

## **The Recovery of Sacred Natural Sites in Modern Scotland: Iona - Harris - Govan**

**Abstract of [Alastair McIntosh's](#) presentation for the Delos workshop at Inari, Lapland, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, 1 – 3 July 2010, Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas**

It is an honour to make this presentation in Finland and, specifically, in Lapland where we are being welcomed by leaders of the Sami people. In the opinion the author [John MacAulay](#) who is an indigenous tradition bearer from the Hebridean islands where I was raised as a child, the Sea Sami people of north-western Norway may in the past occasionally have mixed and interbred with Scottish people. His evidence lies in the extensive body of folklore and records of kayaks in the Sea Sami style being blown ashore. Their occupants, whether alive or sadly drowned, would probably have been dressed in seal-skin clothing. This, together with the likelihood that they were able to conceal themselves by submerging their kayaks and moving some distance underwater, may be the origin of the widespread and well-attested beliefs in “mermaids” or “seal-folk”. One of our sub-clans, the [MacCodrums of Uist](#), even trace their family origins to such a seal-folk marriage. And I open with this story because part of what I will be sharing with you – the account of the return of the summit rock of Mt. Roineabhal on the Isle of Harris – required my seeking permission, indeed, a sense of blessing, from John MacAulay to tell the story in this international context and use pictures of him. Also, at a gathering of some forty members of the GalGael Trust in Govan, Glasgow, on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2010, I gave a preview of my presentation, and received their blessing for what I am to share here.

### **Static & Dynamic Conceptualisations of Sacred Natural Sites (SNSs)**

My contribution to this conference is very simple. It comes out of experience in rural and urban community regeneration. I invite participants to consider that sacred natural sites should be understood not just as static entities that have long been *recognised* and often protected, but also, as dynamic processes by which sites can be *reactivated* in cultural recognition, and even *recreated* in consciousness. I explore these categories below with Scottish case studies of the Isle of Iona, Mt. Roineabhal on the Isle of Harris, and Govan in a socially deprived part of the city of Glasgow.

Let us start with two questions. First, why should SNSs matter to us today? My answer is that we live in a world where so much that was once considered sacred has become de-sacralised. We are despoiling the planet and rendering our own lives devoid of essential meaning. If we are to restore respect for the Earth wholeness to people, we need to return to (or, if we've never been there in the first place, move forward to) knowing this world as somehow sacred. When we use the Earth's resources to meet the needs of dignified sufficiency we should do so with respect, even reverence. We need to cultivate a spirit of grace that respects beauty at all levels of relationship. That requires building on that sense of awe that, for example, a young scientist feels the first time they look up a telescope, or down a microscope.

Secondly, what is the “sacredness” in question? For me, this is where the nature of nature wild connects with our wild human nature and underpinning both, divine nature. This presence of the divine lifts our experience beyond any narrow

anthropocentric construction. It leads us to the sheer magic of mystery. We are transported beyond concepts and into the *tenderness of reality*. This is the passion of the world, the love that drives it and beauty that transfigures its brokenness. “Consider the lilies of the field...” and “Be still and know that I am God” and “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see ...” I do not know of any better summation of the sacredness that applies to places than these lines from T.S. Elliot’s *Four Quartets*:

If you came this way,  
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
At any time or at any season,  
It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. *You are here to kneel*  
*Where prayer has been valid.*

Below I propose a spectrum of three types of SNS. This framework might help us to think of such designation in both its static and dynamic contexts.

### 1. **Recognised SNSs – Example: [Isle of Iona](#)**



Iona is said to have been established as a monastic site by St Columba of Ireland in A.D. 563. To stand beside the 8<sup>th</sup> century St Martin’s Cross at the Abbey entrance is to witness Biblical scenes clearly carved in stone that have withstood nature’s elemental blast for nearly two-thirds of Christian history. The island is owned by the

National Trust for Scotland for the nation. It is a well-established and highly protected SNS. We can therefore view it as “recognised” and its status is secure. George MacLeod who founded the [Iona Community](#) described it as a place where the boundary between the spiritual and the material worlds is “tissue thin”.

### 2. **Reactivated SNSs – Example: Mt Roineabhal, [Isle of Harris](#)**



This site holds the medieval church of St Clement on the lower slopes of Mt Roineabhal (*Roin-e-val*). Local tradition dates religious observance back to the Culdees and the Druids. Although Roineabhal is only 460m in height, it rises directly out of the sea. With stunning views in all directions it has the awe-inspiring character of a much larger mountain. It is the highest in south Harris, a designated National Scenic Area.

Between 1991 and 2004 a [battle](#) raged to stop it from being turned into a “superquarry” extracting 10 million tonnes of roadstone per annum for shipping south to England. Part of the protest involved my bringing Stone Eagle, the Mi’Kmaq war chief from Canada, and Donald Macleod, a Calvinist professor of theology to the

government public inquiry. We testified that the mountain reflects the majesty of God and should not be wantonly disfigured. The resulting debates helped to *reactivate* an awareness of sacred place. In 2004 I led the negotiations that resulted in the quarry being abandoned. Although “sacred mountains” are not part of the island’s dominant Protestant tradition, Roineabhal is now often spoken of reverentially. This might be the ongoing foundation of its protection, and in 2009 the island’s residents voted by a 2/3 majority in support of exploring national park status for Harris.

### 3. Recreated SNSs – Govan, City of Glasgow



Govan is an economically deprived area of Glasgow with high incidences of drug abuse and unemployment. Its [Old Parish Church](#) is the source of a fine but little-known collection of 9<sup>th</sup> c. carved stones. In the past century meaningful new spiritual gravity has been constellated. George MacLeod led the rebuilding of Iona Abbey from Govan in the 1930s and used it as a platform to transform the position of church and nation on urban poverty, ecumenism and nuclear weapons.



Today, local community groups are further building on this. The [GalGael Trust](#) of which I am a founding director draws inspiration from the past and actively seeks to *recreate* a sense of this broken industrial environment being an emergent SNS. We build traditional boats and sail down the river, reconnecting coastal communities and mending traumatised lives. Sacred place starts in the hearth of the human heart. It expresses a triune sense of community - with soil, soul and society. Our work has an *implicit* spiritual basis, partly inspired by the history of the Church, but moving *dynamically* in the present from past to future.



### Conclusion

To consider a SNS only as a static entity is to fossilise it in matter and time. It is the dynamic movement of the Spirit that gives life and rekindles spiritual consciousness. Such dynamics have their parallels in most major faiths – in Christianity with the “wind” of the Holy Spirit, in Taoism as the “watercourse way”, in Hinduism’s “lila” of cosmic dance that animates reality. When we enter into a dynamic relationship with SNSs we become more fully alive. We participate in the responsibility – *the ability to respond* – that can heal the world. This is suggested in the [Cycle of Belonging](#) (right). Here is a spirituality of resurrection; of that which gives life as love made manifest.

