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Sacred Cartographies: Sthala Puranas and Narratives of Protected Landscapes in Serpent Temples of Southern Kerala

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Abstract

Sarpa Kavu, or the sacred serpent groves in Kerala, is a multifaceted space that intersects mythic narratives with ecological conservation. *Sthala Purana*-the local, legendary history of a sacred site-functions not merely as a religious chronicle but as a performative tool for environmental preservation. This research investigates the role of textual mechanisms in cultural narratives that sustain protected ecologies. Drawing on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Lefebvre's production of space, Eliade's sacred geography, and the emerging field of narrative ecology, this research examines the *Sthala Puranas* of two prominent serpent temples: Mannarasala and Vettikode, which are the prominent serpent temples in southern Kerala with legends, myths, and narratives of origin and protection of sacred groves. Analysing these primary texts as "spatial stories," the study identifies the primary narrative strategies used to establish divine presence, marking and perpetuating cartographies of protection and preservation through ritual practices and the construction of intergenerational temporal continuity. *Sthala Puranas* often function as sophisticated "sacred cartographies" that sacralize the landscape, transforming mundane wetlands into inviolable zones. This process of sacralization inadvertently creates de facto conservation zones where biodiversity persists despite intense regional urbanisation in Kerala. By shifting the focus from the biological state of the groves to the narrative mechanisms that protect them, the research highlights how traditional knowledge systems encode complex environmental ethics within mythic forms. Additionally, the paper proposes that narrative-led conservation provides a resilient, culturally embedded alternative to state-centric preservation models in the Global South.

Keywords: Sthala Purana, sacred groves, spatiality, environmental humanities, narrative ecology, indigenous knowledge systems

Introduction

Sarpa Kavu, the traditional natural space that functions as a sacred grove, serves as a significant site of indigenous ecological practice and a religious and social hub of worship, representing a harmonious mode of coexistence between humans and nature. The space, with its flora and fauna, waterbodies, and temperature drop, sustains the water table and offers a microclimatic sanctuary within the rapidly urbanising landscapes of Kerala. *Sarpa Kavu* is not merely a remnant of ancient dense forests reduced by human settlement, but a "hotspot" of cultural and biological significance where the preservation level often surpasses that of state-protected reserve forests (Gadgil and Vartak 152). Preservation has been shaped by an intricate web of taboo and veneration, functioning as what scholars of indigenous ecology describe as a "community conserved area" with its own governance logic (Bhagwat and Rutte 519).

Mannarasala and Vettikode, the traditional spaces of serpent worship in southern Kerala, lie in the wetland-rich terrains of Alappuzha district. These major groves, which extend for hectares within the rapidly urbanising landscape of Kerala, are deeply rooted in the social and spiritual fabric of the

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region, serving as the primary agency for the survival of these unique ecologies. With rapid urbanisation and the scarcity of land, critical questions arise regarding how exactly cultural narratives produce and sustain these protected ecologies. Even with the depletion of forest cover, the sacred groves remain repositories of relic vegetation, functioning as what ecologists have termed "ghost forests"—isolated patches of original vegetation sustained by cultural prohibitions rather than legal protection (Sukumaran et al. 204).

While ecologists and botanists have meticulously documented the ecological significance and floral and faunal richness of these biodiversity sites, and anthropologists have catalogued their ritualistic significance, a significant research gap remains in understanding the narrative mechanisms that produce the physical space. Existing studies often observe these sites as biodiversity hotspots or religious monuments, overlooking how textual sacralization functions as a sophisticated technology of landscape conservation. This study addresses this intersection, exploring the relationship between textual sacralization and material conservation to understand how, in the context of the *Sarpa Kavu*, the "word" becomes "wood."

The study employs a multidisciplinary theoretical approach to decode the sacred cartographies surrounding these ecological spots, utilising the local legends and histories, or *Sthala Puranas*, of the Mannarasala and Vettikode*SreeNagaraja* temples as primary texts. Incorporating the ideas of the "production of space" by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau's "spatial stories," the research argues that these narratives do not merely describe the sacred site but actively spatialise the landscape by layering it with divine and ethical imperatives. Connecting Mircea Eliade's notions of the sacred and profane to contemporary ecocriticism, the research investigates how the *Sthala Purana* functions as a "narrative ecology" that employs unique strategies—establishing persistent divine presence, drawing spatial and liminal boundaries, instituting ritual taboos, and embedding an ecological memory within the psyche of the community.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research lies at the intersection of mythical narratives, cultural geography, literary theory, and environmental humanities. Central to this analysis is the concept of spatialization, by which social and cultural narratives imbue meaning in neutral sites and transform them into protected zones. Employing Lefebvre's idea of the "production of space," the sacred groves can be understood as "representational spaces" formed through narratives and lived experience rather than through top-down planning or legal statute (Lefebvre 39). In Lefebvre's trialectic, *Sarpa Kavus* occupies the dimension of "spaces of representation"—spaces suffused with symbolism, inhabited by the imagination and inhabited in practice simultaneously.

In a similar vein, Michel de Certeau's concept of "spatial stories" suggests that narratives do not merely describe a place but actively "traverse" and "organise" it, transforming it into a "practised space" (de Certeau 117). Applied to the *Sthala Purana*, this framework reveals how each recitation of the temple's origin story re-enacts a territorial claim upon the grove, renewing the spatial contract between the community and the landscape. The narrative is not a passive record but an active cartographic instrument.

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Mircea Eliade has differentiated between the "sacred" and the "profane," arguing that sacred space constitutes a "break in the homogeneity of space" that establishes a fixed point, an absolute "center" around which meaningful orientation is constructed (Eliade 20–21). Sacralization, however, is not a static theological given but a dynamic cultural process in which religious narratives create "qualitatively different zones" through repetition and ritual performance (Notermans etal. 2). In the context of Kerala, it is a strategic use of myth that instills the landscape with divine agency, transforming a wetland into a sovereign site with ecological and spiritual laws.

The *Sthala Purana* as a genre serves as the primary textual mechanism for this spatialization. These are site-specific hagiographies connecting regional cosmic myths to local topographies and functioning as performative cartographies that document the history of the *SreeNagaraja* temples and establish a divine history that justifies the "extra-territorial" status of the grove. By defining precise ritual boundaries and prescribing ethical behaviours of protection, the *Sthala Puranas* act as linguistic maps. They "do things" to the landscape by establishing a narrative contract between the deity and the devotee, where the physical preservation of the trees is the non-negotiable condition for divine favour (Jayan 45).

Western concepts of preservation often involve colonial perspectives that separate humans from nature, creating a "terra nullius" of enforced exclusion. In contrast, cultural conservation in Kerala is rooted in a "culture of fear-appeasement," where myths embed strict restrictions on resource use within a logic of reciprocity rather than prohibition (Jayan 52). The *Sarpa Kavu* makes use of a "narrative restraint" in which mythic consequences—such as the "curse" of the serpent or the Malayalam proverb *kavu theendiyal kudivellam vattum* (if the sacred grove is defiled, the drinking water will dry up)—become elements of tangible biodiversity protection. Thus, a sophisticated system is formed where traditional ecological knowledge is encoded in narrative form, producing what Devika terms a "narrative-led" conservation model, where mythic imagination translates oral tradition into an ethics of material landscape protection (Devika 78).

This study is further informed by the growing field of narrative ecology, or "ecological literary criticism," which examines how stories shape environmental behaviour. Scholars such as Robin Wall Kimmerer have argued that the stories a culture tells about the land determine how that land is treated: "restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise" (Kimmerer 327). The *Sthala Puranas* of Kerala offer a case study in which the relationship—between community, deity, and ecosystem—is so thoroughly encoded in narrative that the narrative itself becomes the conservation instrument.

Analysis

Sarpa Kavu, or the serpent groves of Kerala, is a testament to an indigenous socio-religious infrastructure that resists the homogenising forces of modernity and urbanisation. Serpent worship, or *Naga Aradhana*, is a foundational aspect of Kerala's cultural identity, deeply entwined with the region's unique wetland and riparian ecosystems. Historically, these groves were "miniature biosphere reserves," where the serpent deity protected vital water sources and preserved indigenous flora and fauna (Gadgil and Vartak 158). The tradition has been a complex intersection of fertility cults, ancestral worship, and land tenure systems. In the traditional household (*Tharavadu*), the

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Sarpa Kavu was the primary spatial component, demonstrating the family's spiritual and ecological responsibility to the natural world.

Although often associated with Namboothiri and Nair lineages, serpent worship transcends rigid caste hierarchies through its universal themes of ecological balance. The worship was essential across communities and castes, often incorporating unique gender dynamics, particularly at Mannarasala, where the female priestess (*Amma*) becomes the living embodiment of the divine narrative, bridging the gap between the mythic past and the material present. This convergence of social inclusion and ecological protection represents what scholars of indigenous knowledge systems identify as a "biocultural" model of conservation, wherein biological diversity and cultural diversity mutually sustain each other (Maffi 1)—a model directly challenged by but also resilient against Kerala's rapid urban transformation.

Mannarasala Sree Nagaraja Temple, situated in Haripad, Alappuzha district, is one of the most prominent centres of serpent worship in India. Situated within a sprawling, ancient grove that thrives on the abundance of water resources and plains typical of the Kuttanad region, the temple is renowned for its vast collection of over 30,000 stone idols of serpents and *Chithrakoodakallu* installed and worshipped beneath the canopy of medicinal trees. The central narrative revolves around the great fire that scorched the land during the burning of the Khandava forest, as mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, leading to the creation of the cool, moist sanctuary where the *Naga Raja* took up residence. This myth provides the primary justification for the grove's high humidity and dense foliage, which is understood as both a spiritual and ecological necessity.

Vettikode Sree Nagaraja Temple is positioned in close proximity to Mannarasala and is equally significant as one of the oldest serpent shrines in Kerala, traditionally established by the legendary sage Parasurama. The topography features a distinctive mound (*Ammavan Kavu*) within the grove, highlighting a different facet of the region's diverse wetland-highland interface. The narrative emphasises the "consecration of the land" following the retrieval of the landscape of Kerala from the sea, as Parasurama offered the reclaimed land to Kashyapa as penance, positioning the serpent deity as the original "owner" of the soil. The sage established the serpent deity on a raised mound to stabilise the newly formed land and provide fresh, non-saline water essential for further human settlement. Together, these two temples constitute what Zimmermann terms a "sacred landscape cluster"—interconnected sites that reinforce each other's narrative and ecological authority (Zimmermann 211).

The *Sthala Puranas* of Mannarasala and Vettikode function as a cosmogenesis—a sacred account of how a particular space came to be chosen, inhabited, and made inviolable by the divine. In Mannarasala, the origin is tied to the *Khandava Dahanam* (the burning of the Khandava forest), where Serpent King Anantha and other serpents sought a "cool retreat"(*shaitalya*) from the heat of the fire. The text specifically marks the landscape features—the low-lying moisture and the abundance of medicinal *Mandara* trees—as the divine criteria for selection. This origin narrative transforms the wetland's natural humidity from a geographical accident into a sign of divine favour, effectively sacralizing the ecological characteristics of the site.

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The narratives of these two temples share a motif: the deity (*Nagaraja*) demands an undisturbed dwelling within a unified ecological space and is drawn to specific features of the regional sacred cartography. While Mannarasala emphasises a natural sanctuary, Vettikode emphasises foundational stability. In both cases, the "choice" of the landscape by the deity or the sage elevates specific features—the mound at Vettikode and the marshy hollow at Mannarasala—from mundane topography to cosmologically significant spaces. The narrative origin thus acts as a spiritual "deed of ownership," removing the land from human commerce and placing it under divine jurisdiction, a strategy that Comaroff and Comaroff identify as characteristic of how communities across the Global South construct "sovereignty over life itself" through mythic claim-making (Comaroff and Comaroff 35).

If the origin story establishes the sacred "center," the narrative of boundaries defines the "limit." The *Sthala Puranas* employ rigid spatial demarcations that translate directly into de facto ecological protection. At Mannarasala, the boundaries of the *Kavu* are narratively reinforced by the presence of the *Chithrakoodams* (idols). The text conveys that the serpent's gaze (*Drishti*) covers every inch of the canopy, and any act of "uprooting" or "clearing" is viewed as an assault on the deity's body. The grove, in this framing, is not merely where the deity resides but is the deity's embodied form, a move that scholars of religious ecology describe as "somatic sacralization"—the identification of the divine body with the natural landscape (Sponsel 104).

Transgression narratives play a crucial role here. A common motif in both temple *puranas* involves a labourer or a passerby unknowingly harming a branch or a snake within the demarcated zone, followed by an immediate "affliction" (*Sarpa Dosha*). These stories function as narrative boundaries—not merely legends but legal-ethical codes. At Vettikode, the "Hillock of the Uncle" (*Ammavan Kavu*) is marked by a narrative of total exclusion; certain zones are so sacred that even the priests enter only under strict ritual conditions. By narratively marking what can and cannot be done (no cutting of wood, no treading with footwear, no loud noises), these texts create a "buffer zone" of silence and stillness. The material boundary of the grove is thus maintained not by a fence but by a shared mental map of "prohibited space," a cultural technology of exclusion that operates entirely through collective belief (Gadgil and Guha 97).

The prescriptions found in these *Puranas* function as informal conservation regulations. They prohibit the felling of trees (*Vriksha-chedana*), the pollution of temple tanks (*Theerthams*), and the harming of any living creature within the grove. However, the logic is rarely presented in ecological terms; instead, it is framed through ritual necessity and divine command. For example, the need for the "Mother" (*Mannarasala Amma*) to offer *Noorum Paalum* (milk and turmeric) to the serpents requires a pristine, undisturbed environment. The ritual is rendered impossible without ecological integrity, and thus ecological integrity becomes a condition of religious fulfilment. This is what Berkes has called "sacrificial restraint"—the embedding of conservation behaviour within systems of religious obligation (Berkes 180).

These prescriptions also have social dimensions. Traditionally, access was governed by caste and gender protocols which,while exclusionary, served a "protective" function by limiting human

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footfall—a form of ritualized carrying-capacity management. The *Sthala Purana* of Mannarasala, however, subverts some of these norms by placing a woman at the centre of the ecology. The *Amma's* celibacy and ritual purity are narratively linked to the "fertility" of the grove itself; if she fails in her ritual duties, the myth suggests the grove will wither. This embeds an ecological ethic where human moral behaviour is directly responsible for the health of the non-human sanctuary—an ethics of care that parallels what contemporary ecofeminists describe as the inseparability of patriarchal domination and ecological exploitation (Shiva 42).

Finally, the *Sthala Puranas* construct a bridge between the primordial past and an eternal future, creating an intergenerational obligation of care. They often include "crisis narratives"—times of drought or pestilence where the grove was neglected, leading to catastrophe for the surrounding villages. These stories function as cautionary prophecies: the destruction of the *Kavu* is equated with the end of the community's prosperity and the drying up of its water sources.This temporal logic mirrors what environmental historians describe as "ecological memory"—the encoding of past environmental conditions and responses within cultural narratives that guide future behaviour (Fikret Berkes and Turner 479).

At Vettikode, the narrative emphasises the "eternal presence" of the Naga Raja through the lineage of the *Mooppan* (the traditional head). The text anticipates future threats, suggesting that as long as the "serpent's lamp" burns, the wetlands will not fail. This temporal continuity is vital; it ensures that the protection of the grove is not seen as a one-time act but as a perpetual duty inherited from ancestors and passed to descendants. While modern laws may change with political cycles, the "law of the *Purana*" is framed as timeless. By constructing this temporal depth, the texts ensure that the "protected landscape" remains a permanent fixture in the collective cultural memory, resistant to the short-term logic of urban expansion (Pathak 66).

Discussion

The foregoing analysis identifies four interlocking narrative mechanisms through which the *Sthala Puranas* of Mannarasala and Vettikode produce and sustain material protection for the sacred groves: divine origination, spatial boundary-making, prescriptive ecology, and temporal continuity. Taken together, these strategies form what this study terms a "sacred cartography"—a comprehensive narrative system that maps and governs the landscape not through legal instruments but through collective mythic belief. The effectiveness of this system lies not in its compulsion but in its internalisation; the grove is protected because the community believes its own welfare is inseparable from the grove's integrity.

This narrative architecture achieves what formal conservation law often cannot: compliance that is self-regulating, socially embedded, and culturally reinforced across generations. Studies of sacred grove ecology in India have consistently demonstrated that groves protected by religious prohibitions often contain higher species diversity than state-managed reserves in the same region, precisely because community compliance with informal prohibitions is more consistent than compliance with formal law (Bhagwat and Rutte 520; Gadgil and Vartak 160). The *Sarpa Kavu* tradition exemplifies this dynamic, with Mannarasala's grove documented as containing over 800

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species of plants, including numerous species found nowhere else in the surrounding region (Sukumaran et al. 208).

When compared to state-based conservation, the narrative model reveals distinct advantages and limitations. State conservation regimes typically operate through surveillance, enforcement, and legal penalty—mechanisms that require sustained institutional capacity and are vulnerable to regulatory capture and political change (Guha and Martínez-Alier 12). The narrative model, by contrast, operates through what Foucault would recognise as an internalised "disciplinary regime"—one in which the subject regulates their own behaviour not out of fear of external punishment but out of a deep-seated belief that transgression will result in supernatural harm (Foucault 215). This internalisation is, paradoxically, both the model's greatest strength and its most ethically complex feature, a point to which this discussion will return.

4.2 Implications for Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge Systems

The sacred cartographies of Mannarasala and Vettikode offer significant implications for the study of indigenous and traditional knowledge systems (IKS). These *Sthala Puranas* demonstrate that traditional communities did not conceive of ecology and cosmology as separate domains; the protection of the natural world was not a secular "environmental policy" but an integral component of a coherent metaphysical worldview. This integration challenges the dominant paradigm ofWestern conservation, which has historically separated the "human" from the "natural" and treated biodiversity protection as a technical rather than a cultural problem (Maffi 3).

The *Sthala Purana* tradition also demonstrates how IKS systems encode complex ecological knowledge in forms that are resilient to literate institutional memory. Because these texts are oral-performative in their primary mode of transmission—recited at rituals, embedded in festival cycles, and re-enacted through the bodily practice of the *Amma*—they are not vulnerable to archival neglect or bureaucratic obsolescence in the same way that written conservation regulations may be. This is consistent with what Nakashima and colleagues identify as the "resilience" characteristic of biocultural knowledge systems: their capacity to persist across generations through embodied practice rather than institutional record (Nakashima et al. 8).

However, it is necessary to resist a romantic celebration of these traditions that overlooks the social hierarchies embedded within them. The very caste and gender structures that historically limited access to the groves—and thereby contributed to their ecological protection—also enforced forms of social exclusion that are incompatible with contemporary ethics of equity. The female priestess at Mannarasala occupies a position of spiritual centrality, yet the narrative that elevates her also disciplines her body and sexuality through its requirement of celibacy. Similarly, the spatial demarcations of the grove have historically been policed along caste lines, with lower-caste communities excluded from sacred precincts under threat of supernatural sanction. Any contemporary engagement with the *Sthala Purana* tradition as a model for conservation must grapple honestly with these embedded inequities rather than treating the texts as uniformly benign (Devika 85).

Nevertheless, acknowledging these complexities does not diminish the environmental effectiveness of the tradition. It does, however, suggest that any attempt to revive or institutionalise

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narrative-based conservation must be accompanied by a critical process of social renegotiation—one that preserves the ecological function of the *Sthala Purana*'s narrative prohibitions while detaching them from the social hierarchies in which they were historically embedded. This is the central challenge for what might be termed "critical biocultural conservation" in the context of postcolonial Kerala.

Limitations

Despite the demonstrated effectiveness of narrative-based conservation, several significant limitations and contemporary pressures must be acknowledged. First, the relationship between textual prescription and material practice is never straightforwardly causal. Even within communities that profess belief in *Sarpa Dosha*, violations of grove boundaries do occur, particularly under conditions of acute economic pressure. The encroachment of residential and commercial development on the peripheries of both Mannarasala and Vettikode in recent decades attests to the limits of narrative prohibition when it confronts the material incentives of land commodification (Sukumaran et al. 210). The "law of the *Purana*," however culturally authoritative, cannot substitute for formal legal protection when developers operate outside the community's shared belief system.

Second, the changing religious landscape of contemporary Kerala introduces pressures of a different kind. The rationalist and reform movements that have periodically challenged the authority of traditional practices, the commercialisation of temple tourism, and the influence of majoritarian Hindutva politics—which tends to standardise and homogenise regional devotional traditions—all threaten the contextual specificity that gives the *Sthala Purana*'s ecological prescriptions their meaning and force. When a festival is transformed from a local ritual of appeasement into a large-scale tourism event, the "silence and stillness" that the narrative prescribes as the grove's protective conditions are directly violated by the event itself.

Third, the *Sthala Puranas* are not static texts. They have evolved over centuries, and it is likely that elements of the contemporary versions reflect recent adaptations and interpolations. Ongoing scholarly attention to the historical evolution of these texts is essential to understanding which protective prescriptions reflect ancient ecological wisdom and which are more recent accretions. This demands ethnographic fieldwork and archival research to complement the textual analysis offered here.

Nevertheless, the narrative model demonstrates a fundamental resilience that state conservation frameworks often lack. Because the *Sthala Purana*'s protective function is embedded in the cosmological worldview of the community rather than in any external institutional structure, it cannot be defunded, repealed, or captured by opposing political interests. It operates, as Pathak observes, as a "commons of the mind"—a shared cultural resource that regenerates itself through practice and belief (Pathak 71). In the Anthropocene, when the failures of state-centric conservation are increasingly evident, the narrative model offers a compelling if complex alternative.

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Conclusion

This paper has examined the *Sthala Puranas* of Mannarasala and Vettikode as sacred cartographies—sophisticated narrative systems that sacralize the wetland landscapes of southern Kerala and create culturally embedded mechanisms of ecological protection. Through the four interlocking strategies of divine origination, spatial boundary-making, prescriptive ecology, and temporal continuity, these texts transform physical landscapes into inviolable moral and cosmological zones, producing what the study has termed "narrative-led conservation." The material outcomes—documented biodiversity, persistent relic vegetation, and community compliance—testify to the genuine ecological effectiveness of this narrative architecture, even as the social hierarchies embedded within it demand critical scrutiny.

For cultural studies, the findings offer a compelling demonstration of the material force of narrative. The *Sthala Purana* is not merely a cultural artefact that reflects a pre-existing ecological reality; it actively produces that reality. Stories do not only describe the world—they create the conditions for the world's preservation. In this sense, the *Sthala Purana* tradition resonates powerfully with the broader turn in environmental humanities towards understanding how "culture" and "nature" are co-constituted rather than opposed (Heise 12). The grove does not pre-exist the narrative; rather, the narrative is what makes the grove persist.

For IKS research, the study provides a model of how traditional knowledge systems can encode complex environmental ethics within mythic and ritual forms that are resilient to institutional obsolescence. This has direct implications for conservation policy in the Global South, where formal legal protection regimes frequently fail to account for the cultural logics that actually govern community relationships with the land. Rather than treating *Sthala Puranas* and similar traditional texts as folklore to be archived, policymakers might consider them as living governance instruments whose authority, carefully maintained and critically renegotiated, could complement and reinforce formal conservation frameworks (Berkes 185).

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. Ethnographic work examining how the *Sthala Purana* narratives are interpreted and enacted by contemporary devotees—particularly in the context of generational change and urban migration—would substantially enrich the analysis offered here. Comparative studies with other sacred grove traditions in the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa could illuminate both the particular features of the Kerala tradition and the broader cross-cultural patterns of narrative-based conservation. Historical research into the evolution of the *Sthala Puranas* themselves could reveal how these texts have responded to and shaped ecological change over centuries.

The central provocation of this study remains: if the most effective conservation tool available to the communities of the Kuttanad wetlands is a story, then perhaps the most urgent work of environmental scholarship in the Anthropocene is not the production of new scientific data but the recovery, critical renegotiation, and sustained telling of the stories that make human communities unwilling to destroy the living world. The *Sarpa Kavu* endures not because it is fenced but because it is narrated. In an age of ecological emergency, that distinction carries consequences far beyond the boundaries of any single sacred grove.

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