

The case of the *murabitun* / *amrabd*, ancient sacred natural sites

in al Hoceima National Park, Morocco

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Established in 2004 after a disastrous earthquake, the National Park of al Hoceima, a IUCN category V (protected landscape), is the main protected area in the Rif region of north Morocco. Its total area is over 48,000 ha, of which 18,000 are marine areas. The Mediterranean cliffs are spectacular, reaching an altitude of 700 m. Altitudinal variations create quite diverse landscapes, therefore biodiversity is high, particularly in the coastal and marine parts of the park.

Although the National Park is under funded and has limited planning and management resources, it has a valuable asset: several local organizations very committed to conservation and a long history of community conserved areas. A stronghold of the Amazig (berber) culture, in particular the Bokkoya tribe, the terrestrial zone is densely populated with some 15,000 people living there in 36 *douars* (traditional villages), in addition to some 33,000 people living in the peripheral zone. The Park includes some of the highest concentrations of sacred natural sites of North Africa.

These sacred sites receive different names: *murabitun* or *klalwas* in Arabic, *amrabd* in Amazig (ancient regional language) and *sites marabutiques* in French. Although *murabitun* usually refers to a shrine where a holy person was buried, it also includes, by extension, the natural protected area around it. The natural area itself is called *hurum* with has the same root of *haram*, meaning reserved or forbidden, because of his holiness. *Khalwa*, spelled *khaloa* in the region, refers to a place of spiritual retreat. The custodians of these sacred sites, usually people from nearby villages or farms, are called *lamkaddam*, which comes from *al-muqaddam*, i.e. the representative. All these Arabic names are used in *Tarifit*, the Amazig dialect of the region.

The *murabitun* / *amrabd* of Al Hoceima are outstanding: ecologically they protect the best relicts of the original vegetal communities, which have been severely deteriorated almost elsewhere in the region. Culturally, they are important sites of history, memory and identity for the local population over the ages. Most important decisions have been taken around them. Spiritually, they normally include tombs of holy people, often in small shrines and sometimes together with small mosques. A variety of rituals and ceremonies are still enacted there, such as annual pilgrimages or festivals (*mussem*) and sacrifice of young animals, usually goats or sheep. Most *douars* have one or several sacred natural sites nearby. The origin of these sacred sites seems very ancient, pre-Christian in many cases, perhaps Phoenician, although all of them have been 'Islamised'. Therefore, it is likely that many of them have been actively conserved for over thirty centuries.

A striking fact is that the sacred natural sites are found within seriously degraded mountain landscapes, due to deforestation and overgrazing, standing out as relatively pristine patches of vegetation, without any physical walls. For generations the high respect that local population –

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including shepherd boys and girls- has had for those sites has been the most effective safeguard against any misuse or exploitation. In fact, the strength and resilience of the beliefs supported the conservation of these sacred natural sites for centuries, more effectively than any legislation or official surveillance. However, under current circumstances, additional measures are required, as will be discussed later.

From a conservation point of view, these sacred sites have a particular value as reference plant communities for mountain landscape restoration and also to monitor the responses and resilience of slightly altered natural vegetation patches to climate change impacts. These relict forests contain unique gene pools, which has allowed them to overcome multiple changes over the centuries. From a cultural and spiritual point of view, they are significant places of tribal and local memory and identity. Moreover, these sites are the result of open interpretation of the Islamic tradition, which has deep roots in the region.

The main features of these sacred natural sites include patches of forests, sometimes less than one hectare in size, other times a few hectares, often with a particular sacred tree, preserving a considerable array of plant and animal species. Very old specimens of *Tetraclinis articulata*, *Olea europea*, *Pistacia lentiscus*, *Chamaerops humilis*, *Ceratonia siliqua*, *Quercus coccifera* or *Zyziphus lotus* are common. They often include a water spring, well or small stream, and a small mosque which hosts a tomb of a holy person, a spiritual leader or a high political or military authority. The physical distribution of the sacred natural sites is complex. The largest sites seem related to strategic lines, such as the borders of tribal lands, defensive lines against the invaders from the north, and also some key passage points, located from the coast or over cliffs, to hilltops or slopes over 1,500 m of altitude.

As Regato and Salman (2008) point out, these sacred natural sites are very valuable areas for conservation and their species populations may have an important role to play in adaptive management strategies against climate change conditions of mountain biodiversity hotspots areas. This role could be very significant in places undergoing accelerated ecological degradation where social resistance to nature conservation arguments alone may be high, as is the case in North Africa.

The main threats to the *murabitun / amrabd* are a consequence of the erosion or weakening of the traditional cultural values in younger generations. Therefore, recovering or strengthening the cultural values and knowledge is one of the main challenge that the National Park is facing. Another secondary threat is the spread of the Islamic fundamentalism, which historically has never been significant in Morocco.

The opportunities to conserve the entire heritage of these sacred sites are very significant:

- Most sacred natural sites are property of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Habous which is very much interested in their conservation and restoration.
- Several local and regional NGOs are involved in safeguarding and restoring the sacred sites and their spiritual, cultural and natural heritage, as well as other significant related projects like the nursery of Tafnasa.

- Some local NGOs are interested in promoting ecotourism routes, which could allow the visit to some of the less fragile sacred sites, adding value, providing resources to local populations and thus helping to conserve them.
- Selected plant species from these sites are critically important for ecological restoration, which should be done by local organizations
- There is a growing interest in recovering traditional knowledge and management practices related to these sacred sites.
- Future inclusion of those sacred sites in local and regional educational programs will help in strengthening cultural identity and values related to them.
- Last but not least, future planning and management of the National Park should have as a priority conserving and restoring the full spectrum of values of these outstanding sacred natural sites.

Acknowledgements

In December 2008 a seminar was organised by the Azir NGO and its Spanish counterpart, Ecodesarrollo, at the town of Al-Hoceima. Attended by some fifty people, including the managers of the National Park, and representatives of the main local authorities and several active local and regional NGOs, most of the debates focused on the significance, threats and opportunities for conserving the heritage of the sacred natural sites included in the National Park and around it. This paper includes the author's summary of the seminar. Four people deserve special recognition: Soussan Fikrt, regional delegate of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Habous, Monhamed Al-Andalousi, President of the Azir Association, Al Hoceima; Anissa El Kahttabi, Asociación Rif para el Desarrollo del Turismo Rural, and Miriam Zaitogui, former environmental consultant of Ecodesarrollo.

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