 2019-2022 she was the Local Plan Officer for the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

