

# ***Sacred Natural Sites of Estonia***

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*Sacred grove in Põlva county, Mamastõ village*



# Hiite Maja Foundation

founded in 2008

## Main objectives:

- Investigation and protection of sacred natural sites of Estonia
- Publication of literature and information material about sacred sites
- Organization of and participation at events introducing sacred sites and ancient traditions
- International cooperation



*Representatives of indigenous people all over Estonia gathered at Kunda Hiiemäe (Grove Hill) Day in autumn 2009. Image: representatives of the Seto minority singing a welcome song.*





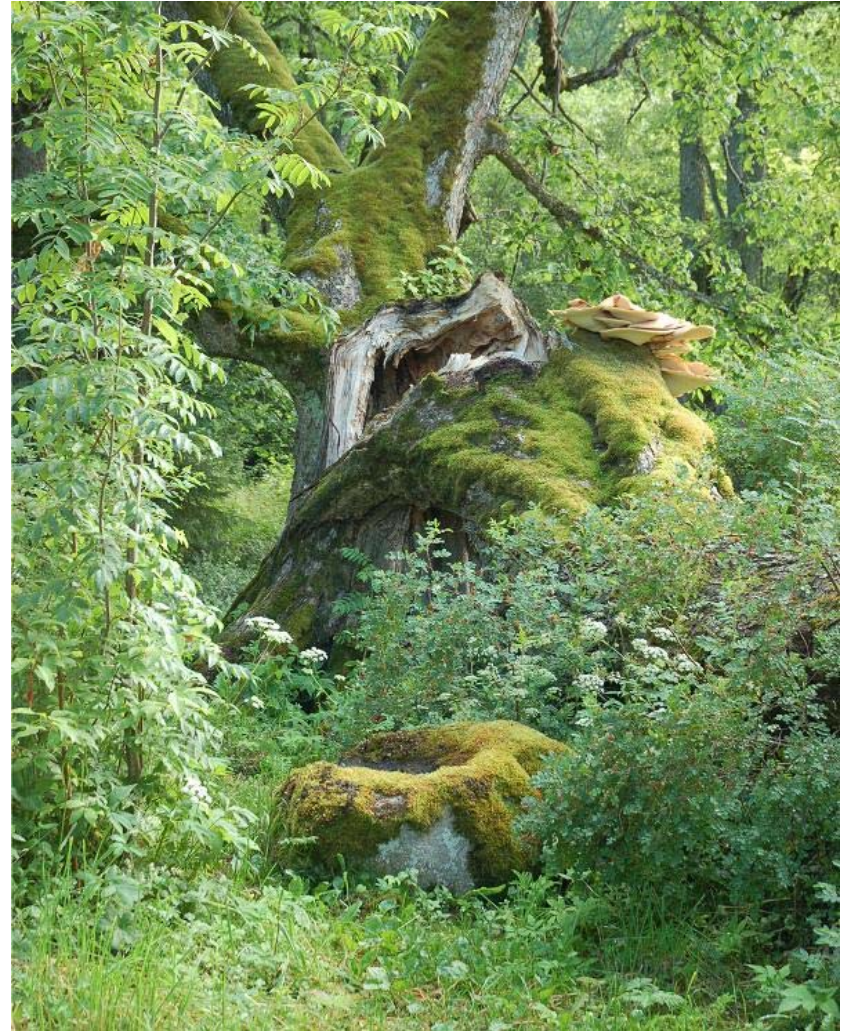
## Main activities:

- Sacred sites' expertise of Lahemaa National Park (western part)
- Consultation of local authorities
- Campaign „Grove Friend“
- Photo competitions and exhibitions about groves
- Introduction of IUCN manual of sacred natural sites' administration to local authorities

## Main partners:

- Estonian Ministry of the Interior
- Tartu University
- Estonian University of Life Sciences
- Maavalla Koda
- Estonian Museum of Literature

# Activities



*Kiigeoru grove is still being used as a sacred site,. The flora includes European White Elm and several species of orchids under nature protection.*



# „Cult Identity“ in Estonia

- Legal analysis of sacred natural sites, proposals for law amendment
- Inventory of sacred natural sites in Juuru and Muhu counties
- Formation of sacred natural sites' administration principles
- Formation of sacred natural sites protection principles
- Planning, preparation and introduction of natural sacred sites' tourism routes



*Traditions of nature religion related to sacred natural sites are still alive in Estonia. Sacred rock in Tammealuse grove in Virumaa.*



# Expectations to the Project

- To map and make an inventory of as many sites as possible
- Methodological and interdisciplinary researches
- Overview of the legal situation of sacred natural sites, planning of necessary law amendments
- Set an exemplary model for administration and tourism development in sacred natural sites



*Research must be professionally organized and carried out with proper methodology. Research of sacred natural sites in Kuusalu county in spring 2009.*



# Proper Principles

## Expectations to the project

- While planning research, administration and protection: protection of all values (incl spiritual) and consideration of and respect towards the interests of the indigenous people
- Values located in sacred natural sites have been created by the indigenous people who are, therefore, privileged to use them (UNO Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples)
- The spiritual space connected to sacred natural sites and felt by the indigenous people is even more vulnerable than its natural surroundings



*Meeksi Jaani Rock has been documented as a place of worship, sacrifice and healing for more than a century, and it is still being used by the community. Image: year 1937*



# Taevaskoda (Heaven's Hall)

- One of the most visited sacred natural sites of Estonia (~40,000 people in 2010)
- Environmental tolerance has been surpassed, natural and cultural heritage is being destroyed
- Neither the interests nor the spiritual values of the indigenous people have been taken into consideration
- Lack of information – most visitors are not aware of the site's importance as a sacred natural site of the indigenous people



*Taevaskoda (Heaven's Hall), Põlva county, Taevaskoja village.*

*The sacred natural site located in a nature protection area includes sandstone outcrops, a river, a sacred rock, springs and a meeting place.*



# Panga Shelf

- The most important tourist destination in Saaremaa (Estonia's biggest island)
- Tourism development has caused damage to natural and cultural heritage
- Neither the interests nor the spiritual values of the indigenous people have been taken into consideration
- Lack of information – most visitors are not aware of the site's importance as a sacred natural site of the indigenous people



*Panga Shelf, Saaremaa, Panga village. The most important site of the Mustjala county for prayers and sacrifice is located on the shelf taken under nature protection.*



# Kalme Grove Hill: Brutal Development

- Nature protection area since Soviet times
- Grove, burial mounds, sacred rock
- Central point of Soviet Estonia marked
- Toilet built on top of the burial mounds
- Woodworks
- Roadworks



*A toilet and a couple of tourism attractions have been built, forest has been cut down for better views and roadworks – the protection does not function. Põltsamaa county, Kalme village*



# Muhumaa Initiative

- Dialogue between tourism developers, researchers, local authorities and indigenous people
- Careful selection of sites opened for tourism
- Development of environment friendly support services
- Lack of information
- No development plan for the sacred natural sites of the island



*Muhumaa Tihuse tourism farm takes visitors to sacred natural sites on horseback along small village roads.*





# Sacred Sites of Nature Worship

- Ca 7,000 historic sacred natural sites in Estonia a small part of which has been researched
- Heiki Valk, PhD of archaeology: nowhere else in Europe have the sacred natural sites as well as traditions related to them transferred to contemporary world in such extent as in Estonia
- 2010 research on public opinion commissioned by the Estonian Council of Churches: 20% of all Estonians regards nature worship as their religion
- Research of the Estonian University of Life Sciences (1994): 65% of people living in South-Estonia believe that trees have souls



*In Estonia it is common to see ribbons tied to sacred trees as offerings.*

# Development Plan

- Development Plan lead by the Ministry of Culture to preserve the sacred natural sites
- „Historic Sacred Natural Sites of Estonia. Research and Preservation 2008-2012“
- Plans: mapping, inventory, protection, restoration, introduction, raising awareness, etc.



*So far, Estonian culture policy has been contradictory. Woodworks to establish a sports centre on Paluküla Grove Hill were financed by the Ministry of Culture, regional sports centres' programme.*





# Measures of the Development Plan

- Database of sacred natural sites
- Methodology for research and protection of sacred natural sites
- Field works
- Data processing and analysis
- Protection of all preserved sacred natural sites



*Often just a few old people remember the locations of sacred natural sites. If the researchers cannot find them on time, up to hundreds of sacred natural sites will be destroyed in Estonia.*

# Measures of the Development Plan

- Media
- Consulting land owners and local authorities
- Curricula and learning materials
- Seminars, exhibitions, publications
- Legal measures



*The trunk of Võlla Grove Oak broke after the young oaks were cut down. Natural renewal of the grove was interrupted because of lack of awareness. Muhumaa, Saare county*



# Important Activities

- Methodology for research and protection
- Local research
- More than 250 articles
- Consulting local authorities
- Lectures related to sacred natural sites at Tartu University and Estonian University of Life Sciences
- Exhibitions, photo competitions, and other events
- Cooperation with IUCN initiative to protect sacred natural sites



*Excursion of students of Tartu University. Sacred hill, Mäletjärve village, Tartu county*



# *Thank you!*

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