

# Best Practices Survey—Promising First Step toward Developing Guidelines

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On behalf of the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group

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## Background

Established in 2007, the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group (RCBWG) focuses on strengthening dialogue between biological conservation and religious communities throughout the world and promoting within the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) an awareness of the importance of their collaboration. This commitment has prompted research and action to discourage religious communities from using ivory that has been brutally removed from the endangered African elephant and to encourage Buddhist communities to adopt ecologically compatible and compassionate ways of practicing the release of animals for merit.<sup>1</sup> To further discussion within the SCB, the RCBWG sponsored symposia at the International Congress for Conservation Biology in 2013 and 2015 at which members shared projects in which they had involved religious leaders and communities, and a forum was held at the 2015 ICCB at which Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si, On Care for Our Common Home*<sup>2</sup> and other religious sources for addressing conservation issues were discussed. Emerging during these congresses was an increasing interest among some SCB members to engage religious leaders and communities because their approval and/or help was needed to initiate, participate in, and/or advocate the implementation of conservation projects. Especially important to SCB members was a desire to hear one another's stories about approaches they used to interact in constructive ways that resulted in successful outcomes of their projects.

This growing interest among SCB members prompted the Board of the RCBWG to incorporate in its 2015 Strategic Plan the goal of identifying best practice guidelines for SCB members to consider when needing and/or wanting to engage religious leaders and communities in conservation projects. After months of planning, the three-year Best Practices Project was approved in March 2016 and shared subsequently with the SCB's Board of Governors.

The first step of this project was surveying the full membership of the SCB for their experiences when relating to religious communities—the focus of this report. Subsequent steps include (1) highlighting in a symposium to be proposed for the 2017 ICCB successful practices that SCB members shared in the survey, (2) holding a workshop following the symposium at which guidelines for establishing a working relationship with religious leaders and communities will be drafted, (3) submitting the guidelines to the SCB Board of Governors by January 2018 for promulgation and promotion through SCB communication channels, (4) conducting workshops on the guidelines at sectional SCB meetings in 2018, (5) organizing a symposium at the 2019 ICCB during which successful collaborations of religions and conservation communities will be shared and celebrated, and (6) sharing the outcome of the Best Practices Project with other

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organizations that are dedicated to interfacing religion and the natural sciences.<sup>3</sup> During 2018 and 2019, members of the RCBWG Board will seek to explain the Best Practices Guidelines at meetings of the American Academy of Religion, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, other academic groups, and government and non-government organizations that interface religion and conservation.<sup>4</sup>

### **Survey Method**

SurveyMonkey<sup>5</sup> was selected as the vehicle through which to obtain input from SCB members. Anonymity of respondents' names in connection with data entries was promised and limited to project leaders. Questions were drafted and honed, entered on the survey site, and tested to streamline and assure functioning. Members of the RCBWG Board were requested on 5 May 2016 to access the survey, evaluate it, and suggest revisions. Their input facilitated improving the survey, and it was published and made accessible to all SCB members on May 30. Concurrent with the survey's publication, staff at SCB headquarters circulated through the Society's extensive communications system<sup>6</sup> an article submitted by project leaders that included an explanation of the survey, a link to it, and a plea to all members to participate by July 15.<sup>7</sup>

To facilitate publicizing the survey at section congresses held during the summer, the date for completing the survey was extended to September 10. Project leaders contacted presidents of all sections to encourage their members to participate, and most presidents responded enthusiastically with additional ideas for encouraging participation. SCB staff generously tweeted reminders to members during the congresses to take the survey, and Board members who were participating in the North American, Asian, African, and Marine congresses circulated bookmark reminders at pertinent sessions. They also personally encouraged attendees to take the survey.

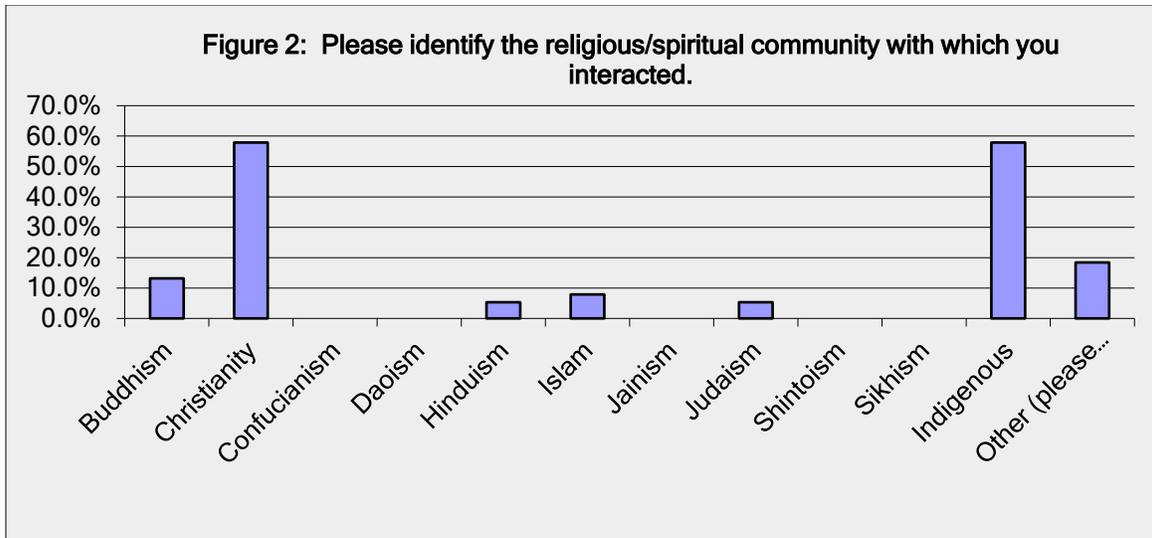
### **Results**

Thirty-nine members responded to the survey. The geographic locations of their projects spanned all continents of Earth except Antarctica (Figure 1). Within the geographic sections established by the SCB, members reported on projects in Africa (Nigeria and Kenya), Asia (Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Thailand), Europe (Italy), Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru), North America (USA and Canada), Oceania (Australia, Fiji Islands, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines), and Marine (coastal Kenya). The wide variety of project foci included aging polar bears, bison, climate change, coral rehabilitation, fish, iguana, kangaroo, rattlesnakes, terrestrial vertebrates, wildlife used for bush meat, forest management and restoration, restoration of rivers, and protective management of shrines and sacred places.

Figure 1: Locations of Projects



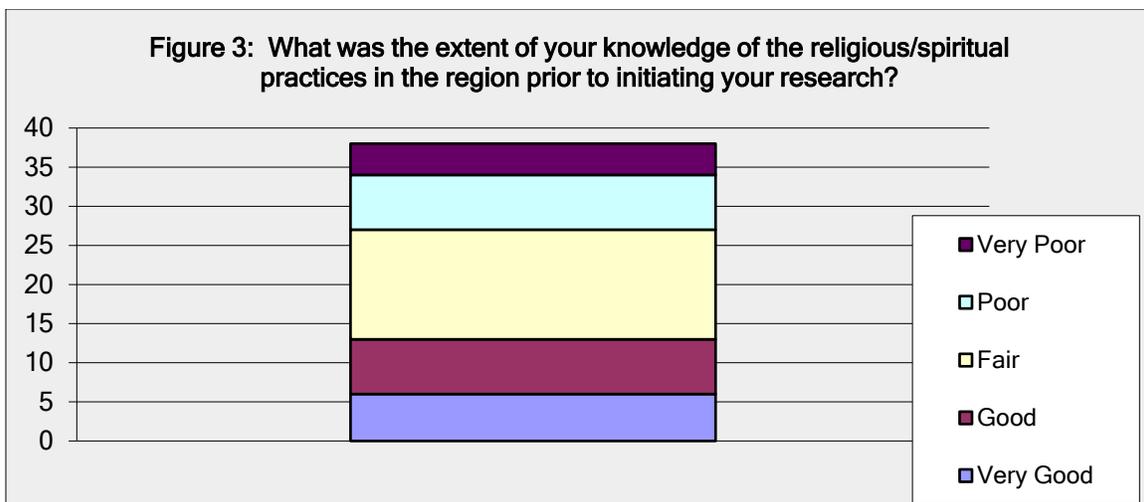
A variety of religious and indigenous communities were engaged in these projects. When asked to “identify the religious/spiritual community with which you interacted,” twenty-two survey respondents specified Christianity, and another twenty-two respondents specified indigenous/spiritual. Other religions engaged were Buddhism (five), Islam (three), Hinduism (two), and Judaism (two). Some respondents worked with a mix of communities. For example, among the twenty-two survey respondents who engaged Christian communities, six also engaged indigenous communities, one a Hindu community, and another a Muslim and an indigenous community. One respondent engaged three communities--Buddhist, Judaic, and indigenous. Of the twenty-two engagements with indigenous communities, two also interacted with Buddhists, four with Christians, and two with Muslims. Survey respondents who interacted with Christian communities underscored the diversity of their traditions (Pentecostals, evangelicals, and Roman Catholics) which precluded making general assumptions about them, the meaning of their rituals, and their expressions of faith. Variety also existed within the indigenous communities with which twenty-two of the survey respondents interacted. Traditional knowledge of species and land, spiritual meaning of particular animal species, and ocean spirituality were among the cultural manifestations of these communities.



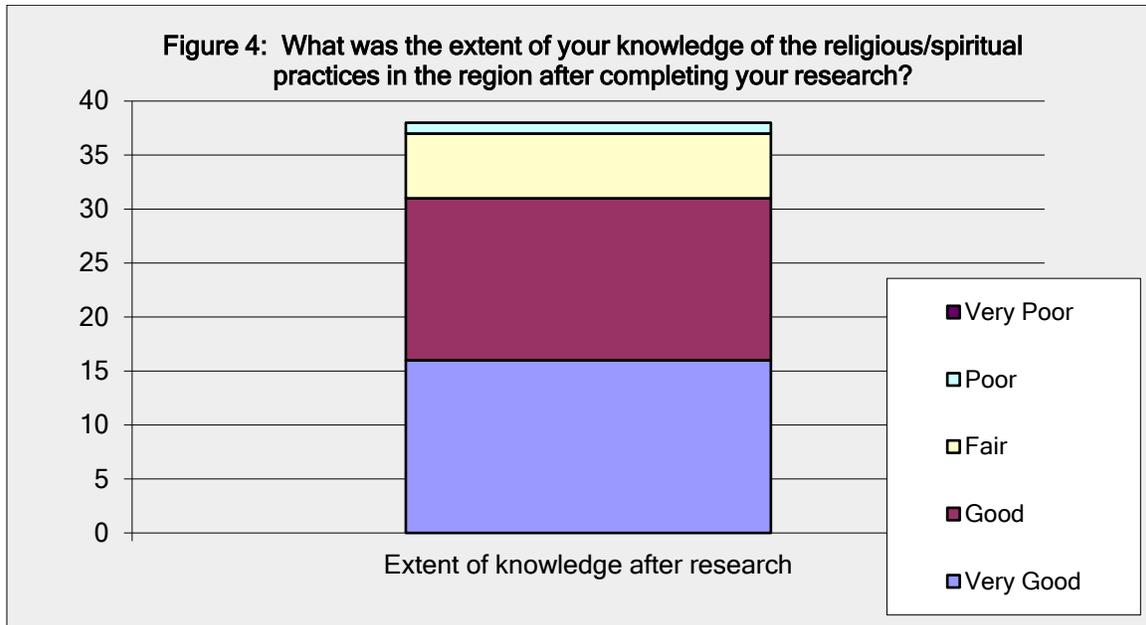
Though disappointed with the number of respondents, the experiences and insights that SCB members shared are invaluable for proceeding with the Best Practices Project and advancing its goal—the issuance of guidelines for members to consider when contemplating a conservation project that needs approval and/or involvement of religious communities to succeed. Particularly valuable are ways in which survey respondents interacted with religious and indigenous communities prior to and at various stages of their projects to yield positive results, difficulties they experienced and through which they worked, and lessons learned from their interactions. Overall, the Best Practices Survey provides ideas and categories from which to begin to draft at the 2017 ICCB guidelines for interacting with faith communities.

### Extent of Researchers' Knowledge of Religious Practice Prior to and After Engagement

While fourteen of the survey respondents indicated that their knowledge of the religious and indigenous practices prior to initiating their projects was fair, eleven others considered themselves very poor and poor. Thirteen others thought their knowledge was good or very good.



The extent of the survey respondents' knowledge of religious and indigenous practices improved significantly after completing their research. Thirty-one of the respondents described their knowledge as good (fifteen) and very good (sixteen). Seven selected fair (six) and poor (one) levels of knowledge.



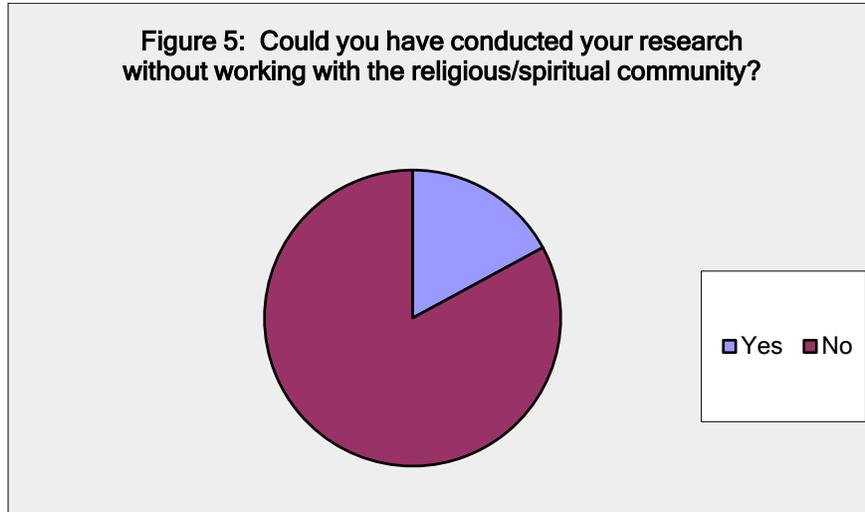
### Sources and Methods for Improving Knowledge

Survey respondents detailed how they improved their knowledge of the religious and/or indigenous traditions of the communities with which they had interacted. In their comments, some indicated that they had read primary texts of the religions, published sources about the religious and indigenous traditions, on-line sources issued by religion-conservation organizations (e.g., Alliance for Religions and Conservation), and locally-produced information. They also consulted, interviewed, and listened to local religious (ministers and pastors) and indigenous leaders (traditional healers and shamans) as well as members of their communities. They observed rituals when invited, usually after having been involved with them in projects. They interacted socially with research partners, listening to their explanations of their traditions and practices and engaging in lengthy discussions. They reported learning through listening. And, they shared their knowledge with members of the communities with which they interacted. One survey respondent described the growth in knowledge as “mutual ‘slow’ learning.”

### Necessity of Interacting with Religious and Spiritual Leaders/Communities

When asked if SCB members could have conducted their research projects without working with a faith community, most responded they could not. Thirty-one respondents needed the approval and/or participation of the community for their projects, some of which focused on studying community attitudes and actions pertaining to conserving biological diversity. Of the seven respondents who indicated they could have conducted their research without involving a

religious or spiritual community, three reported that the outcome would not have been as complete as desired. Another researcher identified a personal benefit--the creation of “lasting friendships” that resulted from having worked with members of a faith community on the project.



**Nature of Research and Cooperation**

Respondents reported that they needed knowledge of and access to religious and indigenous communities for several reasons that pertain to the nature of their projects (Figure 6). Some respondents (thirteen) were conducting social research on how communities engage in major conservation issues (e.g., climate change). The others (twenty-six) were researchers who were conducting species-related or conservation biology habitat protection research. Of this latter group, ten were studying a certain species, eleven were engaged in habitat restoration and protection, and five were focused on conservation of sacred species and sites in particular.

<b>Figure 6: Types of Research Conducted by Respondents Involving Religious and Indigenous Communities</b>	
Singles species research	10
Habitat restoration or protected area designation	11
Social science study of religious community attitudes, knowledge and/or action on conservation issues	13
Conservation of sacred species and sites	5

Figure 7 shows that almost half of the respondents needed permission from the faith community before they began their research. Another half and different mix of respondents indicated that engaging in or otherwise acknowledging the community’s religious or indigenous practices helped gain trust that facilitated their achieving the objectives of their research. The same percentage of researchers wanted members of the community to collaborate in collecting data.

As reported by sixteen respondents, their social science research on faith communities benefitted from asking members of these communities to serve as guides, as interpreters, as advisers on appropriate ways of communicating with members of the communities, and as aides in helping them understand the traditions of others in the region. However, in only twelve of the cases were the researchers and members of the faith community co-researchers on a joint project (e.g., an interdisciplinary team).

Twenty-one of the researchers provided additional qualitative responses to this question that are reflected in subsequent sections of this report. Important to note is the survey finding that most scientists entered the faith community to conduct their own research; far fewer were invited by the community to train or compile new data about the lands of the faith community. Regardless of the direction of information flow, many researchers needed to work with a local expert to help lead the work and bridge communications. Significant time was needed to build trust and, as one researcher put it, “to create a shared vision of the conservation goal.” To cooperate before research even begins, many attributed “importance to activities that were meaningful to the community” and invested themselves “in terms of time and finance (as possible) in the community, and in relationship-building.”

**Figure 7: The nature of cooperation with the religious/spiritual community (all answers that applied).**

<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
We needed permission from this community before we could conduct research in the region.	18
Member(s) of the community assisted in data collection.	18
Member(s) of the community served as guides for us in the region.	16
Member(s) of the community helped us understand how to communicate appropriately with other people in the region.	16
We engaged in and/or acknowledged certain religious/spiritual practices that helped gain trust.	18
We were co-researchers or work on a joint research project as part of an interdisciplinary team.	12
Other (please specify)	21
	<i>Answered</i> <b>39</b>
	<i>Skipped Question</i> <b>0</b>

### **Outcome of Interactions with Religious Communities**

When engaging faith communities in research, survey respondents reported a generally positive outcome pertaining to terms and expectations. Quantitatively, the descriptions of the researchers who ranked their outcomes ranged from fantastic (eleven), good (eighteen), fair (four) to poor (one).

Qualitative responses varied considerably. One researcher of a project in Bhutan called the commitment to interact a lesson in “expectations management” and concluded that interactions would be futile without listening, sensitivity, respect, flexibility, clear communications, and willingness to learn. The respondent cautioned: “At the same time, these and other elements can be extremely nuanced and difficult, often due to cultural norms [and]

political contingencies.” Another researcher who worked on river restoration with indigenous people in the western part of the United States wrote: “My approach was to listen. I never argued or tried to present a summary that was contrary to his story. He (the community member) made jokes about my ‘analytical’ approach to everything, but also appreciated my sincerity. In the end, it was likely my personal approach that provided the connection. *Science was a valuable tool, but it was not the foundation of the relationship.*” Ultimately, despite these differences in “language” and culture between researcher and faith community, the “good” to “fantastic” interaction outcome is encouraging.

### **Best Practices to Consider for SCB Guidelines**

Survey respondents recommended many positive ways of interacting with religious and indigenous communities. Their recommendations fall within three stages from planning a project to its closure, and all are ripe for consideration when drafting SCB Guidelines at the ICCB in Cartagena.

#### Pre-engagement Planning

1) Plan to spend plenty of time developing a relationship with the faith community. This requires understanding the economic and social needs of the community that cannot be separated from conservation biology issues slated for studying. Developing a relationship with the community also requires understanding the jurisdictions within which they are functioning and the sovereignties that affect them. To fail to fully and respectfully understand the social needs, jurisdictions, and customs may offend the community, impede the project’s progress, and diminish results.

2) Identify and visit the leader and members of the faith community. Budget time and resources for at least two visits before initiating research to assure understanding their hierarchical norms (e.g., “who” to talk to and the level of respect that is expected).

3) During the initial planning encounter, listen, be honest about your intentions, and aim for a common vision. Do not promise what you cannot offer, and be prepared to accept “no” from the leader and/or community. Avoid contentious issues (e.g., human-forced climate change) that some faith leaders and communities may not accept and may deter a positive beginning.

4) Invite research assistants and translators from the local community to assure a local connection and, if needed, one who is multi-lingual.

5) Study and understand spiritual texts and generational stories of the faith community.

6) Recognize and respect the perspective of the faith community about the human-Earth relationship (e.g., recognize that some believe their subject of worship “gifts” the world to humans for them to protect). When appropriate, point to the connections between protecting human health and well-being and protecting global health and well-being.

7) When planning to work with fundamentalist Christians (e.g., Pentecostals), understand their idea of “creation care” and what the Bible says about God as the creator and humans as God’s stewards--“the best bridge” for collaboration with the community according to one survey respondent.

8) When planning to work with indigenous people, be cognizant of their past, especially of their having been disenfranchised by outsiders.

9) Avoid aiming for a researcher-faith community relationship that is oriented ultimately toward answering “How much can I get out of this community?” or “How can this community help me network and reach people with my own agenda?”

#### During the Project

1) Plan a regular time to listen and to build trust and rapport with the faith community; continuous, long-term engagement is critical to a successful outcome of a project.

2) Liaison with a person who is respected and trusted by the faith community.

3) Throughout the project, maintain cordiality, respect for, and acceptance of the faith community’s traditions.

4) Be prepared to give gifts.

5) Ask about taking photographs, refrain from any that are not approved, and, if approved, do not take too many.

6) If appropriate to the research project, consider using live animals during educational visits.

7) Accept with gratitude invitations to special events and other opportunities to build mutual trust.

8) Beware, as one researcher underscored, of “nasty [local] politics” that may transpire and avoid getting “sucked into such complexities.”

9) Demonstrate patience, politeness, and good humor.

10) Focus throughout on the project mission and avoid being side-tracked.

#### Closure

1) Have an appropriate exit plan.

2) Follow through with any “promises” made: Financial? Resources? Support?

3) Assure the faith community receives some kind of benefit from research conducted.

4) Provide the community with the final research report, expressing thanks for the role members of the community played in the project's completion.

## Conclusions

The Best Practices Survey conducted by the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group of the Society for Conservation Biology provides a constructive beginning toward drafting guidelines for conservation researchers and practitioners to consider when contemplating a project that needs approval by a religious or indigenous community and/or its help. Survey respondents underscore the benefits of interacting respectfully, knowledgeably, and constructively with leaders and members of a faith community. They also point to positive ways of interacting at the planning, conducting, and closure stages of a research project. Their suggestions will contribute to the workshop planned for the International Congress for Conservation Biology to be held in Cartagena during July 2017.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Awoyemi, Fred Kraus, Yiming Li, Kit Magellan, and Jame Schaefer, "Prayer Animal Release Can Embody Conservation Principles: A Call to Action," Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative of the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group, Society for Conservation Biology, June 16, 2016 ([http://st.scb.org/images/content\\_groups/Religion/Policy\\_Brief\\_for\\_Prayer\\_Animal\\_Release\\_\\_RCRC\\_\\_FINAL\\_SCB\\_Letterhead.pdf](http://st.scb.org/images/content_groups/Religion/Policy_Brief_for_Prayer_Animal_Release__RCRC__FINAL_SCB_Letterhead.pdf)); endorsed by the Global Policy Committee of the SCB (<https://conbio.org/groups/working-groups/religion-and-conservation-biology>).

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, *On Care for Our Common Home*, Vatican City, 24 May 2015 ([http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Alliance for Religions and Conservation, Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Delos Initiative, International Society of Ethnobiology, Sacred Natural Sites Initiative, and World Wildlife Fund.

<sup>4</sup> Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group, "Best Practices for Religious and Indigenous Community Interaction," SCB News Blog, May 2016 (<http://conservationbiology.org/publications/scb-news-blog/best-practices-for-religious-and-indigenous-community-interaction>).

<sup>5</sup> SCB Best Practices -- Working with Religious/Spiritual Communities (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>). Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group (<https://conbio.org/groups/working-groups/religion-and-conservation-biology/>).

<sup>6</sup> SCB June and July 2016 member newsletters, blog, and presidents of the SCB sections and working groups.

<sup>7</sup> Superseded in the notice that appeared in the August 2016 SCB member newsletter (<http://conservationbiology.org/publications/scb-news-blog/best-practices-for-religious-and-indigenous-community-interaction>).