

Wetlands and spiritual life

Water is essential for life, and therefore people's belief systems have, from earliest times, commonly considered water and wetlands to be sacred. This has been just as true in lands of plentiful rainfall as in arid lands. Although now diminished in some cultures, this sacramental relationship between people and wetlands is still in evidence today in many parts of the world.

Archaeology supplies ample evidence of the antiquity of wetland beliefs. Burial sites from 8,000 years ago in Florida, USA, and the numerous ancient sites identified around Lake Titicaca, indicating a thriving pilgrimage route from 2,500 years ago, are just two examples. In Britain, the Roman name for the present town of Buxton was *Aquae Arnemetiae*, recalling its ancient Celtic name meaning the sacred waters and grove. This name is probably some 2,500 years old and the connection between springs, woods and the sacred was maintained as Christianity spread through Britain, resulting in literally thousands of holy springs, wells, streams, and islands.

A similar relationship is seen in India, a country where drought is common and often life-threatening. Hindu traditions of capturing and holding rainfall

became the focus of a cult of sacred lakes and surrounding groves. In the forests of Vrindavan, sacred to Krishna, in northern India, every village maintained its own sacred *kund*, or small lake. A grove of trees around the *kund* helped retain rainfall and, in the midst of this grove, was built a temple or shrine dedicated to a deity usually associated with Krishna or the goddess Radha. The *kund*

and grove were sacred and inviolable, and the legal property of the temple deity. This ensured the survival of the *kund* and its ability to store rainfall, mitigate flooding, supply irrigation water, and recharge the groundwater which supplied village wells and supported wildlife. Neglect and pollution of these once-

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SEHUNED



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An annual religious ceremony in the Valencia Lagoon, Spain, to exorcise diseases and bless the water. (Top)

Mother and son bathe in the silt-filled waters of the holy Yamuna River, in Vrindavan, birthplace of the god Krishna, India. (Above)

sacred lakes in recent times has led to increasing problems of water shortage, flooding, and lack of clean water, and in some areas efforts are now being made to improve the care of these functional holy places.

In the Arabian Peninsula, wetlands and springs have had legal Islamic protection since the 11th century. Called *himas*, these protected areas covered up to one kilometre around key watersheds, springs or marshes. Under Islamic law all creatures need fresh water and must be allowed to come to such sources unhindered, so exploitation or development

within the *himas* was prohibited. In the 1960s, many thousands of *himas* were released for development activities but the recent rise in awareness of Islamic environmental law is resulting in efforts to reinstate this principle and restore the surviving *himas*. This movement is now spreading to other Islamic regions such as Indonesia and Zanzibar.

In the forest and savannah zones of Guinea, traditional beliefs are still deeply entrenched in everyday village life. Here, several lakes are sacred to local communities, and strict religious taboos and local rules dictate the proper use of wetland resources. At Lake Wassaya it is forbidden to hunt, there is a very short fishing season, and even the Wassaya's crocodiles are sacred. People wishing to see the lake must first gain permission from a group of village elders. These traditional beliefs are still followed today and have helped to maintain the ecological integrity of these forest wetlands.

The Camargue region in the delta of the river Rhône, southern France, is famous for its ancient festivals honouring the Virgin Mary of the Christian religion, the wetlands, and the sea. The main delta town, Les Saintes Maries de la Mer, is named in honour of the Virgin Mary's links with the waters. Here each summer her image is carried through the delta and brought to be washed in the sea to celebrate the protection for the waters, land, and people of this region.

Sometimes the sacred value of wetlands has enabled them to survive undisturbed for centuries. In

Ladakh, high altitude wetlands lying on the western edge of the Tibetan plateau at altitudes of between 4,000 and 5,000 meters include a number of sacred lakes, so precious to the local Buddhist population that they will not enter the waters, or take from them in any way. These wetlands provide the only breeding grounds for some bird species and support a unique flora as well as rare mammals.

In some cultures, belief systems do not differentiate between the economic, social, cultural and spiritual value of wetlands and people seem to have a more holistic perspective of their world. Indigenous people in Australia consider themselves an integral part of their natural environment. With the poorest soils of any inhabited continent and with a very dry climate, the high productivity of Australia's wetlands has given them special significance for these people. Their wetlands are very often sacred to them: they are story places and evidence of the work of the ancestral creators who made the landscape and provided for the needs of people. This holistic perspective is also found in many indigenous belief systems in Africa and the Americas.

The spiritual connection between people and wetlands has a long history and is still of great significance today in many cultures, their belief systems and traditions representing an important feature of wetland cultural heritage – and at the same time often ensuring the conservation and wise use of wetlands.

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