



Religions, traditions and biodiversity

Religious development initiatives

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Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet is a joint initiative of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Eleven faiths are committed to conservation projects on every continent. They express their environmental concern in language and action appropriate to their tradition and social situation. This programme, a living example of the possibilities of formal religions in conserving natural resources, builds on indigenous cultures in the local communities. IUCN contributes through its work on sacred protected areas.

Virtually all religions are sensitive to biodiversity concerns, essentially asserting the need to treat all life with respect. But this religious perspective has not always been sufficient to conserve biodiversity. Christianity has often promoted over-exploitation of natural resources, while the Hindu recognition of the Ganges as sacred river has not prevented its pollution. The balance advocated by Islam is in many cases replaced by environmental pressures, and the Tao non-interventionist philosophy did not prevent the ancient Chinese from making profound changes to their land and water.

But religions constantly evolve, and it is possible that a stronger religious response to a decline in biodiversity will emerge as the concerns about such loss begin to affect people more profoundly. The faiths have a unique role to play here because of their histories, networks, perspectives on time and, perhaps most important, their core beliefs.

Recent initiatives

The World Wide Fund for Nature first invited the faiths to become partners in environmental work at Assisi, Italy, in 1986, after the Alliance of Religions and Conservation was set up in 1985. Today ARC includes eleven religious faith members, who have undertaken thousands of projects and reached countless communities with their environmental message.

WWF and ARC launched a new programme in November 2000 in Kathmandu, Nepal, entitled *Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet*. This programme is based on two principles that characterise the major religions: to celebrate and respect the gift of life and to promote the concept of giving. The idea is to create new, significant and environmentally important projects addressing a wide range of issues affecting biodiversity, like climate change,

marine conservation, sustainable forest management, and environmental advocacy.

Numerous Sacred Gifts

The Sacred Gifts are practical, concrete and active expressions of concern of religious traditions about the natural world. The Gifts include: the restoration of sacred forests in India; the reinstatement of a Buddhist hunting ban that will help protect Mongolia's endangered snow leopard; support to Muslim fishermen to save turtle nesting sites in Zanzibar; and the initiative of the Islamic government of Saudi Arabia to establish the country's first biosphere reserve. Japan's Shinto community is vowing to purchase only sustainably grown wood for their thousands of shrines, and Catholic Benedictine Sisters are doubling their school programmes geared toward reducing the toxic waste in Lake Erie in North America.

Other initiatives: the Methodist Church world-wide is developing an ethical framework to support environmental and social justice, the leaders of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations - together representing some 80% of the Jews in the US - are launching an environmental conservation programme to counter climate change, and stimulate consumer preference for sustainably-managed forests. The China Taoist Association, the umbrella organisation for 40 million Taoists in China, is calling on its members to stop using endangered wildlife for traditional medicines.

Catalysts for action

The Gifts are an important way of linking formal religions with the conservation movement. *Through these Gifts we are reaching out to huge new constituencies - the 3 to 4 billion people that these faiths*

represent - to work with them for the conservation of our living world, said Dr. Claude Martin, Director General of WWF International. *Sacred Gifts are catalysts for action. They are conservation templates for religious followers around the world: a community that is capable of having an incredible impact on efforts to save the natural world.*

Martin Palmer, General Secretary of ARC, said: *In devising new ways of protecting nature, religious diversity may be the secret to how to live more caringly with nature. All faiths have environmental teachings. What we see in these Sacred Gifts are these teachings becoming real, changing lives and our relationship with nature.*

Religions and biodiversity

All of the world's major religions are today sensitive to the importance of biodiversity, though of course their historical writings do not use today's conservation vocabulary. Each of the faiths represented in the Alliance of Religions and Conservation has distinctive beliefs on the role of nature and humanity, which shape their lives as faith communities and their relationship to the environment. In various degrees religious beliefs have been able to prevent the excessive human demands on the environmental resources on which they depend. More fundamentally, religions provide a holistic view of how to use natural resources, based on an ethical perspective. Therefore, approaches to conserving biodiversity based on cultural and religious values are often more sustainable than those based on mere legislation or regulation.

The next page shows a brief summary of major religious traditions and the way they relate to modern biodiversity concerns, including a few quotes from religious leaders represented in the ARC.

Overview of the informal and formal religions

Animism is a diverse set of beliefs held by traditional peoples who believe in the spiritual connection between humans and nature. Animism can be considered as one of the oldest religions in the world. It is widespread on all continents and is often combined with a formal religion. Many animistic belief systems are accompanied by specific taboos. Breaking a taboo can result in sanctions from the spiritual world, such as illness, loss of crops or drought. The taboos often apply to particularly vulnerable sets of natural resources. Animism often includes totemism: the belief in a mystical relationship between individuals and certain animals or plants. Totems are normally associated with taboos: for example, an Amazonian hunter within a social group that has the peccary - a wild pig species - as a totem may be forbidden from hunting these animals. Thus totemism helps to restrict the exploitation of certain natural resources.

The Baha i Faith is a modern religion founded in the mid-19th century. The Baha i Scriptures teach that, as trustees of the planet's vast resources and biological diversity, humanity must seek to protect the heritage of future generations. The Baha i faith sees in nature a reflection of the divine, and approaches the earth - the source of material bounties - with humility. The Baha i are guided by the fundamental spiritual truth of our age: the oneness of humanity.

Buddhism has a total of about 300 million practitioners found in many Asian countries. It teaches that a behaviour has a natural relationship to its resulting consequences in the physical world. Right actions lead toward *nirvana*, the liberation from desire and ignorance, while negative actions, such as killing animals, lead away from that goal. Buddhism is a religion of love, understanding and compassion, and is committed towards the ideal of non-violence. As such, it also attaches great importance to wild life and the protection of the environment.

Christianity, with some 1.6 billion members, is the dominant religion in Europe, parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific, and the western hemisphere. Christians believe that all of creation is the action of God, who continues to care for all aspects of existence. The very nature of biodiversity is seen as giving glory to the Christian God. Christianity teaches that humanity may not disorder biodiversity and destroy God's creations. If it does so it risks destroying itself.

Hinduism, the dominant religion in India with about 700 million followers, teaches the all-encompassing sovereignty of the divine, manifesting itself in a graded scale of evolution. While the human race is currently at the top of the evolutionary pyramid, it is not seen as something apart from the earth and its biodiversity. Hinduism is permeated by a reverence for life and an awareness that the great forces of nature - earth, sky, air, water, and fire - as well as various orders of life, including plants, trees, forests and animals, are all bound together within the great rhythms of nature. Hindus believe that all plants and animals have souls, and that people must do penance even for killing plants and animals for food.

Islam, with about a billion adherents, is the dominant religion in North Africa, the Middle East, and many Asian countries. The entire universe is God's creation; Allah makes the waters flow, upholds the heaven, makes the rain fall, keeps the boundaries between day and night, creates all biodiversity and gives it the means to multiply. *We are God's stewards and agents on Earth. We are not masters of this Earth, it does not belong to us to do what we wish. It belongs to God and He has entrusted us with its safekeeping.* *)

Jainism is one of the oldest living religions, beginning in India at least 2800 years ago. The ten million Jains believe that all living beings have an individual soul which occupies the body until it dies, then leaving the body and immediately taking birth in another. Jainism is based on the principle of non-violence towards human beings and all of nature. Jain cosmology recognizes the fundamental natural phenomenon of symbiosis, or mutual dependence, with all aspects of nature belonging together and bound in a physical as well as a metaphysical relationship. This ancient perspective is reflected in their modern ideas about biodiversity.

Judaism originated in the Middle East. The 18 million Jewish practitioners today are thinly spread around the world. Judaism teaches that God created the world, making order out of primal chaos. The sun, the moon, the stars, plants, animals, and ultimately humanity were each created with a rightful and necessary place in the universe. Judaism teaches that the earth is the arena that God created for man. Man was commanded to behave toward the rest of biodiversity with justice and compassion. But humanity inevitably lives in tension between its power and the limits set by conscience.

Sikhism began in India the late 15th century and now has about 16 million followers. Sikhism builds on the message of the oneness of the universe created by an Almighty God, who is master of all forms and the source of the birth, life and death of all beings. Sikhism teaches conspicuous consumption, emphasizing mastery over the self rather than mastery over nature. Sikh religion aims for harmony with the Earth and all creation. Sikhs believe that the current instability of the natural system is a reflection of the instability and pain within humans.

Shinto is the system of indigenous religious beliefs and practices of Japan, first appearing in written form some 1400 years ago. Shinto is based on beliefs concerning the nature and attributes of *Kami*, the sacred power, which is found in all individual things. Shinto temples are often established on sites that have particular spiritual integrity and force, often with large groves of trees (totalling nearly 120,000 ha). Shinto is strongly based in rural agricultural practices, involving various ceremonies and festivals that guide the relationship between people and nature.

Taoism has a history of over 2500 years, and is one of the main components of Chinese traditional culture. It has at least 40 million active followers with many more passive followers. Tao means simply the way. According to Taoism, everything is composed of two opposite forces known as Yin and Yang. When the two forces reach harmony, the energy of life is created. Taoism judges the affluence of a society by the number of different species; thus a society with high levels of biodiversity is affluent, while societies with declining biodiversity are themselves in decline.

Zoroastrianism is the ancient, pre-Islamic religion of Iran, that now is most prosperous in India. Founded in the 6th century BC, it contains both monotheistic and dualistic elements of good and evil. *Our role in this world is to serve and honour not just the Wise Lord, but the seven bounteous Creations - the sky, water, earth, plant, animals, humans and fire - which are the gifts of God on High to humanity.* *)

*) Quote from religious leader represented in ARC.
This overview does not pretend to be complete.



Spirit medium in Iganga, Uganda, explains how the flora and fauna influence healing and farming practices

Building on indigenous traditions

Most indigenous approaches foster respect for their environment, plants and animals, which play an important role in their spiritual traditions. In many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America local people have established sacred sites on the basis of inherent spiritual or religious significance. Such sacred sites are often sanctuaries for biodiversity as well as locations for spiritual practices. These sacred sites have often survived substantial cultural changes. Many traditional cultures also consider certain species as sacred, with elaborate myths, folktales and magical powers related to them. In this way the traditional societies promote conservation, though the original motivation may not be directly related to this purpose.

Establishing a connection between traditional cultures and the conservation of biological diversity is by no means a simple matter, however. The traditional conservation practices remain viable only as long as the local communities depend on the natural resources in their immediate vicinity, and have full control over them. Another precondition is that local communities retain a sufficiently high level of internal cohesion. In most cases these conditions are undermined when outside state or corporate bodies establish control over the natural resources.

Moreover, traditional resource-use patterns may be sustainable only under conditions of low population density, abundant land, simple technology and limited involvement with a market economy. Unfortunately many traditional societies today are confronted with market pres-

ures, higher population densities, and new technologies, making it more difficult to maintain the integrity of their traditional methods and organisation, even when these are reinforced by religious beliefs. Even so, many indigenous peoples are seeking new ways of adapting their traditional beliefs to modern realities, often using a combination of animism and a formal religion as their spiritual basis. In this process they may draw on support from conservation organizations to protect their interests.

Encouraging developments

The fundamental beliefs that underlie each faith provide a basis upon which new ethics of conservation, respect and responsibility for the sacred natural world

can be developed. Formal religions and indigenous traditions can stimulate each other in the process of finding new ways to promote nature conservation. It is encouraging to note that many of the major formal religions are now seriously addressing the challenge to build a renewed sense of practical responsibility among their adherents, and look for ways of putting this responsibility into practice. The combined efforts of ARC and WWF in the form of the Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet programme, are a living example of this concept. In a similar way the IUCN encourages the protection of sacred sites as part of biodiversity conservation.

The experiences from Compas partner organisations such as IDEA and GREEN Foundation in India, ECO in Sri Lanka, TIRD-P in Indonesia, AZTREC in Zimbabwe and ADICI in Guatemala, are also examples of efforts to reinforce the linkage between people and nature.

All these initiatives together have considerable potential to enable a more positive relation between people and the rest of nature.

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Tribal cosmovision and agro-ecological practices are often combined with formal religions. Tribals in Orissa, India