



## Local perceptions of Tibetan village sacred forests in northwest Yunnan



Teri D. Allendorf<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jodi S. Brandt<sup>b</sup>, Jian M. Yang<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1630 Linden Drive, Madison, WI 53706, USA

<sup>b</sup> School of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

<sup>c</sup> College of Ecotourism, Southwest Forestry University, Kunming, Bailingsi, Bailong Road, Kunming, Yunnan 650224, China

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### ABSTRACT

Sacred natural sites have played important social and cultural roles in many cultures around the world for centuries. More recently, scientists have shown that sacred sites act as de facto protected areas. However, the potential for sacred sites to be integrated into conservation strategies depends on the motivations of people to protect them. The objective of this study is to understand people's relationships with village-level sacred forests in northwest Yunnan, China. We conducted 201 standardized open-ended interviews of both men and women over 18 years of age from six communities in the area near the city of Shangrila. While this region of Yunnan is undergoing dramatic socio-economic changes that can contribute to changes in cultural values, we find no evidence that people's appreciation for sacred forests is declining. Our results show that the forests hold primarily religious meaning for people, people visit the forests regularly, and, while younger people know less about the forests, they do not differ in terms of use and appreciation, indicating that the value of the areas is not decreasing. Because people primarily view these sacred forests as religious sites and do not directly associate them with ecological value, we suggest that direct integration of these areas into conservation strategies may not be appropriate.

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### 1. Introduction

Sacred natural sites have played important social and cultural roles in many cultures around the world for centuries (Rutte, 2011; Verschuuren et al., 2010). More recently, scientists have shown that sacred sites act as de facto protected areas. They protect biodiversity at multiple spatial scales and for a wide range of taxa (Bhagwat and Rutte, 2006; Dudley et al., 2009). The potential of these areas to conserve biodiversity has led conservationists to suggest that sacred areas should be integrated into conservation strategies (Dudley et al., 2005; Verschuuren et al., 2010).

However, in the face of rapid social changes, sacred natural sites around the world are degrading (Dudley et al., 2005; Verschuuren et al., 2010). Cultural assimilation, imported religions, formal education, increasing migration, and other factors are all contributing to the breakdown of the traditional values and social structures that have served to protect these sacred areas (Barre et al., 2009).

The reasons that people protect sacred natural sites are diverse and sites range in size from a particular tree or spring to large landscapes. Because sacred areas are often not formally designated or recognized, their existence and effectiveness is dependent on the people that protect them. This form of protection is very different

from official protected areas, which depend on decisions by the central or local governments and external enforcement of rules and regulations (Bhagwat and Rutte, 2006). Thus, the potential for sacred sites to be integrated into conservation strategies depends not only on the biodiversity they contain, but also on the values and perceptions of the people that motivates them to protect these sites (Rutte, 2011).

The Himalayan region has a rich history of sacred natural sites spread across a landscape that is one of the most biodiverse in the world (Myers et al., 2000). Northwest Yunnan Province, China is in a biodiversity hotspot and has three of the world's most important rivers flowing through it – the Salween, Mekong, and Yangtze. In this area, Tibetan Buddhists protect sacred sites that range in size from entire mountains recognized by all Tibetan Buddhists to small patches of forest associated with and protected by a single neighboring village (Xu et al., 2005).

Sacred natural sites in northwest Yunnan are a combination of Bön and Buddhist traditions (Kolås, 2007). Bön traditions, which pre-date Buddhism, center on the worship of natural features, including trees, springs, forests and mountains based on the belief that these were homes of the deities. As Buddhism spread into Tibet, religious leaders incorporated pre-existing beliefs and traditions into Buddhist belief systems. Larger sacred mountain areas tended to be incorporated into Buddhist tradition and had Buddhist creation stories and traditions incorporated into their worship, including rites such as pilgrimage and circumambulation.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 608 262 3946.

E-mail addresses: [allendorf@wisc.edu](mailto:allendorf@wisc.edu), [allendorf@wisc.com](mailto:allendorf@wisc.com) (T.D. Allendorf), [jbrandt@umich.edu](mailto:jbrandt@umich.edu) (J.S. Brandt), [yangjm21@gmail.com](mailto:yangjm21@gmail.com) (J.M. Yang).

Smaller sacred areas, such as village-level sacred forests or specific springs or trees, were not as fully incorporated into Buddhism. The creation stories and rituals associated with these sacred areas remained pre-Buddhist and consist primarily of the lighting of incense and making offerings (Kolås, 2007).

The larger sacred natural areas are known to play a key role in conserving biodiversity at multiple spatial scales and for several different taxonomic groups (Anderson et al., 2005; Brandt et al., 2013; Salick et al., 2007; Xu and Melick, 2007). However, they are under threat from rapidly expanding development and tourism. After disastrous flooding of the Yangtze river killed thousands of people, a commercial logging ban was put into effect in 1998 to protect mountain forests in the Yangtze watershed from clear cutting (Liu et al., 2008). However, old-growth forests continue to be logged due to continued economic development and population growth in the region (Brandt et al., 2012; Xu, 2011).

In contrast, the smaller village-level sacred sites are not as well-studied in terms of the conservation value. They are small in size, but numerous on the landscape, occupying niches along environmental gradients and at various altitudes. Furthermore, they are not as clearly under threat as the larger sacred sites, even in areas that are in more densely populated tourist centers (Brandt et al., 2013).

While these areas contribute to the conservation of biodiversity, we know very little about people's reasons for conserving these village sacred areas other than that they are religious sites. The objec-

tive of this study is to understand people's relationships with village-level sacred forests. The specific goals are to describe people's use, knowledge, and perceptions of benefits and change of their sacred forest patch to understand the role that these sacred forests play in people's day-to-day lives.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study area

This study was conducted in the communities associated with six sacred forest sites in Shangrila County (Fig. 1). The county was renamed from Zhongdian in 2001 by local officials to promote tourism and is referred to as Gyaltang in Tibetan (Hillman, 2010; Kolås, 2007). The study was conducted in the same sites studied by Brandt et al. (2013) in order to complement their research to understand the importance of sacred forests for bird conservation in the Himalayan region. Around Shangrila, very few native forest ecosystems remain, but small village-level sacred forests protect remnant patches of relatively undisturbed native forest ecosystems. These forests protect relatively intact native vegetation and support distinct bird communities and higher bird diversity compared to the surrounding landscape (Brandt et al., 2013).

The sacred forests ranged between 13 and 75 ha (Table 1) and were a mix of mature and secondary native forest patches

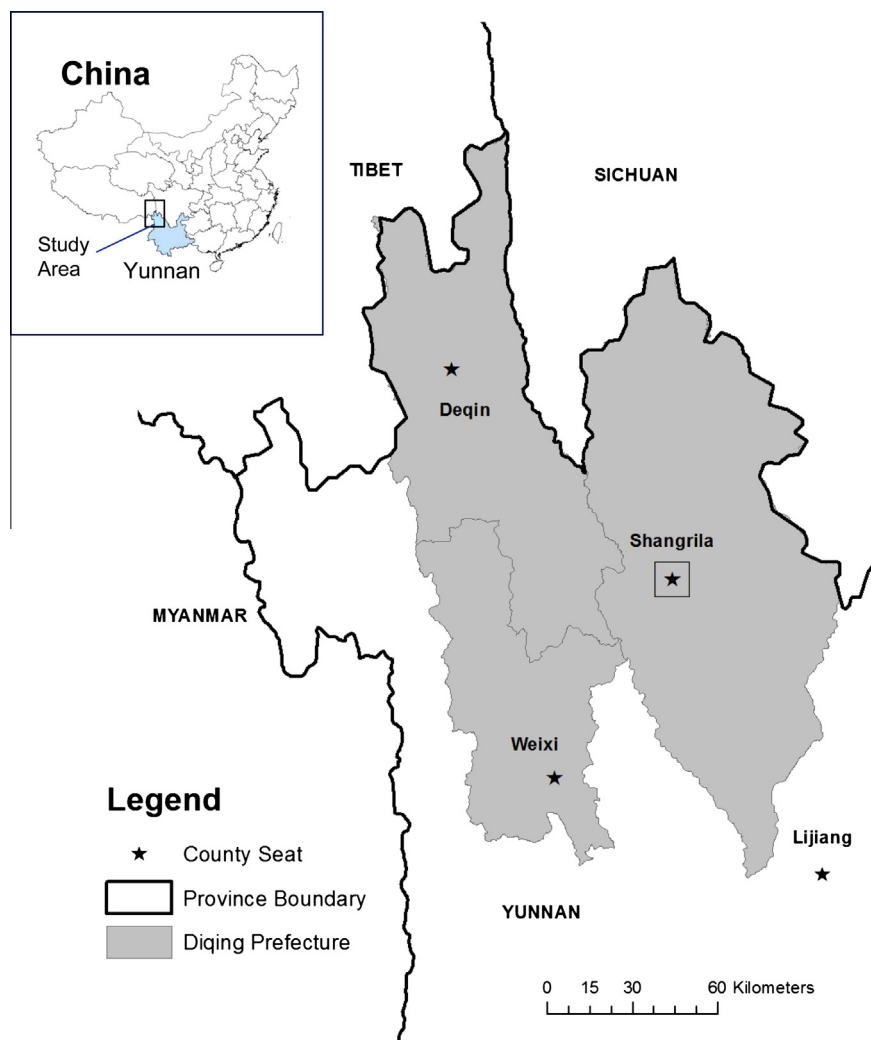


Fig. 1. Location of study site.

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