



Cultural values of nature: untying knots and creating bonds in the implementation of conservation policies

Valores culturais da natureza: desatando nós e criando laços na implementação de políticas de conservação

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ABSTRACT: In many social groups, nature is not only associated with utilitarian and economic aspects, but also with features of their history, memory and identity. These are knowledge and practices that form material and immaterial cultural connections that are still poorly understood and accounted for in conservation strategies. In recent decades, this issue has gained visibility in global debates, inspiring the perspective of an alliance with society as a prerequisite for promoting nature conservation, valuing the positive aspects of this interaction. In Brazil, these issues still lead to conflicts between government efforts to protect nature and the needs and rights of local populations. The ideology of a dehumanized nature, disenchanting by its symbolic meaning, contributes to the invisibility of identity and cultural ties with natural areas. Therefore, the objective of this article is to connect Brazilian conservation policies to the global debate on cultural values of nature and to present a concept proposal and description of categories adapted to the national reality. This analysis was based on a bibliographic, documentary and normative review that support the theme, as well as debates resulting from courses and events promoted in Brazil, between 2019 and early 2023. Considering the socio-environmental complexity and richness of the country and the sectorization of its public policies, some challenges for the integration of these values into strategies for conservation are highlighted. These included training public managers to work on this topic; promote surveys in areas of interest for conservation; and adapt international guidelines to different contexts, based on interdisciplinary and intersectoral initiatives that promote the exchange of knowledge. The integration of this subject into the public administration can help to untie knots and create ties with different social groups in favor of nature's conservation, strengthening the role of local communities in this process.

Keywords: nature conservation; cultural heritage; natural heritage; protected areas; cultural and spiritual significance of nature.

RESUMO:

Para muitos grupos sociais, a natureza está associada não apenas a aspectos utilitários e econômicos, mas também a elementos da sua história, memória e identidade, envolvendo saberes e práticas que conformam ligações culturais materiais e imateriais ainda pouco compreendidas nas estratégias de conservação. Nas últimas décadas, essa temática vem ganhando visibilidade em debates globais, inspirando a perspectiva de aliança com a sociedade como uma premissa para promover a conservação da natureza, valorizando aspectos positivos dessa interação. No Brasil, essas questões ainda se traduzem em conflitos entre os esforços governamentais de proteção da natureza e as necessidades e direitos de populações locais. Um ideário de natureza *desumanizada* e *desencantada* de seus significados simbólicos contribui para que vínculos identitários e culturais com as áreas naturais continuem invisibilizados. Diante disso, o objetivo desse artigo é conectar políticas de conservação brasileiras ao debate global sobre valores culturais da natureza e apresentar uma proposta de conceito e descrição de categorias adaptada à realidade nacional. A análise é fundamentada em revisão bibliográfica, documental e de normativas que subsidiam a temática, bem como em debates resultantes de cursos e eventos promovidos no Brasil, entre 2019 e início de 2023. Considerando a complexidade e riqueza socioambiental do país e a setorização de suas políticas públicas, destacam-se alguns desafios para que esses valores sejam integrados nas estratégias de conservação. Dentre eles, a necessidade de capacitar gestores públicos para trabalhar com o tema; promover estudos em áreas de interesse para conservação; e adequar as orientações internacionais a diferentes contextos, a partir de iniciativas interdisciplinares e intersetoriais que promovam o diálogo de saberes. A integração desse tema na gestão pública pode ajudar a desatar nós e criar laços com diferentes grupos sociais em prol da conservação da natureza, fortalecendo o protagonismo de comunidades locais nesse processo.

Palavras-chave: conservação da natureza; patrimônio cultural; patrimônio natural; áreas protegidas; significância cultural e espiritual da natureza.

1. Introduction: challenges in integrating nature and culture in conservation policies

Raising awareness in society to support the maintenance of environmentally relevant areas is one of the main challenges in implementing public policies for nature conservation (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021). However, in much of the world, public policies are based on a conceptual and instrumental division that separates nature and culture, treating these dimensions in a dissociated manner. The notion of biodiversity also derives from a dominant Western ideology, grounded in the concept of a homogeneous humanity and a globalizing, commodified narrative, which considers humans

as separate from nature and potentially harmful to it (Moscovici, 2007; Verschuuren & Brown, 2018).

In this context, it is common for conservation strategies to be primarily based on technical and scientific arguments, in which only objective evidence of the biophysical aspects of natural systems is evaluated, emphasizing utilitarian or negative aspects of human interaction. In initiatives of communication with society, discourses prevail on the importance of biological richness per se and the economic benefits of ecosystem services. Although these aspects are relevant, they do not encompass all the reasons why people care about nature (Harmon & Putney, 2003). As Ailton Krenak's book title (2020) suggests, life is not always useful and the emotional bonds with nature cannot be measured in monetary terms.

Consequently, the diversity of values and concepts of nature permeates the worldview of various social groups. Its significance encompasses a range of complex cultural connections that are difficult to describe and measure. They are intricately linked to the history, memory and identity of diverse peoples, incorporating both material and immaterial knowledge and practices (Harmon & Putney, 2003; Toledo & Barrera-Bassols, 2015; Descola, 2016).

Far from being secondary, these aspects commonly shape a sense of belonging and caring relationships of human populations with natural spaces. According to Verschuuren & Brown (2018), cultural and spiritual meanings associated with nature are among the strongest motivations for maintaining conserved areas. For it is in the connection between scientific knowledge, arts and emotions that the naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt (1769 – 1859) termed a *deeply rooted bond*, which nourishes the feeling of admiration and respect for the natural world. An idea that reinforces the importance of *wonderment* in the face of nature, highlighted by Krenak (2022) as essential for promoting recognition of the interconnection between culture and nature.

Despite their social relevance, cultural values related to nature are still often overlooked in conservation and environmental management strategies. In this context, the need to understand the bonds that connect people to natural areas has been reaffirmed. They are crucial for increasing the effectiveness of these strategies and helping to overcome existing challenges in the implementation of corresponding policies (Harmon & Putney, 2003; Fernandes-Pinto, 2017; Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021).

In recent decades, this theme has been gaining visibility in global debates. It has also been inspiring

the perspective of alliances with society as a premise to promote nature conservation, valuing the positive aspects of this interaction. Surveys aimed at identifying and characterizing the relationship between culture and nature have been promoted in various regions of the world (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021).

In Brazil, however, a country that combines one of the greatest biological richness in the world with significant sociocultural diversity, issues related to this theme still translate into various conflicts between governmental efforts to conserve nature and the needs, interests and rights of local populations. The dualism between nature and culture has contributed to shaping a scenario of conflict regarding the presence of indigenous peoples and traditional communities in areas designated for conservation. This ideology has favored the dissemination of a view of nature as *dehumanized* and *disenchanted* of its symbolic meanings, which contributes to the invisibility of identity and cultural ties with natural areas (Diegues, 2003; Fernandes-Pinto, 2017).

Only in the last two decades has this scenario begun to change, with the introduction of new legal instruments that have started to incorporate a vision of socio-environmental rights (Santilli, 2005; Shirashi Neto, 2007). However, there is still a long way to go for an effective integration of cultural values into conservation strategies.

With the aim of enriching this discussion, the objective of this article is to connect Brazilian conservation policies to the global debate on cultural values of nature, as well as to present a proposal for a concept and description of categories adapted to the national reality.

The analysis is methodologically grounded in a literature review of key publications in the field and in the documentary evaluation of international

norms and recommendations that underpin the debate. It also draws on the author's professional experience in drafting guidelines for the *International Union for the Conservation of Nature – IUCN* on the subject (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021)¹; in promoting events, lectures and courses with this focus in Brazil; and in conducting surveys of cultural values of nature in some conservation units, through initiatives promoted by the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation – ICMBio², between 2019 and early 2023.

The interpretative reflection is guided by the theoretical perspectives of Psychosociology and Social Ecology, aiming to go beyond the factual level of phenomena and composing an interdisciplinary and critical view of the subject in contemporary times.

The presentation of the results begins with a comprehensive overview of the main milestones in discussions on the topic in global nature conservation forums and the key international norms that underpin this debate. Next, some Brazilian policies are listed that should be articulated to integrate culture and nature into conservation strategies. Additionally, pioneering initiatives for discussing and disseminating this theme at the federal level are highlighted, which supported the proposition of the concept and description of categories of *cultural values of nature* presented in this article. Considering the complexity and socio-environmental richness of the country, as well as the segmentation of its public policies, some challenges to be overcome for these values to be adequately integrated into

conservation strategies are identified, along with priority actions to contribute to this process.

2. The evolution of discussions on the topic in the global scenario

The recognition of the multiple values of nature and their direct and indirect contributions to human well-being and quality of life has been expanding in global environmental forums (Chan *et al.*, 2011). In this context, the theme of cultural values of nature began to awaken interest from the late 1990s, when the first reference works were published and events were promoted by global coalitions.

The collection entitled *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, released in 1999 by the *United Nations Environment Program – UNEP*, is considered the first comprehensive specialized publication on the subject. Interweaving historical, legal, scientific, philosophical and personal perspectives, the work provides a glimpse of the vast network of connections that interlink biological and cultural diversity (Posey, 1999).

In international discussions on nature conservation and protected areas, the theme gained momentum when it was incorporated into the agenda of world congresses organized by the IUCN. This occurred more prominently at the *V World Parks Congress (WPC)* in Durban/ South Africa, held in 2003 – the first to involve indigenous peoples from various parts of the world. They denounced injustices suffered by many groups as a consequence of

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² Where the author was responsible for developing a program to integrate cultural values of nature into the management of conservation units (Service Order No. 10/2019).

the lack of involvement of environmental agencies with local populations and the disregard for cultural aspects in the implementation of these policies. Harsh criticisms were directed at the prevailing model of natural heritage conservation, condemning colonialist practices and emphasizing that many protected areas overlap not only with territories of traditional use but also on sites of cultural and spiritual significance (Brosius, 2004).

This context sparked a series of debates that triggered a global paradigm shift in nature conservation, strengthening the political discourse on the relevance of indigenous and traditional peoples for biodiversity maintenance, as well as the legitimacy of their knowledge and management practices for environmental conservation (Stevens, 2014).

Approved at the 2003 congress, *Recommendation 5.13* highlights the importance of culturally-based conservation approaches and the incorporation of cultural and spiritual meanings of nature into the management of protected areas. Additionally, *Recommendation 5.19* reinforces that these aspects are essential in all management categories and should be considered in the various stages involving the creation, implementation and management of these areas.

In this direction, the book *The Full Values of Parks: from economics to the intangible* (Harmon & Putney, 2003) is a pioneer in providing a comprehensive view of the cultural values associated with protected areas, including intangible aspects. According to the authors, the reasons why people value parks (and other categories) stem from an incredibly diverse, complex and sometimes conflicting range of aspects. This brings additional challenges for public managers, who need to deal with different interests and points of view in for-

mulating management and conservation strategies for these areas.

To follow up on the directives resulting from Durban, still in 2003 the *Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas* – CSVPA, was permanently integrated into the *World Commission on Protected Areas*, linked to IUCN. This initiative – which originated in 1998 as a task force on *non-material values of protected areas* – had its name changed in recognition of the difficulty of separating material and immaterial aspects, another criticism raised by traditional peoples regarding current policies (Verschuuren & Brown, 2018).

Bringing together experts from various countries, this group has played a fundamental role in formulating theoretical and conceptual approaches to the subject, organizing repositories of information and publications, conducting case studies and proposing principles, guidelines and directives for integrating these values into conservation strategies (Fernandes-Pinto & Irving, 2017).

A significant achievement of the CSVPA was the development of a reference document for the management of *sacred natural sites* in protected areas. This publication, launched at the *World Conservation Congress* in 2008 (Barcelona, Spain), provides an overview of the topic in the context of different countries and presents recommendations for best practices based on emblematic examples (Wild & McLeod, 2008).

At this event, *Resolution 4.099* was also approved, recognizing the diversity of concepts and values related to nature, emphasizing the need to consider different worldviews, practices and traditions to broaden intercultural efforts for conservation. It highlights the need to promote an

inclusive and comprehensive approach that values and incorporates the multiplicity of cultural perspectives in the search for sustainable solutions.

Building on this trajectory, the *VI World Parks Congress* of 2014 (Sydney, Australia) made progress in demonstrating that the most successful conservation cases in the world are those that foster partnerships with various sectors of society. With the theme *Parks, People, Planet: Inspiring Solutions*, the event aimed to stimulate innovative conceptions that encourage a deeper connection of people with nature, engaging their emotions and minds to generate physical, psychological and spiritual well-being. Launched a decade after the landmark congress in Durban in 2003, the final document of this event – titled *The Sydney Promise* – has become a reference in adopting a *new ethic* in conservation, based on the integration of biological and cultural diversity, as well as principles of justice, equity and respect for diverse social groups.

Following this, the 2016 *World Conservation Congress* (Honolulu, Hawaii) invited participants to reflect on the severity of the planetary environmental situation and the urgency of implementing mechanisms to transform this scenario. Amidst the *discouraging pessimism* – which claims that it is too late to avoid a catastrophe – and the *blind optimism* – which denies the emergence of the current situation –, an alternative path was proposed, considering that nature conservation and human progress are not necessarily mutually exclusive or incompatible.

At this event, the relationship between culture and nature emerged again as a key theme, renewing the perspective that reconnecting these dimensions should be a premise for conservation. Resolution 33 emphasized the importance of recognizing the

cultural and spiritual meanings of nature in conservation policies, as well as developing institutional capacities to promote the appreciation of these aspects associated with natural heritage through the training of professionals who work in this field. One of the highlights of this event was the establishment of a membership category within the IUCN specifically for indigenous peoples, a measure that can significantly contribute to the integration of cultural values of nature into conservation policies.

In 2018, the work *Cultural and Spiritual significance of nature in protected areas: governance, management and policy* (Verschuuren & Brown, 2018) marked the expansion of the CSVPA's approach – initially focused on understanding *sacred natural sites* – to encompass other meanings and values attributed to nature in the management of protected areas.

At the 2021 *World Conservation Congress* (Marseille/ France), a publication titled *Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature: guidance for Protected and Conserved Areas governance and management* (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021) was launched. This document, which is part of the IUCN's *Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines* series, brings together contributions from various experts to present six comprehensive principles, over 40 specific guidelines and case studies that demonstrates how cultural values can be integrated into the management of different categories of protected areas. The publication urges government agents to deepen their understanding on this topic, incorporating it in innovative ways into conservation strategies and expanding the scope of stakeholders with whom they engage to make PAs more inclusive and socially just.

The authors emphasize the need to overcome the mistaken view that cultural values and nature conservation are conflicting aspects. To do so, they argue that public managers need to understand the interconnection and interdependence of cultural and natural heritage and that multiple worldviews must be embraced in management practices. Furthermore, they stress that recommendations formulated at the global level must be validated and adapted according to local realities and the specific legislation of each country, in order to translate these guidelines into concrete actions (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, the main global regulations that support this debate and the national policies that should be articulated to promote initiatives with this goal in the Brazilian context are highlighted.

3. International policies that support the debate

Initiatives to recognize cultural values of nature and integrate them into conservation strategies have been supported by some global policies seeking an integrated understanding of culture and nature. A relevant example in this regard is the *Convention on Biological Diversity* – CBD, of 1992, which represents a milestone in recognizing the importance of traditional people and their knowledge about nature protection, affirming that cultural values are intrinsically linked to biodiversity.

In this perspective, two articles of the Convention are especially relevant. Article 8j requests respect for and preservation of the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities that embody traditional lifestyles relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of

biological diversity. And Article 10c, that encourages the protection and promotion of the customary use of biological resources in accordance with cultural practices compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements.

Two documents developed under this convention also stand out in this debate: the *Akwé:Kon Voluntary guidelines* for the conduct of cultural, environmental and social impact assessments regarding developments likely to impact sacred sites or lands traditionally occupied or used by indigenous people, from 2004; and the *Tkarihwaí:ri Code of Ethical Conduct*, which aims to ensure respect for the cultural and intellectual heritage of indigenous people and local communities relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, from 2011.

Although still underutilized in Brazil, these directives provide valuable examples of how cultural aspects should be considered in environmental interventions. They emphasize the importance of dialogue with social groups, incorporating into their texts an understanding of the intrinsic relationship between cultural and biological diversity (Fernandes-Pinto & Irving, 2017).

These recommendations are supported by *Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization on indigenous and tribal peoples*, from 1989, which establishes the principle of *self-identification* as a criterion to determine the status of these groups and recognizes the right to *prior, free and informed* consultation regarding initiatives and projects affecting their territories. Additionally, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* of 2007, adopted after 25 years of debates and controversies, is considered a fundamental achievement for the consolidation of the rights of

these groups worldwide, inspiring national policies and legislation that reinforce their rights and roles in maintaining natural diversity.

In the field of heritage policies spearheaded by the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* – UNESCO, the *World Heritage Convention*, adopted in 1972, is considered the first global instrument to address nature and culture jointly. However, the practices of listing and inscribing heritage assets are still operated under the aegis of separating of these dimensions, representing an inevitable challenge to be faced in the review of this policy (Larsen & Wijesuriya, 2015).

Furthermore, for decades the understanding of cultural heritage was limited to material assets with characteristics of greatness and exceptionality, which restricted the recognition of cultural elements of native peoples. In response to this, some countries began to demand the formulation of instruments for the protection and recognition of popular cultural expressions (Sant'Anna, 2009). A step forward in this direction was the approval of the *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore*, by UNESCO in 1989, considered a driving milestone in discussions about the protection of intangible cultural heritage in the Western world, directly influencing the valorization of the culture of indigenous peoples in heritage policies.

Since then, a more integrated perspective of nature and culture, considering both material and immaterial dimensions, has been asserted in subsequent UNESCO norms, such as the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001); the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003); and the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005). These international

devices have been fundamental in recognizing the symbolic dimensions and intangible values associated with natural heritage, helping to strengthen an integrative perspective between culture and nature in conservation initiatives (Fernandes-Pinto & Irving, 2017).

Also relevant in this debate are the statements of the *International Council of Monuments and Sites* – ICOMOS, a non-governmental organization linked to UNESCO and advisor to the World Heritage Committee. *The Quebec Declaration* of 2008, for example, introduced the notion of preserving the *Spiritu Loci* or spirit of the place. It highlights physical, social and spiritual components that give *meaning, emotion* and *mystery* to the place, providing a richer and more complete significance to heritage. In addition to intangible elements such as memories, narratives, celebrations, rituals, beliefs and knowledge which are addressed in other legal texts, this declaration includes sensations, sounds, colors, aromas, textures, flavors and other aspects that enrich the cultural experience.

The listed policies make it clear that, at the international level, an integrated reading of nature and culture is not just a trend but a necessity emphasized by the main global organizations involved in promoting heritage protection strategies. This field of interest has been gaining prominence among conservation professionals and academics on a global scale. However, in many countries, initiatives to recognize these values in public policies are in their early stages and conservation strategies continue to be dominated by the dualism between nature and culture (Verschuuren & Brown, 2018).

4. *An integrated approach to nature and culture in Brazilian public policies*

In the Brazilian context, the understanding of this issue may still be considered limited and cause some strangement among those accustomed to conceiving nature solely through the positivist bias of natural sciences. In this scenario, the cultural values of nature are scarcely recognized in the realm of public management and, consequently, also disregarded, neglected, or undervalued in conservation strategies (Fernandes-Pinto, 2017). However, several provisions in national policies allow for their connection with international recommendations related to the issue.

Brazil, in addition to its natural exuberance, harbors a rich cultural diversity composed of over 300 indigenous peoples, *quilombola* communities and various segments of traditional populations. Moreover, throughout its history, the country has received influxes of immigrants from different parts of the world, contributing to the formation of a multicultural nation. This mosaic of social groups with multiple origins and ways of life adapted to different environments manifests a variety of specific cultural values of nature across the national territory.

In the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988, this perspective is supported by Article 231 (which establishes specific rights of Indigenous Peoples); by Article 68 of the Transitional Constitutional Provisions (which deals with remaining *quilombola* communities); and by articles 215 and 216. The first introduces the notion of *cultural rights* and the valorization of the ethnic and regional diversity of Brazilian society, establishing that it is the duty of the State to protect the manifestations of popular,

indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultures, as well as of other groups participating in the national civilization process. The second, in turn, defines that Brazilian cultural heritage comprises not only material assets but also those of *immaterial nature* that represent the identity, action and memory of diverse social groups, encompassing forms of expression and ways of creating, doing and living.

In a scenario where the notion of cultural heritage has been predominantly directed towards the preservation of buildings, historical monuments and artworks of colonizers for decades, these articles represent significant milestones for the inclusion of the perspectives from other groups that comprise Brazilian society in heritage policies. In addition to granting greater visibility to the cultural values of indigenous and traditional peoples, these constitutional provisions reinforce the idea that the attribution of cultural value must be constructed from the perspective of cultural practices and their practitioners, rather than presuming that such values are immanent to things. By assigning to the government the duty to protect and promote Brazilian cultural heritage in multiple formats, it is important to emphasize that this responsibility does not exclusively fall on one governmental sector but on the State as a whole, which also includes agencies responsible for implementing environmental policies.

Brazilian regulations, implemented nationally by the *National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage* – IPHAN, distinguish two aspects of cultural heritage: material and intangible. The protection of *material cultural heritage* – which comprises the universe of tangible assets (movable or immovable) bearing references to the identity, action and memory of the different groups forming Brazilian society – is governed by the policy established in

IPHAN Ordinance N°. 375, of 2018. It establishes principles that emphasize *shared responsibility* and the need for cooperation among different spheres of government and society in preserving heritage.

The protection of *intangible cultural heritage* – which encompasses activities, practices and aspects of social life expressed in knowledge, skills, ways of doing, forms of art, festivities, celebrations and places of singular significance – is regulated by Decree N°. 3.551, of 2000. It is understood that these aspects are transmitted from generation to generation, being constantly recreated by social groups as they interact with the environment, generating a sense of identity and continuity. Accordingly, they should be considered more as processes than as products. It is also important to highlight that intangible value does not oppose material value, rather, it complements. As clarified by Menezes (2009), reducing immaterial aspects to mere mechanical references, empty of their existential content, favors the perverse *cultural us of* other people's culture, which appropriates cultural values without recognizing or crediting its producers.

Article 225 of the Federal Constitution of 1988 establishes the right of everyone to an ecologically balanced environment, essential for a healthy quality of life, also assigning to the Public Authorities and the collective the responsibility to preserve it. To this end, various instruments are made available that aim to concretize this fundamental right, in a perspective of *intergenerational solidarity* that benefits both current and future generations. In this context, it is essential to recognize that Brazilian society is composed of diverse social groups, aggregated unequally. By neglecting the different forms

and social perspectives of interaction with nature, one may incur in mistaken decisions that result in conflicts with groups that could be allies in conservation, inadvertently *criminalizing* their cultural practices (Diegues, 2019; Fernandes-Pinto, 2017).

To ensure equity in the implementation of environmental policies, it is necessary to adopt an approach that is attentive and sensitive to this plurality, strengthening dialogue with different stakeholders and promoting an integrated understanding between nature and culture. Consequently, the notion of a *healthy and balanced environment* should not be understood solely as the maintenance of an acceptable state of physical integrity, but encompass the entirety of meanings that nature represents for the various specific groups in society (Fernandes-Pinto, 2017).

Moreover, it is important to consider that the debate around the cultural values of nature is not restricted to the sphere of application of heritage policies. This theme encompasses a broad field that can be explored from various perspectives and methodological approaches, where instruments such as designation, registration and inventory are some of the possibilities to be considered (Mallarach *et al.*, 2012; Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021).

In Brazil, the creation of specially protected areas has been the main strategy used to safeguard the natural heritage. Since the establishment of the first national park (PARNA), in the 1930s, over two thousand and six hundred conservation units (UC) have been created in Brazilian territory – at the federal, state, or municipal level³. The *National System of Nature Conservation Units* – SNUC comprises 12 categories that differ in terms of allowed uses

³ Find out more at <https://cnuc.mma.gov.br/powerbi>.

in areas of *full protection* and *sustainable use*. The objectives of this law include not only the protection of natural elements but also relevant cultural characteristics present in these areas, as well as the resources necessary for the subsistence of traditional populations, emphasizing the need to respect and value their knowledge and culture, promoting them socially and economically (Article 4 of Federal Law N°. 9.985, of 2000).

The *National Strategic Plan for Protected Areas* – PNAP (Federal Decree N°. 5.758, of 2006) recognizes the environmental importance of indigenous territories, *quilombolas* communities and other traditional populations, reinforcing the need to promote the valorization of cultural and symbolic aspects in nature protection and to strengthen instruments of social participation to encompass sociocultural diversity. According to Irving *et al.* (2013), this policy rescues *the social value of biodiversity* and recognizes the subjectivities involved in conservation processes and interpretation of natural heritage.

These directives were also integrated into the construction of the *National Policy for Sustainable Development of Traditional Peoples and Communities* – PNPCT (Federal Decree N°. 6.040, of 2007), which aims to promote the recognition, strengthening and guarantee of the territorial, social, environmental, economic and cultural rights of these groups. In a context of historical invisibility, this policy represented a significant achievement for these segments of the national population, who maintain ways of life that are not based solely on capitalist logics, relying on traditional knowledge

about natural cycles, especially for those that were not explicitly mentioned in the 1988 Constitution.

Therefore, although there still prevails an interpretation of environmental laws and regulations disconnected from cultural policies in the implementation of conservation strategies, there is a gradual progression of legal texts towards a more inclusive approach that recognizes the importance of cultural aspects in the protection of natural heritage.

5. Recognizing cultural values of nature in public management

With the purpose of increasing visibility and fostering debate on this issue in the Brazilian context, ICMBio organized the Seminar on *Cultural Values of Nature: new challenges for conservation public policies*, in July 2019. Coordinated by the author, the event featured a comprehensive program involving representatives from different government agencies, academics and members of civil society⁴. This initiative sparked an institutional effort to expand knowledge on the subject and formulate a program to integrate guidelines into the management of federal conservation units. Participants' feedback from this event reinforced the need to promote the training of public managers to broaden their understanding of the interrelationship between culture and nature, envisioning interfaces with various processes aimed at conservation.

In this direction, in September 2021, ICMBio launched the distance learning course *Integration of Cultural Values in the Management of Conservation Units*, offered annually as part of the training

⁴ Lectures available at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLopDAICigSa5GJTtSy-450yrY7plq1kMq>

program for employees. The activities carried out by participants of the course have been contributing to the structuring of a comprehensive collection of information on cultural values of nature present in these areas, as well as to the formulation of institutional guidelines to deal with this issue. Qualitative surveys on the topic are also being conducted in some prioritized federal UCs, such as Iguaçu National Park (PR) and Aparados da Serra National Park (RS and SC), the Ipanema National Forest (SP) and Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve (AC). These efforts aim to deepen the knowledge on the topic in the Brazilian context and apply international guidelines in emblematic areas of the national system⁵.

A critical reading of the current management plans in these UCs reveals that the understanding of integrating culture and nature in the development of these planning and management instruments is still limited. Cultural aspects have been addressed only through socioeconomic information based on census data from the municipalities encompassing the protected areas, with few references to communities connected to these territories, as well as to their interactions with nature, in a more ethnographic approach.

In fully protected UCs, the cultural values of nature of local populations are often perceived as threats to conservation or sources of conflicts, such as in the case of harvesting flora and fauna products or the religious use present in some areas. Moreover, there is a tendency to portray the history of regions from a *colonialist perspective*, with little

or no reference to indigenous and black people's perspectives on the territories. When cultural assets are highlighted, they are usually restricted to architectural or archaeological heritage, not reflecting the diversity of this theme, especially in its intangible aspects. Even in sustainable use UCs, such as extractive reserves, which aim to protect the culture of traditional communities, economic analysis of production chains and utilitarian views of natural resources prevail, which do not reflect the multiple forms of nature-culture interactions present in these areas (Fernandes-Pinto, 2017).

Despite this scenario, significant changes have occurred in recent years in federal regulations that govern processes such as the development of management plans in UCs (ICMBio, 2018), allowing greater participation of society in the construction of these instruments, contributing to bringing to light cultural values associated with nature. An example of this can be seen in the revision of the management plan of the Pico da Neblina National Park (ICMBio, 2022), whose significance statement includes the protection of sacred natural sites of the indigenous peoples of this territory.

The dissemination of the theme of cultural values of nature in light of IUCN directives has also been carried out through workshops, classes and lectures promoted by different educational institutions and at academic events. For example, the inclusion of the theme in the *Heritage and Tourism extension project* at the Western Paraná State University (2020)⁶; in the extension course on *Collaborative*

⁵ Studies in progress. A summary of the results of the survey of cultural values of nature in PARNA do Iguaçu is presented at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjEP3PNvPSM>

⁶ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM7MZEvE6U0>

Conservation at the Department of Geography of the University of São Paulo (2021)⁷; in a workshop at the *X Brazilian Symposium on Protected Areas and Social Inclusion – SAPIS* (2021)⁸; in the post-graduate course *Challenges and Perspectives for the Management of Protected Areas* at the Center for Sustainable Development of the University of Brasília (2023); and in the *III Natures-Cultures Meeting* promoted by the Biogeography and Historical Ecology Laboratory of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (2023)⁹, among others.

In order to enable the training of more people on this subject, an introductory course on *Cultural Values of Nature* was also launched in early 2023 on the virtual platform of the *National School of Public Administration – ENAP*. With a workload of 20 hours, the online course is free and open to any one¹⁰.

In addition to contributing to a greater dissemination of this theme among professionals working in protected areas, these initiatives bring opportunities to deepen understanding about culture-nature relationship in federal UCs and to make new interpretations about long standing conflicts in concrete situations. Examples include the recognition of identity relationships of indigenous peoples, *quilombolas* and traditional populations in some areas where these groups have been marginalized and these connections were previously invisible (such as in Iguaçu National Park/PR, Aparados da Serra National Park/RS and Cavernas do Peruaçu Na-

tional Park/MG), as well as sacred natural sites and places of religious use (such as in Tijuca National Park/RJ and the Tinguá Biological Reserve/RJ and Serra Negra Biological Reserve/PE), among others.

However, there are still several challenges to overcome for an effective integration of cultural values of nature into conservation strategies. As a transversal theme, it is crucial to transcend the boundaries of the structural sectorization in public organizations to integrate social and cultural policies into all categories of UCs, considering the various processes of implementation and management. This approach can help to review some misinterpretations and misconceptions of environmental laws that criminalize relevant cultural practices – as observed by Fernandes-Pinto (2022) regarding regulations that prohibited religious manifestations in federal UCs.

Moreover, in order to understand the potential contributions of the cultural values of nature to the management of these areas, it is necessary to address the old – but still current – dilemma of reconciling the presence of traditional peoples and communities in fully protected UCs (Diegues, 2003). The international recommendations and guidelines from IUCN on the subject provide various inspiring examples and lessons on how to proceed in this direction, which need to be analyzed in the Brazilian scenario. This context has motivated the formulation of a proposal for a concept of cultural values of nature

⁷ Seminar available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nc0G3QCaTv4&list=PLIdVwmawP_TO672S5SxjOb3X_bc09h76a&index=5 and Collaborative Dialogues interview at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7LJOGnJ9ZA>

⁸ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oa5BGkneN2o>

⁹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjRTdDMXn0E>

¹⁰ By August 2023, more than four thousand people had participated in the course (Available at: <https://www.escolavirtual.gov.br/curso/909>).

and the description of categories adapted to the national reality, as presented next.

6. A concept under construction and some fundamentals of its application

In broad terms, *cultural values of nature* encompass the various meanings related to different attributes of nature, including aesthetic, spiritual, historical, social and affective aspects. They are shaped by systems of knowledge, traditions, cultural practices, stories and myths transmitted across generations and can vary widely, reflecting the diversity of people's interactions with the environment around them (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021).

The variety of perspectives regarding the subject makes it challenging to formulate a single definition that adequately expresses the concept. The dichotomy between nature and culture which is prevalent in many Western views, for example, does not exist in other traditions. Additionally, as the meanings of nature are socially constructed, these interactions can be complex and sometimes conflicting, as what is valued by one sector of society may not be valued by another (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021).

In recent international publications on this theme, the expression *cultural and spiritual significance of nature* has been adopted to emphasize, according to Brown & Verschuuren (2019), the inclusion of knowledge, meanings and feelings within the scope of the concept. However, within the program developed by ICMBio, it was decided to keep the use of *cultural values of nature* (VCN) because we considered it more adaptable to Brazilian parlance.

Based on the accumulation of reflections and insights from the initiatives listed earlier, it is proposed to understand VCN as *symbolic meanings, historical and ancestral ties, assets, knowledge, traditions, perceptions and practices of social groups (from the past or contemporary) intrinsically linked to landscapes, elements of flora, fauna, relief or natural phenomena*. Conceptualized in this way, VCN involves a rich and heterogeneous set of aspects that reflect the diversity of ways of life, worldviews and perceptions of nature that permeate different segments of society.

In accordance with the IUCN guidelines on the subject (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021), priority is given to cultural practices and society-nature interactions that foster a positive connection between people and places stimulating or strengthening feelings of belonging, respect, care and affection towards natural areas, directly or indirectly contributing to nature conservation. *Direct contributions* include actions that promote the *in situ* maintenance of biodiversity, species diversification strategies, forest restoration and the direct protection of areas, among others. *Indirect contributions* encompass aspects that enhance the beauty of natural areas, increase knowledge about landscapes and their elements, raise awareness of the importance of conservation, promote meaningful experiences, or foster a spiritual connection with nature.

However, it is important to consider that the interpretation of these criteria can present a considerable degree of complexity and subjectivity. In light of this reality, IUCN guidelines emphasize the importance of direct dialogue with the involved social groups, which is considered essential when seeking to recognize the diversity of expressions, relationships, connections and associations of people

with nature. Therefore, conservation strategies based on the cultural values of nature differ from those are guided solely by natural sciences – focusing on biodiversity protection, which often reinforces the dichotomy between culture and nature – recognizing the rights and importance of collaboration with peoples and communities closely connected to natural ecosystems (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021).

In surveys of cultural nature values in protected areas, it is important to record aspects related to collective memory, traditions and practices of the different social groups that constitute the sociocultural diversity of a region. This includes not only those present today but also those connected to their historical roots, which may have been extinguished, displaced, or forced to leave the territory. In this regard, it is considered that not only indigenous peoples but also communities of European or Asian origin that participated in immigration processes to Brazil may have developed ways of life adapted to specific environments, consequently generating unique cultures in the national territory. Additionally, it is worth noting that cultural nature values are not restricted to rural populations but also apply to urban communities.

As these aspects are highly dynamic and dependent on the socio-environmental context, they can change over time and lead to diverging interpretations, both among different collectives and within the same community. Moreover, certain knowledge may survive only in the memory of a few individuals, often elderly, making them the last custodians of vulnerable or endangered cultural references. Therefore, recognizing VCN implies not only acknowledging the tangible and intangible aspects present in this relationship but

also safeguarding the social groups and traditions that sustain them.

But what are these values, after all? Based on the analysis of international reference documents on the subject (Harmon & Putney, 2003; Mallarach *et al.*, 2012; Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021), Brazilian legislation on material and immaterial cultural heritage and the experience gained from surveys conducted in national UCs, 11 comprehensive categories of cultural values of nature are proposed:

1. Sensory and perceptual experiences
2. Leisure and recreation opportunities
3. Practice of extreme sports and adventures
4. Therapeutic benefits
5. Source of artistic inspiration
6. Scientific discoveries and education
7. Historical aspects
8. Ethnological and identity links
9. Forms of management and products of socio-biodiversity
10. Oral and linguistic elements
11. Religious and spiritual connections

In this adaptation to the national context, the aim was to encompass a wide range of cultural values attributed to nature by different social groups without exhausting the possibilities. Some categories that are not explicitly stated in official documents were highlighted, aiming to emphasize aspects that still do not receive enough attention in conservation strategies and management instruments of Brazilian UCs.

6.1. Sensory and perceptual experiences: ways of seeing, feeling and appreciating nature

This category refers to how people experience and connect with nature, valuing experiences involving the aesthetic appreciation of landscapes (visual beauty) and tactile, olfactory, gustatory and auditory sensations provided by direct contact with natural elements. It emphasizes the importance of qualitative and subjective experiences that promote an *emotional connection* with the environment, arousing feelings of harmony, peace, admiration, communion with nature and wonderment for life.

These aspects, highly valued socially but difficult to measure and translate into words, are often not mentioned in legal documents and tend to be underdeveloped in promoting public use in protected areas (Mallarach *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the perception of these elements may contrast with how visitation is encouraged in some areas where mass tourism focused on *landscape consumption* is prioritized, to the detriment of the deep experience of connection with nature. An example of this was observed in the Iguaçu National Park/PR, with the phenomenon that can be called “*selfie tourism*” – a colloquial expression that describes the interest in obtaining self-portraits for sharing on social media, prioritizing the acquisition of images of oneself in “Instagrammable scenarios”, where nature is just a backdrop.

6.2. Leisure and recreation opportunities: the diversity of interests in interaction with natural areas

The experience and the pleasure of being in contact with preserved nature and engaging in recreational activities are among the most important attractiveness factors that lead people to seek out natural areas for visitation. Beraldo-Souza (2016), for example, in a comprehensive review on the subject in Brazil, identified 57 activities carried out by visitors in conservation units. They can play a relevant role in raising awareness about the importance of conservation (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021).

In addition to activities commonly associated with *nature tourism* or *ecotourism* (such as hiking for landscape contemplation and interaction with flora and fauna or bathing in rivers and waterfalls), this category may also include thematic tourist routes, historical paths and crossings that traverse natural areas (such as those registered in the *Brazilian Long-Distance Trails Network*)¹¹, as well as initiatives of *ethnotourism* and *community-based* (TBC) or *local* (TBL) tourism, which values the culture, traditions and knowledge of people and communities. The *TBC Network*, created in 2014, contributes to promoting such experiences nationwide¹².

Special attention is sought to identify *non-conventional* public use activities, understood as those that are not typically mentioned in regulations and institutional documents regarding visitation in natural areas. Examples include astronomical tourism and astrophotography (for observing the starry sky

¹¹ Initiative recognized with Joint Ordinance MMA/MTur No. 407/2018 (<http://www.redetrilhas.org.br/w3/>).

¹² <https://tbcrede.blogspot.com> and Instagram: @tbcrede

and capturing astronomical images); "glamour tourism" (intended for the production of photographic essays celebrating special occasions, such as weddings and debutante parties, in stunning natural settings); ufological tourism (which aims at observing unidentified flying objects and unusual phenomena in the skies); horror tourism (associated with the exploration of places considered haunted and with stories of paranormal activities); mystical, spiritual, or religious tourism (encompassing visits to sacred sites, spiritual pilgrimages and ritualistic practices in natural areas); mermaidism (an activity inspired by legends about mythological beings, involving swimming with mermaid tails and advocating for ocean conservation); playful activities and games such as *geocaching* (a kind of treasure hunt aimed at finding small objects hidden in landscapes based on coordinates and clues left by other participants); among other activities that reflect the diversity of social interests in interacting with nature.

6.3. Extreme sports and adventure activities: nature as a challenge

Although sports activities practiced in natural areas are related to enjoying the landscapes, they involve a intense level of physical activity, experiences of overcoming limits, challenges and risks associated with extreme situations. This distinction is relevant to highlight the importance of extreme sports and exploratory adventures as a specific form of cultural interaction with nature, with their own practices, values and meanings. It includes mountaineering, rock climbing, trail running, mountain biking, whitewater canoeing, surfing, hang gliding,

among other modalities. Some protected areas are emblematic in introducing certain extreme sports in Brazil, such as the Serra dos Órgãos National Park in Rio de Janeiro for mountaineering, the Tijuca National Park also in Rio de Janeiro for hang gliding and the Lençóis Maranhenses National Park in Maranhão for kitesurfing.

6.4. Therapeutic benefits: nature's contributions to human health and well-being

Studies have shown that regular contact with nature and engaging in outdoor activities provide an environment conducive to relaxation, stress relief, improved sleep quality, strengthening of the immune system and promotion of physical, mental and emotional health. This connection is essential for human health, as evidenced by Richard Louv (2005), who coined the term *nature deficit disorder*, highlighting the problems arising from a life disconnected from the natural world.

Various therapeutic experiences with restorative, preventive and healing effects have been practiced in parks and other conservation areas, such as bioenergetic walks, thermal baths, the use of natural sources with medicinal properties and contact with places with a high concentration of negative ions, bringing notable benefits to well-being. Practices such as *yoga*, *tai-chi-chuan* and meditation can also be performed in nature, providing a conducive environment for mental and emotional balance.

The so-called *forest bathing* (as it has become known in Brazil, inspired by the *Shinrin-yoku* practice originally created in Japan and South Korea and disseminated to other regions) involves immersion

in the revitalizing energy of nature¹³. The *Rede Saúde e Natureza Brasil* (The Health and Nature Brazil Network)¹⁴, as well as the global movement *Healthy Parks, Healthy People*¹⁵, aims to promote the importance of relationships between health and nature in public policies and societal initiatives.

6.5. *Source of artistic inspiration: nature in the arts and the arts with nature*

This category involves cultural expressions that convey the sense of beauty, mystery and harmony present in nature, influencing the social value of certain places or landscapes and favoring their conservation (Verschuuren *et al.*, 2021). It acknowledges that natural areas and their elements are sources of inspiration and expression for multiple forms of artistic manifestation, both traditional and contemporary, including paintings, sculptures, literature, poetry, theater, music, dance, among others.

It includes craftsmanship that utilizes elements of nature to produce decorative items (such as florais arrangements and ornaments), everyday use items (utensils, clothing, eco-jewelry, ceramics, among others), as well as ceremonial objects of traditional peoples (such as headdresses, necklaces and artifacts).

It also considers the value of landscapes as settings for photographic and audiovisual productions, such as films, documentaries and TV programs, particularly those that address themes related to nature conservation or that have contributed to raising awareness of certain protected areas.

6.6. *Scientific discoveries and education: exploring knowledge and human development in natural areas*

This category highlights the value of certain natural areas as sources of significant scientific discoveries – such as the recording of new biological species; the presence of iconic, rare, or endangered species; the occurrence of unique natural phenomena and special ecosystems, among other aspects.

Efforts are made to document places that have been referenced as influential by renowned naturalists during their passages through Brazil, such as Spix and Martius, Saint Hilaire Lange, Charles Darwin and others.

Initiatives of *citizen science* and educational activities promoted in natural areas are also encompassed in this category, emphasizing the importance of contact with nature in heritage education, ecological awareness, cognitive development and character formation of children and young people..

6.7. *Historical aspects: events and memories related to landscapes*

This category records places and natural elements with relevant historical significance, encompassing a variety of material and immaterial aspects. It includes traces of ancient human occupations (such as archaeological sites, ruins, cemeteries, shell middens, rock paintings, geoglyphs or megalithic monuments), even if not officially registered. It

¹³ <https://ecopsicologiabrasil.com/banho-de-floresta/>

¹⁴ <https://redesaudenaturezabrasil.com/>

¹⁵ <http://www.hphpcentral.com/>

encompasses symbolic geographical features – such as the sources of major rivers, highest points or natural boundaries – that played important roles in guiding migratory routes, opening historical trails, occupying territories and delineating borders.

It includes places involved in disputes, events and facts that left marks on national, regional or local memory, such as battlefields and massacres, or those that served as hideouts and escape routes. The importance of places associated with the collective memories of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and traditional communities is highlighted, as they are fundamental for preserving narratives and knowledge that may be connected to specific elements of the landscapes.

Also considered are relevant architectural heritage present in protected areas, museums and museum collections related to nature, as well as listed or registered heritage sites. However, it is important to emphasize that the diversity of aspects covered by this category of VCN should go beyond the formal focus of recognition in heritage policies, which historically prioritized archaeological and colonial architectural heritage. It is considered crucial to promote the identification of references related to the different groups that make up Brazilian society, in order to reveal contexts that may have been made invisible or silenced by official historiography, marked by a colonialist bias.

6.8. Ethnological and identity links: people and communities of nature

This category highlights the cultural diversity associated with nature, represented by ways of life, worldviews, knowledge, traditions, customs and

practices of different social groups that connect human communities to nature. These aspects are associated with the *sense of belonging* to certain landscapes and natural elements, which shape specific cultural identities, their notions of territory and their shared knowledge.

The presence of indigenous peoples, *quilombola* communities and traditional populations in all categories of protected areas is emphasized, understanding that both current and ancestral relationships should be documented. In these contexts, it is considered essential to respect the right to memory and the truth about historical events that occurred in these territories, which may have led to the removal, expulsion, or extermination of certain groups. In recognizing and protecting these aspects, it is considered fundamental to value the processes of collective self-identification and the social resilience of certain groups associated with natural areas, which sometimes represent unique cultures that may also be threatened with extinction.

It is important to remember that the identity value of nature is expressed in various forms, not only in rural communities but also in urban areas, where natural spaces can have multiple meanings for the population. This category also includes the designation of flora and fauna elements as representative symbols of groups, municipalities, regions, states, or countries.

6.9. Forms of management and products of socio-biodiversity: knowing how to care

This category highlights modes of production not based on capitalist logics of natural resource exploitation, including traditional practices and

trades that shape landscapes and ways of existence relying on elements of nature as the foundation for their reproduction.

Traditional knowledge about natural cycles and ecological processes of fauna and flora are translated into complex systems of specialized management techniques and governance strategies based on communal management practices. Local systems of rules that governing resources use may be considered sustainable depending on the degree and scale of intervention – a process referred by Diegues (2019) as *ethnoconservation*. Examples include non-timber forest products extraction, artisanal fishing, native beekeeping, crafting of handicrafts and utilitarian artifacts, family farming and associated agrobiodiversity, agroforestry systems, extensive grazing in native grasslands, traditional fire management techniques, vernacular architecture, construction of traditional boats and craft houses, among others. Specialized knowledge of griot masters, traditional medicine specialists and practices of healers, herbalists, rain prophets, midwives or shamans is also recognized.

This category also encompasses cultural foods and gastronomic traditions that reflect the cultural identity of a region, techniques for food conservation, processing and preparation, as well as recipes based on products from sociobiodiversity, as exemplified in the catalog prepared by ICMBio (2019). Additionally, festivities and rituals performed by communities in direct relation to nature, such as those related to harvest times and cycles of native species production, may also be considered.

6.10. Oral and linguistic elements: ways of speaking about nature

This category highlights the importance of languages, dialects, vocabularies and expressions used to describe and relate to natural elements. It includes *ethnotaxonomies* and vernacular terms that characterize and name particular places in landscapes, flora and fauna, types of vegetation and soil, climatic conditions, or certain natural phenomena.

It involves the study of *toponymies*, investigating the origin, meanings and history of naming geographical locations. It also recognizes the existence of unique languages and dialects related to cultural groups inhabiting specific geographic areas and the importance of their preservation and revitalization for protecting cultural diversity and connection between humans and nature.

It is considered that linguistic elements, developed over generations in coevolution with certain landscapes, reflect the values, beliefs, perceptions and knowledge of different social groups regarding the environment. Consequently, the lexical richness offers a detailed description of the most relevant aspects of nature for certain groups and its study can contribute to the recovery of ancestral knowledge, including the relations of peoples already extinct in the territories (Verschuuren et al., 2021). In addition, it seeks to record folklore tales, legends, riddles, proverbs and popular sayings linked to territories and species of plants and animals – oral narratives that can reveal valuable insights into the ecology and history of landscapes.

6.11. *Spiritual and religious connections: the sacred nature*

This category recognizes that various cultures and traditions have an intimate and reverent relationship with nature, performing religious, spiritual, magical, or mystical practices that celebrate its sacredness or attribute meaning to the experience. It encompasses a wide range of rites and ceremonies, from individual activities or those carried out in small groups to large collective celebrations, including pilgrimages and processions, which can involve hundreds or thousands of people (Fernandes-Pinto & Irving, 2018).

It considers the existence of *sacred natural sites*, places and elements of landscapes – such as mountains, caves, rivers, lakes, forests, trees and rock formations – that hold a special spiritual significance for different social groups (Wild & McLeod, 2008; Fernandes-Pinto, 2017). These locations may contain human-made structures – ranging from small crosses, altars and sacred images to large monuments or religious buildings – installed as a form of consecration. However, it is important to note that areas of spiritual significance to indigenous peoples and traditional communities may not exhibit notable material evidence in the landscapes (Fernandes-Pinto & Irving, 2018).

Since 2015, the *Sacred Natural Sites Brazil Initiative* has been dedicated to recognizing and valuing places with these characteristics in the national territory, disseminating the theme, connecting interested people, supporting actions to protect these

areas and highlighting the profound relationship between nature, culture and spirituality¹⁶.

This category also encompasses species of flora and fauna considered sacred, associated with legends, mysteries and ritualistic uses. Additionally, beliefs in beings from the *imaginal world* linked to landscapes, such as mythical animals and fantastic characters of forests, fields, mangroves, rivers and seas are taken into consideration. In some contexts, these beings may play an important role in regulating access to and use of natural resources, therefore termed by Fernandes-Pinto (2017) as *ecologically correct entities*.

In recent decades, connections between spirituality and conservation have been recognized in international debates as powerful forces for transforming human consciousness towards a more harmonious relationship with nature, strengthening the concept of *ecological spirituality*. However, some authors argue that this relationship, significant for many social groups, may be one of the least understood and most neglected aspects of the culture-nature relationship, both from an academic perspective and in the field of public policies (Verschuuren & Brown, 2018).

In the Brazilian context, religious use in protected areas often leads to conflicts, especially when access to places of worship is prohibited or certain practices are deemed harmful to conservation efforts. This issue calls for the promotion of respectful dialogue with the involved groups, seeking solutions that respect both religious and cultural diversity and nature conservation (Fernandes-Pinto, 2022).

¹⁶ More than one thousand and two hundred sacred places have already been registered by the initiative, in different Brazilian regions (find out more at: snsbrasil.blogspot.com and <https://sitosnaturaisagrados.org/>).

7. Final considerations: perspectives for the integration of cultural values of nature in Brazilian conservation strategies

Although the theme of VCN may seem relatively new in the Brazilian context, it is part of a growing debate in international forums on conservation policies. In recent decades, initiatives seeking to integrate culture and nature have been implemented in various regions of the world, supported by global recommendations and guidelines that countries are invited to test and adapt to their realities and regulatory frameworks.

In this context, there is a growing understanding that nature conservation depends not only on scientific information, the actions of public managers and government investments, but also on society's support, which must embrace initiatives in this direction. Studies have highlighted that cultural values of nature are among the main motivations driving people to care about its protection. Recognizing and integrating these aspects into conservation strategies can therefore strengthen societal engagement and support for various initiatives contributing to the integrated valorization of natural and cultural heritage.

When the interrelation between culture and nature is perceived, it is understood that social aspects are intrinsic to environmental issues and that biological or ecological patterns cannot be analyzed without considering human influences. This may seem obvious, but it has not always been the case, as nature conservation policies have historically been developed and implemented disregarding the cultural aspects that permeate this relationship. Under the paradigm of modernity, the dualistic

view between culture and nature led to a fragmented approach to reality, both in academic research and in the formulation of public policies, highlighting destructive human actions in the materialistic exploitation of so-called “natural resources”, neglecting the existence of positive and regenerative aspects characterizing this interaction. Therefore, at the heart of this reflection emerges the need to advance in recognizing the interdependence of these dimensions.

These are some of the reasons why, globally, the VCN theme has been placed as a central element in a paradigm shift in conservation, where the mentality of *command and control*— which sees society only as a threat — gives way to perspectives of culturally-based conservation strategies that seek to establish alliances and collaboration with different social groups. In this sense, VCN surveys seek to highlight aspects that nurture traditional peoples' and local communities' affective relationships and sense of belonging with landscapes, which are reflected in attitudes of respect and care for the elements of nature.

It is argued that recognizing VCN can bring a series of benefits in implementing protected areas and conservation strategies. Firstly, by adding additional richness to natural heritage. Secondly, by helping to promote more inclusive approaches aimed at minimizing socio-environmental conflicts by incorporating the perspectives and needs of local communities. And thirdly, by fostering a positive agenda that encourages partnerships with society to demonstrate the benefits of conservation.

However, it is essential to recognize that the conservation ideology is also plural and that the motivations of local populations regarding nature conservation may differ from those considered

relevant by public managers and researchers. Therefore, this construction requires a review of normative interpretations, considering decolonial perspectives, especially those pointed out by indigenous and traditional peoples. Achieving this goal involves complex issues that demand new theoretical reflections and critical and innovative conservation approaches capable of overcoming the fragmented view that separates nature and culture, bringing an integrated reading of reality. Moreover, it is essential to rescue the role of subjectivities and affectivity in interpreting the relationship between people and nature.

Considering Brazil's socio-environmental richness, it is necessary to deepen the knowledge on the subject and its interpretation in light of theoretical perspectives from the social sciences and decolonial paradigms. Surveys conducted in the country so far indicate that conservation units are privileged sites for promoting initiatives of this nature. In this direction, it is crucial to expand the training of managers and collaborators of environmental agencies in understanding this theme to generate references that inspire a more inclusive conservation approach, respecting the diversity of views and perspectives on nature.

Research on this topic has significant potential to reveal a largely unknown facet of Brazil's natural and cultural heritage. This is an ongoing challenge that requires the articulation of partnerships to stimulate the integration of cultural values of nature into conservation initiatives, contributing to untie knots and strengthen more bonds between environmental agencies and local communities. A journey that is just beginning.

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