



# **Sacred Species and Conservation: The Case of the Spirit Bear**

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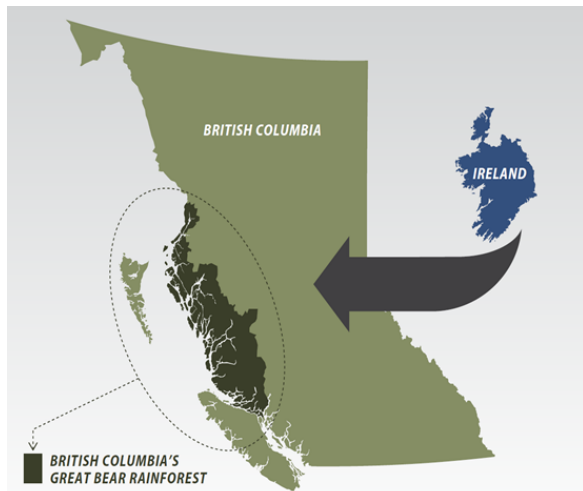
## Introduction

With the rising acknowledgements for the rights and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples worldwide, the topic of sacred spaces and species has become part of the debate surrounding conservation sciences. As a scientific field and practice, conservation has its roots in colonial history and has been criticized for perpetuating neo-colonialism and green grabbing (Kashwan et al., 2021). To lend a stronger voice to Indigenous Peoples, community-based conservation has gained traction worldwide. This form of conservation, too, has come under scrutiny and is often found to silence Indigenous voices despite claiming to do the opposite (Agrawal & Gibson (1999); Igoe, 2007; Kashwan et al., 2021). Underlying all these practical discussions is one of a more theoretical nature: that of ontologies. Blaser (2009) argues that various conflicts surrounding integrating Indigenous knowledge into conservation arise not because of a different valuation of nature but an ontological one. He argues that what's at stake in these conflicts, then, is not different viewpoints of the same world but rather different worlds altogether.

Various power dynamics between the actors whose worlds are in question form the backdrop of these conflicts and can lead to the subordination of entire worlds (Blaser, 2009). In this context, I want to introduce the concept of sacredness. In her article on sacred sites, Hubert (2013) forces us to question the idea of “sacredness” and how we can come to understand sacred sites of cultures different from our own. Even if we can define “sacred” in our own language, can we meaningfully translate this definition to another culture’s understanding of the word? Can we truly believe in the sacredness of sites that are not part of our belief system? Or is it enough to simply treat something as sacred? As well, can the sacredness of a place translate to its protection? And what type of sacredness is most relevant to its protection? These are complicated questions with no simple answers. Yet, they are fundamental questions to ask if we want to engage with the conservation and protection surrounding sacred sites and species. By studying the traditions, facts, legends, and stories of a site or species, I will attempt to find a link between the term sacredness and its importance in protecting and conserving an area. I argue that sacredness is an ever-evolving process that adapts to its surroundings and can perhaps only be truly understood by those whose belief it is. Despite this, it is an essential concept in the negotiations that arise when species protection is discussed and cannot be overlooked.

## The Spirit Bear

Signed “between the First Nations and the British Columbia government in 2016” (The Nature Conservancy, n.d), the Great Bear Rainforest covers 6.4 million hectares on British Columbia’s coast, roughly the size of Ireland (Forests, 2022).



The Great Bear Rainforest covers 6.4 million hectares on B.C.'s north and central coast.

**That's about the size of Ireland.**

Figure 1: Map of the Great Bear Rainforest

This incredible protected area is “one of Canada's most biologically diverse areas” (Ecosystem-Based Management, 2021). It is the only home in the world to one of the most sacred species found in Canada. This species is traditionally called the Spirit Bear, scientifically known as the Kermode Bear, and draws its fame from its unique white fur that stands out against its black brothers and sisters. The Spirit Bear is a “white-phased black bear” and “is one of the most striking colour polymorphisms found in mammals,” with only an estimated 400 individuals left (Hendrick & Ritland, 2011). A recessive mutation at the MC1R gene, the same gene linked to red hair and fair complexion in humans, causes this perplexing trait, also known as Kermodism (Barcott, 2011).

The sacred Spirit Bear has an extensive background of stories and beliefs from Indigenous worldviews that gave the species its importance and protection. Traditionally, Indigenous groups of the area would tell the story that “when the glaciers receded and Raven, creator of the rainforest, made one in 10 black bears white to remind people of the time when the earth was covered in ice and snow”

(Watkins, 2022. Helen Clifton (an 86-year-old clan matriarch of the Gitg’at, one of 14 bands that makes up the Tsimshian people of British Columbia’s northwest coast) says that “Our people never hunted the white bear” (as cited in Barcott, 2011). The bear was considered sacred because of the legend that “the only time you meet with spirit bear is when Creator has a message for you or if there is some healing that is needed” (as cited in Green, 2021). The bear is a part of a legend, a story, a worldview. However, to the Western community and scientists, the bears are seen as



Figure 2: A spirit bear playing with its sibling

worth protecting because of the mystery behind *why* they are white. It has been hypothesized that the reason for the uniqueness of this bear is that “Kermodism represented a remnant adaptation from the last great ice age” or that the whiteness of their fur makes them less visible to salmon

during hunting than black bears (Barcott, 2011). And yet, the mystery has not been officially resolved. Studies must still be carried out, scientific data collected, and genetic codes studied under lab lights. This is not to say that one view is greater or less. The point is not to romanticize and value one over the other but to realize that the frameworks put into place have historically esteemed one over the other. But which reason has, *in reality*, given the bear protection and, therefore, the rainforest its protection? The bear's entire environment is now protected and known as a sacred natural site; can this be a coincidence?

The location of this sacred animal has a long history of colonization and imperialization that is crucial to the story of the land and the Spirit Bear. Until 1871, B.C. was a British colony (History of B.C, n.d). Indigenous Peoples have continually been the centre of horrifying human rights violations in Canada (including BC), a major one being that of Residence schools where, between the late 1800s and 1996, “an estimated 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were removed from their families, homes, languages and lands” by the Government of Canada and church organizations (Indian Residential Schools, 2021). The schools were established to “purify” and conform the Indigenous children to the way of life, language, and thought that was the *right* way, their way. The schools were later discovered to be epicentres of physical and sexual abuse, with some schools having mortality rates above 60% (Indian Residential Schools, 2021). Although things today may not seem as outwardly horrifying, the systems that began these relations can still be seen in the policies, management, and governance we now see between the Government of Canada and Indigenous Peoples. Suppose the traditions, languages, and ways of thinking and being of the Indigenous Peoples were respected and upheld in British Columbia from the beginning. Would the never-ending debates on the conservation and protection of biodiversity even need to be had?

The Great Bear Rainforest is managed and governed by a unique approach called Ecosystem-Based Management (EBM). This approach is used to preserve the co-existence of healthy, functional ecosystems and human activities based on “science as well as traditional, local knowledge” (Forests, 2022). One of the main takeaways from this approach is that they meet with the stakeholders and communities every few years and adapt the framework. The communities residing in the rainforest “continue to work and make a living” (Ecosystem-Based Management, 2021), with one of the main activities being Indigenous-led excursions into the deepest parts of the forest (sometimes solely to find a sacred Spirit Bear). Due to this active relationship between the forest and animals and the Indigenous



Figure 3: Nanwakolas Council drummers lead the procession into the Great Bear Rainforest announcement at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, B.C. on Mon. Feb. 1, 2016.

and non-Indigenous Peoples, the *environmentality* framework is fully implemented. A link is created as residents of this protected region invite visitors inside to experience and appreciate its magic and use a collaborative and hands-on governance approach. This link plays a significant role in protecting and conserving the rainforest and bears, if not the most critical.

The sacred Spirit Bear can be seen as a completely different bear, a different being,



Figure 4: A spirit bear wanders the Great Bear Rainforest

depending on the story and the reason you give it value. As cited in *Rethinking the Building Blocks* by an Indigenous mentor, “use your common sense, but usually there’s a different common sense” (Howitt & Suchet-Pearson, 2006). This can be translated for many situations where ways of seeing and thinking become ways of living and

being. We can surely say that the Spirit Bear did aid in conserving its environment. As we discussed previously, it is no coincidence that the bear’s entire habitat was named The Great Bear Rainforest and is now strictly protected and managed. Whether this was because of the stories and legends the Indigenous tell or its peculiar colour polymorphisms is a more difficult question. The Spirit Bear is protected and will keep stumping researchers until its queries are resolved. Or maybe the Spirit Bear will continue to be a fascinating enigma, wandering among the foggy and moss-covered Great Bear Rainforest.

## Discussion

In the discussion surrounding sacred species, we can see a collision of Euro-American and non-Euro-American environmental narratives. Sacredness of the land is often regarded as a non-Euro-American way of looking at the environment (Hubert, 2013). Yet sacredness proves to be a complicated concept that cannot be understood in a simplistic, static way. There is no easy dualistic divide between “Western science” and “non-Western sacredness.” Spirit Bears are protected because of their sacred function as messengers sent by the Creator and because of their unique gene mutation in a collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples.

The question then rounds back to: are these species protected because of their 'sacred' status endowed to them by the people sharing their environment or because of their ecological relevance given to them by Western scientists? There seems to be no clear-cut answer, or perhaps the most relevant and accurate answer is a bit of both, as well as a mix of other factors that cannot all be listed. It could be viewed that various actors attempt to navigate the topic of sacredness to improve their agenda. Protecting the biodiversity of the Great Bear Rainforest works in alignment with the traditions and rights of the Indigenous groups residing in the area. The conservation approach on a sporadic and small scale becomes more dynamic and stable as governance on sustainable development relies not only on a major national planning system but also adapts and accepts local-scale site-specific frameworks and management.

The power dynamics resulting from historical colonialism and exclusion are still very much at play at these sites of negotiation and conflict surrounding sacred sites and species. While historically, Indigenous Peoples have often been denied access to sacred sites or even seen them destroyed at the hands of colonizers (Kingston, 2015), there is a new movement towards the necessary inclusion of Indigenous communities in species and area protection, albeit successful or not (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). However, for the successful resurgence of the Indigenous Peoples and environmental conservation, this inclusion cannot be on the terms of the non-Indigenous Peoples; instead, it should give Indigenous Peoples the respect and space to lead the way. In the case of the Spirit Bear, we see that its sacred status has led to a new form of governance in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples work together towards the same goal. Sacredness is not a concept set in stone but instead continually changing and adapting to its surroundings, just as cultures and traditions inevitably do.

It is essential to note the limitations of this paper. Most of this research was done at a distance from the communities discussed, and most of the sources come from other researchers visiting and interviewing these sites and communities or newspaper clippings and other online information. As such, this paper should be a place to start thinking about these concepts and case studies, not the final word.

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