

Ancient Sacred Sites & Tourism – Risks & Possibilities

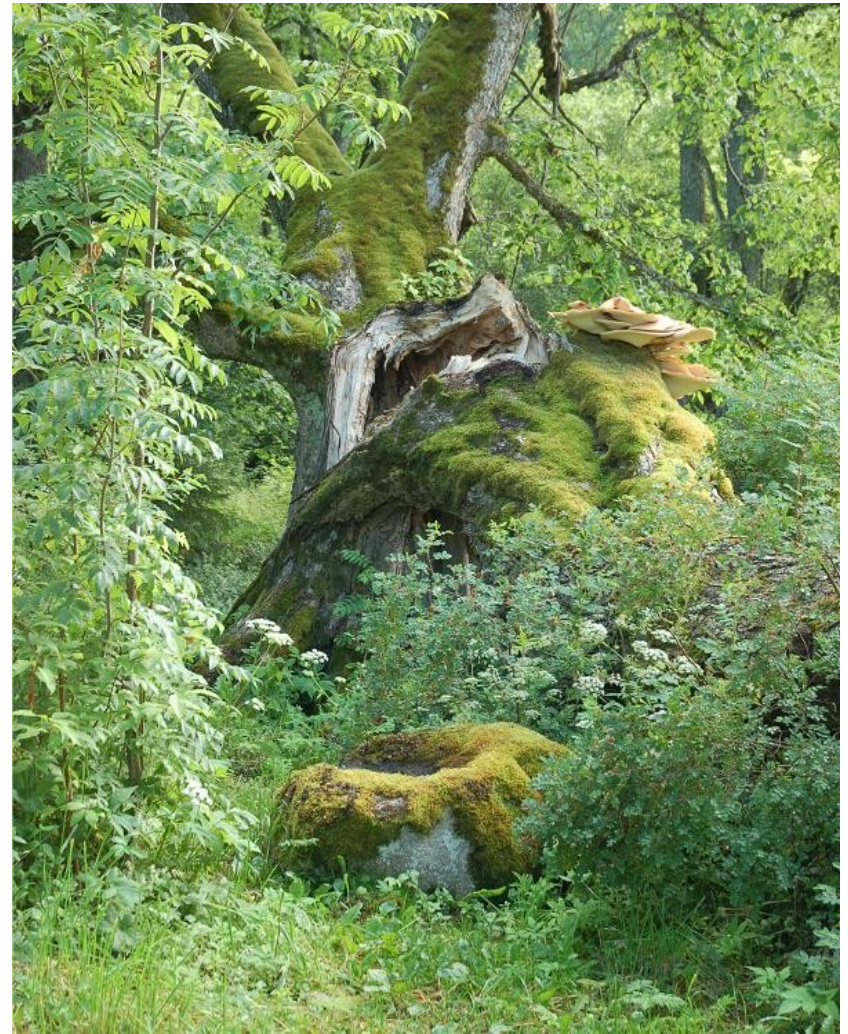
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Organization:

Hiite Maja Foundation (Estonia)



Kiigeoru grove is still being used as a sacred site. The flora includes European White Elm and several rare species of orchids.

Definition

Project „Cult Identity“:

ancient sacred sites are sites in landscape that are connected to **sacred activities, mythical beings** and/or **burial mounds**.

Estonia:

natural sacred sites are areas on land or **in water** connected to **historic religious beliefs** and **rites**.



*In Estonia there are over 700 cross trees connected to ancient funerary traditions. Only 10 of them are under protection.
Photo: L. Keerberg*

Risks

Sacred Sites Are Vulnerable

- Spiritual & religious values (sites are still in active use in Estonia)
 - Material values (treasure hunters!)
 - Natural values (habitats, species, etc.)
- Until today the development of sacred sites in Estonia has been inconsistent and - in many cases - hazardous to the existing values.



Kadja healing spring is located in a marsh and its surroundings is vulnerable to walking. As the site is not under protection, it is especially endangered by treasure hunters.

Photo: A. Kaasik

Agriculture



Soil improvement works took place in the sacred grove during the Soviet era. The Sacred Spring was led into a concrete tube. Now, young unhealthy (cough, skin in bad condition) cattle wonder around the site – a sign that sacred sites are not suitable for herding. Photo: A. Kaasik

Road Works



Kalme Sacred Grove Hill has been under protection since Soviet times. However, during road works earth was removed, trees were cut, a couple of tourism attractions and a toilet were built without any consideration to the existing values.

Tourism



The sacred spring Emaläte (Mother Spring) of the most important and most visited (ca 40,000 people in 2010) sacred site Taevaskoja (Heaven's Hall) in South Estonia was destroyed after extensive development works (deep holes were bored into soft sand stone and filled with cement to build stairs) carried out by the State Forest Management Centre. No authority has taken responsibility for this.

Possibility: Sustainable Tourism

The main preconditions:

- Attitude towards sacred sites must be respectful. **All development activities should be based on the materials** prepared in the course of the Project (**Inventory Methodology, Development and Management Guidelines of Sacred Sites**).
- The following important changes should be introduced to the legal acts:
 - sacred site is a **specific type of monument** (national heritage law);
 - **possibility to introduce restrictions** to protect vulnerable and/or endangered sites and/or values.



Traditions and beliefs connected to sacred sites are personal. An attack towards a sacred site is perceived as a personal attack.. Photo: T. Lehtsaar

Possible results

- People become aware of sacred sites and learn to appreciate and value them
 - > greater experience;
 - > stronger national identity.
- Sacred sites as important destinations in the region (tourism, healing) contribute to the economic development of local communities (support services!) .



A child tying an offering ribbon to a sacred tree in Kiigeoru grove, Tartumaa. Photo: A. Kaasik

Thank you for your attention!

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Saula Siniallika Grove, Harju county. Photo: A. Kaasik